

POL 3113  
Analytical Essay

Issue: The role of the US government in democratising Afghanistan during  
the war on terrorism

Analytical Frameworks: Differentiated government actors, The game  
theory

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### **Introduction:**

The military and the democratic struggle between the US and Taliban that continued over two decades has eventually come to an end in 2021. This essay will first focus on the role of the differentiated US government actors in democratizing Afghanistan during the war on terrorism and analyze this issue by the analytical framework of the game theory.

### **The issue:**

The Afghanistan war started in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attack, in which the US declared international war to cope with terrorism and sent massive troops to Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021; Karns & Mingst, 2010). The US government's intervention in Afghanistan has become an issue when the US, instead of purely protecting national or international security, attempted to democratize Afghanistan, observed in their efforts in building the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) (Ponzio, 2007). Particularly, foreign intervention to achieve democratization has been a century-long debate starting from globalization's early age. However, the consensus is yet to be made for three reasons:

1. Technical difficulties are encountered in determining whether foreign intervention promotes democracy. Namely, even if rational choice or historical institutionalism approach creates theory in such issue from the institutionalist standpoint, it is still difficult to generalize the theory in Afghanistan due to its unique cultures or norms embedded in the polity (Hall & Taylor, 1996).
2. Contested answers on this issue are observed in international organizations and academia. Numerous scholars, depending on different ideologies, would suggest diverse answers to this issue. For instance, Keck and Sikkink believe that foreign intervention is the main contributor to Afghan due to the lack of domestic power and resources to construct their democracy, and, hence, an international advocacy network is essential (2018); Doyle criticized the insufficient durability for the DRA to maintain the democracy constructed by the US (2017); also, Li argues that following standard democracy as the template from the US would be insufficient to obtain good governance (2014). As a result, the answers in the capability of foreign intervention for democracy remain largely contested.
3. From a historical standpoint, empirical evidence shows varied results and complicated the issue. The low degree of intervention from the UK often fails, whereas the high degree of intervention for the US has a relatively high success rate—such as Japan, West Germany, Taiwan, and South Korea. Given that the intervention from the US is more comprehensive than the UK's, in which financial, military, and institutional aids are included in the prolonged intervention—two decades, the DRA still collapsed, and the Taliban can return to power. Hence, the intervention from the US in democratizing Afghanistan has arisen as an important issue in international politics.

### **Analytical Framework: the differentiated government actors**

In this puzzling issue on democratization in Afghanistan, the differentiated government actors in the United States would be explicitly focused. Since the government of the US is consist of people from different ethnic backgrounds, genders, cultural and religious beliefs, or educational level of a massive number of bureaucrats, analyze this issue by treating the main actor—the US government—as just simply one actor would be insufficient (Bevir & Rhodes, 2011). More importantly, according to these differences, although working in the same organization, the agents might carry out different implications on the same issue (Lynn, 2011). Hence, this essay will analyze the issue of Afghanistan's democratization under the US umbrella by treating the US government as differentiated actors.

The most apparent distinction within the differentiated actors in this issue would be the priorities across policy areas. This analytical framework has broadened the scope of discussion by illustrating that the objectives of the government might be fundamentally influenced by the different priorities-ranking from the differentiated government actors. While Biden claimed that democratization and nation-building in Afghanistan "were never our mission in Afghanistan" and argued that the war has successfully secured their interests—security "on the American homeland," this might not necessarily be totally correct (The United States Government, 2021). George W. Bush's<sup>1</sup> hand-written memoir has stated that nation-building in Afghanistan is the "ultimate mission" and that democratizing the country is the US' "moral obligation" (Miller, 2010). Hence, it should be socially and legally recognized objectives of the US invasion of Afghanistan. Surprisingly, despite the officially-recorded motivations and reasons, Antony Blinken<sup>2</sup> still insisted that the mission was to cope with the criminals who were responsible for the 9/11 attack (Marik, 2021). This shift in priorities has been predicted by Bevir and Rhodes: with the diverse background in a huge government, bureaucrats with different "traditions" and "norms" can transform the original agenda set by the politicians (2011). It especially echoes with their example that resistance is commonly observed under the scenario in which a "new commissioner" would come and change the rule of games with his own "interests and priorities" (ibid). Namely, after President Bush was replaced by the current Biden administration, the preference and priorities of the "new" government actors could entirely change the original objectives. Thus, although the agenda of initiating the invasion in Afghanistan was to build democracy, it has gradually shifted to a pure "revenge-driven" objective under the differentiated government actors. In contrast, this shift resulted in some drawbacks that will be discussed later.

