



Haunted by Clausewitz's Ghost

Moral Forces in the Collapse of the Afghan Military

J. B. Potter

The under-resourcing of Afghanistan was much deeper and wider than even I thought. It wasn't just about troops. It was intellectually, it was strategically, it was physically, culturally.

—Adm. Michael Mullen

With the West looking east to Ukraine, the war in Afghanistan seems like an episode from the distant past. Though they may be a fading memory, the chaotic scenes of desperate Afghans swarming planes on the tarmac at Kabul Airport are not even a year and a half old. Nine months after the U.S. withdrawal, in May 2022, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction (SIGAR) issued an interim congressional report on the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Titled *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise*, this seventy-page document concludes that “unless the U.S. government understands and accounts for what went wrong, why it went wrong, and how it went wrong in Afghanistan, it will likely repeat the same mistakes in the next conflict.”¹ To learn from its twenty-year experience in Afghanistan, the U.S. Army should consult one of the oldest friends of its profession, Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831).

Ahead of his time, Clausewitz perceived that battlefields are decisively shaped by intangible moral forces. As a case study in this quintessentially

Clausewitzian idea, the end of the war in Afghanistan demonstrates that successful military operations and nation-building efforts must strike a balance between two approaches: war as a science and war as an art. By favoring the former over the latter, U.S. strategy in the Hindu Kush developed a major blind spot, one that the Taliban wasted no time exploiting when American troops withdrew. Because the art of war is the focal point of his writing, Clausewitz offers a perspective that was all too often neglected in U.S. policies toward Afghanistan.

Clausewitz's name is synonymous with his posthumously published magnum opus, the eight-part work *On War (Vom Kriege)*. This tome is frequently boiled down to its most famous maxim: “War is simply the continuation of politics with other means.”² This adage overshadows other ideas in the first chapter of the first book that are essential to the Prussians' theory of war. In the opening paragraphs, for instance, Clausewitz defines war as “an act of violence to force the enemy to do our will.”³ With competing wills grounding his reasoning, he later claims that any theory of war, in order to have real-world applications, “should also consider the

Next page: Afghan refugees crowd into a U.S. Air Force Globemaster III C-17 for evacuation from Kabul Airport in Afghanistan on 19 August 2021. The evacuation resulted from a rapid withdrawal of U.S. military forces and the subsequent takeover of the Afghan government by the Taliban. The author contends that the United States failed in Afghanistan because U.S. strategists did not pay enough attention to the moral forces that are fundamental to the art of war. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Brandon Cribelar, U.S. Air Force)



human element.”⁴ Since “the art of war deals with living and moral forces”—that is to say, dynamic human actors with wills that wax and wane—Clausewitz admits that it “can never achieve absoluteness and certainty.”⁵ This disclaimer not only rejects overly rational notions of warfare but also reveals the lynchpin of *On War*. For Clausewitz, moral forces are the *je ne sais quoi* and the *sine qua non* of war, a combination of physical and psychological factors that are anything but static.

The hallmark of the art of war, moral forces do not fit neatly into a scientific conception of war, which is best exemplified by Clausewitz’s contemporary, the Swiss-born soldier turned French and Russian general Antoine-Henri Jomini (1779–1869). Although he freely admitted that war is, in part, an art, Jomini tended to scientifically scrutinize it. In contrast to Clausewitz’s understanding of armed conflict as a physical *and* a psychic phenomenon, Jomini’s prescriptive perspective is much more quan-

titative and materialist. To him, war is a numbers game. This data-driven approach to fighting is reflected in his writing and word choice—in the geometry-laden language he uses to give logistics pride of place in war. No stranger to engineering impressive organizational feats across the globe, the U.S. military operates according to doctrines that are unmistakably Jominian. Unsurprisingly, nation-building in Afghanistan found its clearest expressions in Jominian ways—e.g., financial backing, equipment maintenance, and physical infrastructure. Buoyed by this support,

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Carl von Clausewitz (Painting by Karl Wilhelm Wach, *Carl von Clausewitz* [1780–1831] via Wikimedia Commons)

the ANDSF looked good on paper but ended up folding like a paper tiger. This unexpected turn of events occurred partly because, over two decades, mathematically minded policy makers gradually lost sight of what they could not see: moral forces.

By adopting too scientific of an approach to the war in Afghanistan, U.S. strategists did not pay enough attention to the moral forces that are fundamental to the art of war. Clausewitz reiterates this point in the third chapter of the third book, where he deems *moralischen Größen* (moral factors) among “war’s most important objects,” “the spirits that permeate the whole element of war and that align themselves with the will.”⁶ Despite the weight that moral forces carry, keeping track of them is no easy task. They are, by their very nature, incalculable; they can “neither be put into numbers nor into categories.”⁷ Unlike troops, weapons, and supplies, moral forces cannot be objectively counted. Instead, they must be subjectively gauged by observing how mind and matter interact. The relationship between body and soul looms large in *On War* because it allowed Clausewitz to chart the seismic shifts in geopolitics that he experienced

during the prime of his life and a dark chapter in the history of his homeland.

Moral forces haunt Clausewitz's writing because they animated France's decade of dominance in the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1813). Though it had numerous material advantages, the coalition opposing France was confounded by Napoléon's brilliance on the battlefield. Clausewitz discerned that there was more to this success than skillful maneuvering and resource allocation. The Revolution had triggered a psychic transformation in French society through the introduction of novel moral forces like conscription anchored in nationalism. With newfound national purpose, the common people gained a greater say in their political destiny by shouldering arms. In tapping into an emotional reservoir of patriotic fervor, the French gained an edge that made the difference on battlefield after battlefield. As a forward-thinking military mind, Clausewitz advocated for similar social reforms such as the then controversial creation of a popular militia.⁸ This change and others mentally primed people in German lands to physically resist the French following the Convention of Tauroggen, a revolutionary moment in Prussian history that Clausewitz orchestrated during the aftermath of Napoléon's disastrous invasion of Russia.⁹

In a Clausewitzian variation on a Cartesian theme, the fourth chapter of the fourth book outlines the physical and psychological dimensions of moral forces. The loss of the former, in the form of "men, horses, and guns," goes hand-in-hand with the loss of the latter, which includes "order, courage, confidence, cohesion, and planning."¹⁰ Although physical casualties are "difficult to estimate" during combat, the din of battle lays bare soldiers' mental states.¹¹ "Lost ground," for example, "is a measuring stick for lost moral forces."¹²

Judging by Clausewitz's standard, the physical withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan coincided with a psychic shock to a system of command and control that could not yet function without active American involvement, "in part because," as the SIGAR's report puts it, "the United States designed the ANDSF as a mirror image of U.S. forces."¹³ While the Afghan military could hold its own against the Taliban, it relied on American quartermasters and paymasters for logistical and financial backing. As Jonathan Schroden states in his article published by *War on the Rocks*, "While Afghan forces had been

doing the bulk of the fighting for years before the U.S. withdrawal, the United States had been performing nearly all of the behind-the-scenes management and support of those forces."¹⁴ Management and support are, of course, part and parcel of the science of war, not the art. The fact that the former does not necessarily translate into the latter became apparent to frustrated American leaders as they witnessed the ANDSF deteriorate in a matter of days.