### **Analytical Framework: Game Theory**

To explicitly analyze the failure in this issue, game theory is, interestingly, related to the differentiated government actors. Bringing the discussion back to the prisoner dilemma, the US government actors and the Taliban have to choose either to cooperate or to defect, resulting in sucker's payoff and the temptation to defect in this issue (Axelrod, 1990). Due to the "national strategic calculation," the US has arguably chosen to defect rather than cooperate eventually, while the Taliban continue to expand their innovations (McInnis, 2020). In-game theory, there are, according to Sinek, finite war<sup>3</sup> and infinite war<sup>4</sup> (2016). Although it would still be stable if the war is between both finite players or between both infinite players, the issue of this essay is in the total opposite--since the Biden administration has misread the game, the 2001 Taliban has successfully been replaced, but only by the 2021 version of Taliban (Marik, 2021). Namely, by stating that the mission of the invasion is to cope with the 9/11 attack, Biden has set a finite agenda in the game; while by prioritizing the survival of the Taliban's authority and social construction, the Taliban has set the infinite agenda in this war (Malkasian, 2021). As a result, the game theory could be complementary to analyze the differentiated government actors in the US.

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<sup>1</sup> The president who initiated the war against Afghanistan in his presidency

<sup>2</sup> The US' current secretary of state.

<sup>3</sup> Finite War: Wars with known players, fixed rules, while the objective is to win the war.

<sup>4</sup> Infinite War has unknown players, changeable rules, while the objective is to perpetuate the war.

### **The Taliban's perspective**

Starting from the Taliban's perspective, priorities from the game theory significantly influence their political actions and international interactions. Since the Taliban has treated the war against the US government as an infinite war, several advances in its governance could be observed to continue their battle with the US (ibid). For instance, the strategies have been modified with the evolution, such as allowing a female journalist to interview their main official on television broadcasts (Marik, 2021). While this paper has no means to evaluate the authenticity of the moral conduct of the government, it is undeniable that the Taliban has appeared to be more virtuous and socially acceptable to the globe. Moreover, to evolve in the infinite war, the Taliban has also witnessed the importance of inviting "new players" and, thus, allied with the Chinese government in the Belt and Road Initiative (ibid). Consequently, the Taliban has continued the infinite game by gaining more support internationally.

### **The US perspective**

While the Taliban has tried to maintain the infinite war, the US government has mistakenly observed it as a finite war. By shifting their priorities among differentiated actors, from former president to current administration, the US government believes that their objectives in this war is fulfilled—claiming accountability of 911 attack—and hence leave the game because they no longer have the "will" to continue and also, perhaps, ran out of resources as well (Khan, 2021). If the objective of the war is about sending responsible actors for the 911 attack, the US did win the game, and the intention of continuing the game seems unnecessary. However, by leaving the game, the US government would risk being caught in a "quagmire" and confusing the allies by being increasingly unpredictable in international politics (Sinek, 2016). Therefore, the differentiated actors from the US government influence their perception of the game and thus affect their international cooperation.

These diverse interpretations of the game within the US government actors have caused the failure in democratizing Afghanistan. While most players leave the game under insufficient will or resources, the US government quit the game for neither reason but for the claim that they have already won the war and fulfilled their objectives (ibid). To analyze this issue: the differentiated governmental actors impose their self-interests and prioritize divergent value, accountability for the 911 attack, and the objectives have shifted away from democratization and towards national interests; hence, the determination in constructing democracy in Afghanistan, which has become fragile to current US government actors, has led to the failure in democratizing Afghanistan.

### **Suggestion:**

Besides, the game theory has also proposed a remedy to the failure in priority ranking—focusing on the objectives. As mentioned before, the US government has dangerously mistreated the war as finite, while the Taliban remains an infinite player (ibid). Hence, the US government has been proposing policy in a more short-term manner. Namely, President Bush initiated the twenty years long as a finite player, while president Trump signed the Doha agreement to withdraw from Afghanistan in the coming year and president Biden sent back the troops accordingly (The Guardian, 2021). It reveals that the policy regarding Afghanistan has become a short-term policy, compared to the original intention. Meanwhile, short-term policies undermine not just the trustworthiness to the allies but also the functioning of the state. According to Sinek, the US government actors have the tendency to overlook the values, the intention to start the war, while focusing mainly on the interests, the gains from the war (2016). Hence, he proposed two suggestions for the US government,

despite the differences among actors. Firstly, they should realize the nature of the game, which is indeed infinite, so that the situation can be stabilized, even at wars. Secondly, they also should focus on the values when constructing policy (ibid). In these ways, the US could stabilize Afghanistan, or even the globe, by constructing predictable and similarly-directed policies in international cooperation.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, the role of the differentiated actors from the US government was significant to shift the priorities of the Afghanistan War by putting the government into the opposite position as it was originally. By combining the use of two analytical frameworks, the differentiated government actors and the game theory, the issues of whether or not the foreign intervention is capable of constructing democracy have become less blurred. Namely, foreign intervention could be conducive under the circumstance that the developed has strong and less-varied motivations, even in huge governments. It is hoped that through this paper, the issue could be better understood.

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