After the Afghan military collapsed over two weeks, American leaders were quick to deem it too weak. In his speech on 16 August 2021, President Joseph Biden enumerated America's physical investments in Afghanistan. "We spent over a trillion dollars. We trained and equipped an Afghan military force of some 300,000 strong. ... We gave them every tool they could need. We paid their salaries, provided for the maintenance of their air force."¹⁵ Immediately after this Jominian logistical litany, he pivoted to the incorporeal core of Clausewitzian thought and portrayed Afghans as short on patriotism. "American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves. ... We gave them every chance to determine their own future. What we could not provide them was the will to fight for that future."¹⁶

Retired Army Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute, who served as the deputy national security advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan before becoming the U.S. ambassador to NATO, echoed Biden's remarks and evoked Clausewitz in his analysis of the collapse of the Afghan military. In an Associated Press report on 16 August 2021, he was quoted as saying that "the principle of war stands—moral factors dominate material factors. ... Morale, discipline, leadership, unit cohesion are more decisive than numbers of forces and equipment. As outsiders in Afghanistan, we can provide materiel, but only Afghans can provide the intangible moral factors."¹⁷ Inseparable from these moral factors, as Lute said in an interview with CNBC the next day, is "the will to fight."¹⁸

Blaming the victims for lacking willpower distracts from a larger truth with a thousand faces. Schroden rightly points out that "the failure of Afghanistan's forces had many fathers, spanning the political and military leaders of the United States, its coalition partners, Afghanistan, and the Taliban."¹⁹ Among these actors, the Taliban merits mention in the context of



Army engineers from the 132nd Multi-Role Bridge Company prepare a bridge erection boat for employment on 7 November 2012 outside of Forward Operating Base Jackson in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The 132nd “River Rats” provided construction and bridge repair support for Operation Golden Gate, a bridge-building operation allowing the Afghan population to cross the Helmand River safely from the Musa Qal’ah District into the Sangin District. Infrastructure improvement was one of the tools used by U.S. forces in their efforts at nation building. (Photo by Lance Cpl. Alexander Quiles, U.S. Marine Corps)

moral forces. Above all, this militant movement knew the physical and figurative lay of the land better than America. In playing the long game over two decades, it benefited from the moral forces that accompany fighting a defensive war. Fueled by fundamentalism directed against a nation that it could easily brand as a foreign occupier, the Taliban bided its time until a change of hearts and minds in Washington caused U.S. troops to be pulled out of Kabul.

The Trump administration prioritized an exit strategy in February 2020, when it inked a deal that the Taliban welcomed. During the subsequent year and a half, the organization took full advantage of the agreement’s new rules of engagement by waging “an effective campaign that isolated—both physically and psychologically—ANDSF forces and undermined their willingness to fight.”²⁰ This Clausewitzian line from the SIGAR’s report, which speaks to the Taliban’s intuitive grasp of

moral forces, underscores the failure of American policy makers to account for them. This oversight stemmed from an approach that was too scientific, one that did not anticipate the psychic consequences generated by the sudden withdrawal of U.S. troops.

As evinced in the breakneck speed of the Taliban takeover, America was the keystone of security in Afghanistan, a foreign finger in a failing dike. Schroden reminds readers that “Afghan security forces had been slowly failing as an institution for years and the Afghan government had been steadily losing ground to the Taliban.”²¹ The absence of physical boots on the ground left psychological shoes that were too big for Afghan authorities to fill. In hastily pulling out, the United States created a situation that did not inspire the average Afghan to take up arms. As summarized in the conclusion of the SIGAR’s report, the “ANDSF, along with Afghans throughout the country, felt,” in a

word, “abandoned.”²² With war-weary Afghans forced to fend for themselves after years of U.S. support, desire to resist the Taliban understandably evaporated.

The disintegration of the ANDSF can also be interpreted as a disconnect between homegrown courage and imported convictions. It is, after all, hard to fault the Afghan military for not having the courage of America’s convictions, convictions that are largely foreign concepts to a society in which kinship and ethnicity shape political identity more than any national or democratic ideal. For this reason in particular, the Taliban managed to endure, the best efforts of the U.S. Army notwithstanding. Physically training Afghan troops to march and shoot was challenging, but the United States and its coalition partners were up to the task. It was, in contrast, a Sisyphean undertaking to persuade the Afghan people to risk their lives for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, a puppet state that was as financially corrupt as it was politically ineffective.

As alluded to in the opening paragraph of the SIGAR’s report, this corrosive combination ate away at the morale of the ANDSF. Between some leaders embezzling money and many in the rank and file being irregularly paid for years, enlisted men had increasingly less incentive to stand and fight.²³ The clear and present danger of Taliban reprisals against their families gave them yet another reason not to fire a shot. Undercut by the lack of paychecks and the threat of payback, any material advantages afforded Afghan troops by the American military were ultimately rendered moot because the Afghans were, in short, psychologically disarmed. This interaction between tangible and intangible factors is succinctly summed up in Clausewitz’s discussion of strategy. As he states at the beginning of the third book of *On War*, “The relationships of material things are all very simple; it is more difficult to grasp the psychological forces at play.”²⁴

The inability of U.S. policy makers and politicians to sufficiently grasp the significance of moral forces in Afghanistan constitutes a failure of imagination, a phrase made famous by the findings of the 9/11 Commission. With this idea bookending the two-decade conflict, the conclusion of American involvement in Afghanistan exposed a blind spot in the prevailing view of war in the United States. In the minds of many Americans, war is more of a Jominian affair. It is measured in lives lost and in dollars spent. Understanding



Read the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction's interim evaluation report 22-22-IP, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That Led to Its Demise*, at <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-22-22-IP.pdf>.

war in these terms corresponds to a human need to quantify sacrifice—to demonstrate a level of dedication to a larger cause. As Clausewitz makes clear, however, men and materiel tell only part of the story. Intangible moral forces tell the rest because they explain why soldiers defend the colors or strike them.

In the final analysis, if future U.S. military operations coupled with nation-building are to transform dreams of democracy into the reality of a republic, American blood and treasure should not be expended abroad unless they can be translated into civic commitment and defensive determination among the people whom the United States seeks to help. To neglect these moral forces is to turn the U.S. Army into the political backbone of a fledgling government that cannot stand on its own. This lesson is the lasting lesson of the war in Afghanistan. American leaders would be wise to heed it, never mind take Clausewitz’s enduring insights to heart, the next time that they consider putting soldiers in harm’s way. ■

Nota bene: All translations from German are the author’s.

Notes

Epigraph. Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 118.

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3. *Ibid.*, 3.

4. *Ibid.*, 14.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 101.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Wolf Kittler, "Host Nations: Carl von Clausewitz and the New U.S. Army/Marine Corps Field Manual, FM 3-24, MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*," in *Enlightened War: German Theories and Cultures of Warfare from Frederick the Great to Clausewitz*, ed. Elisabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson (Rochester: Camden House, 2011), 288.

9. *Ibid.*, 298–99.

10. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 140.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 155.

13. Sopko, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, i.

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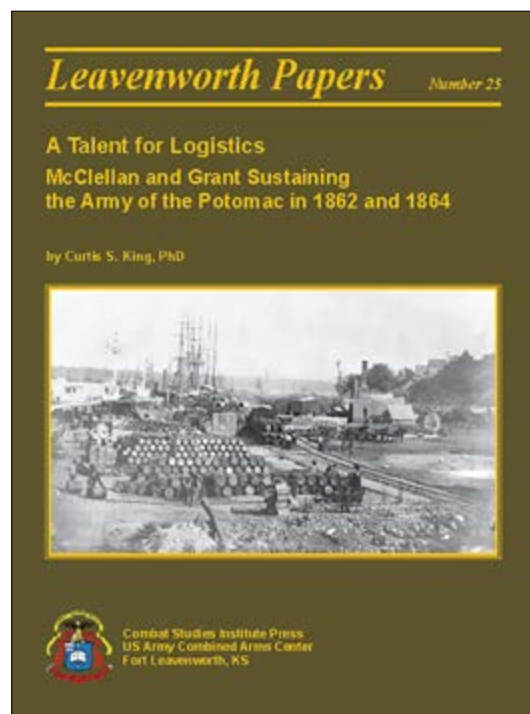
20. Sopko, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, 20.

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