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## SOCIETY-CENTRIC WARFARE: LESSONS FROM AFGHANISTAN AND UKRAINE

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Neither Ukraine nor Afghanistan lived up to American expectations or those of the United States' Western allies. Ukraine was not expected to withstand the unprovoked invasion by the armed forces of the Russian Federation, beginning on 24 February 2022, for more than a few days. The government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, on the other hand, was expected to keep Taliban insurgents at bay after the departure of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led forces in 2021, especially given the two decades of effort to establish security forces to safeguard Western-backed governing institutions. This article briefly compares the unexpected resilience of the Ukrainian people and government facing a much larger force committing a vicious military campaign with the failure of the much larger and better-equipped Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to stop the Taliban from taking over the Afghan capital of Kabul in a few days. What is missing from the dialogue is the often-forgotten dimension of strategic calculations—namely the societal dimension. In this article, the author argues that this is one of the primary reasons that Ukraine stands tall in its resistance and Afghanistan collapsed.

### Historical Background

On 25 February 2022, one day after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the author tweeted to a Ukrainian friend and colleague. As a witness to, and survivor of, another Russian military invasion, the author could only empathize with them, encouraging them to stay strong and reminding them that Ukraine's adversary was not invincible. The author refers in this case to the December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. World opinion at the time was generally that the Afghans had very slim chances, if any, of retaining their independence. A decade later, after brutalities that are yet to be fully recounted and an unknown number of Afghans killed, the Soviet Union was defeated, and within two years it ceased to exist. Ironically, Ukraine's reemergence as an independent nation state was partially due to the steadfastness of the Afghans and their determination not to bow down to a much larger invading force. This is not dissimilar to what the Ukrainians are doing today—perhaps they are not only safeguarding their own country's independence but also helping their European neighbors to the west.

The victory of the Afghans over the Soviets, while a herculean and unexpected feat, has nevertheless entered the realm of ahistorical analysis, namely that Afghanistan is a "graveyard of empires," first for the Macedonian Greeks, then for the British, then for the Soviets, and now for the Americans. As this author has pointed to before, such mis-

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reading of histories has led to strategic miscalculations and misunderstandings of the Afghan society, which in turn has led to inaccurate assessments of the role of the ANSF and the legitimacy of the Afghan government.<sup>1</sup>

Similar misunderstandings abound regarding Ukraine, such as the prevalent, if unspoken, belief that Ukraine was part of Russia, that the two nations were “siblings,” or that linguistic links necessarily translated to societal co-optation of Ukraine by Russia. Such societal misreadings have been the reason behind the West’s surprise at Ukraine’s heroic defense of its national sovereignty.

### **The Neglected Dimension of Strategy**

Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz argued in the early nineteenth century that war consists of three “dominant tendencies”—namely the tendencies of people, the military and its leadership, and the government.<sup>2</sup> Writing more than a century later, military historian Michael Howard listed four dimensions for formulating successful strategies—the operational, the logistical, the social, and the technological. Howard lamented that twentieth-century strategists, neglecting Clausewitz’s trinity, had forgotten the societal dimension of strategy and hyper-prioritized military materiel and numerical strength. Discussing the American Civil War, Howard argued that what proved to be the most important element to the North’s ultimate success was the willingness of the local populations to support and sustain the Union forces. He attributed, in part, the North’s “capacity to bring the largest and best-equipped forces into the operational theatre and maintain them there” to “the attitude of the people upon whose commitment and readiness for self-denial this logistical power ultimately depended.”<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Howard’s argument, Ariel E. Levite and Jonathan (Yoni) Shimshoni write that most actors, whether state or nonstate, who are challenging the West today, including China, Russia, al-Qaeda, and others, have “adopted multifaceted strategies with society at the their core,” adding that these “could be called society-centric strategies.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Looking at Afghanistan**

The United States’ longest war ended in a debacle in August 2021. While much remains to be studied and evaluated to fully analyze what went wrong in Afghanistan, this author attributes the limited resistance to the Taliban’s swift takeover, in part, to their longstanding focus on the people. The Taliban maintained the attitude and beliefs of the people as a central part of their strategy. On the side of U.S.- and NATO-led forces, the focus was less on the societal dimension of strategy and more on the technological and logistical

superiority of the ANSF, which was expected to carry forward the operational dimension of keeping a fragile Afghan government in place. This emphasis had proven successful in 2001, when the Taliban in Afghanistan were defeated by the initial U.S.-led military intervention. But that battle won did not determine long-term success of the war. Why not?

While most of the Taliban leadership moved across the border to Pakistan after the U.S.-led intervention, their rank and file mostly melted into the Afghan population in the country’s south and southeast. Soon after, using terror and intimidation, the Taliban reemerged as a disruptive force, legitimizing their struggle by using enduring Afghan cultural schema, such as xenophobia, localism (including the local version of Islam) and independence, to regulate national emotions in rural parts of country, beginning with the south and southeast. This soon extended across population centers, enough to garner support for or, at least, a lack of will to resist their retaking the government.

Additionally, the Taliban learned from their humiliating defeat in 2001. Using the theoretical formulation presented by Roger D. Petersen of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the shock of the Taliban’s swift defeat by the overwhelming U.S.-led intervention force produced an emotional “push-factor,” forcing the Taliban to accept the status quo of the end of their movement. However, ideology become their “pull-factor,” providing the Taliban with new strategic options and “beliefs about possibilities for action.” According to Petersen, emotion does “far more than simply push people” to accept the status quo that, in the case of the Taliban, was the complete destruction of their regime and dismantlement of their movement.<sup>5</sup> Emotions, in fact, allow for the solidification of ideologies that can mobilize society as part of a military strategy. With ideologies such as nationalism and jihadism, emotional shocks (e.g., the presence of non-Muslim foreign forces in Afghanistan) provided an opportunity to construct a narrative about who the enemy was. In this narrative, those Afghans who supported the foreign forces, namely the Afghan government and the ANSF, were considered foreign and non-Islamic elements, no matter that they were Afghans and Muslims.

Several factors allowed this Taliban narrative to take hold among a large segment of the Afghan people. Chief among these factors was the acceptance by the highest authorities of the Afghan government from the outset that most members of the Taliban were “real and honest sons” of Afghanistan, which served to legitimize the overarching Taliban claim that their resurgence was to safeguard the country’s independence and Islamic faith.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the Taliban portrayed an aura of honesty and modesty, living out their role

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as “real and honest sons” of Afghanistan. This was in sharp contrast to the pervasive blatant corruption and unabashed display of wealth by a large segment of the Afghan officialdom, which distanced these elites from ordinary Afghan citizens who were struggling economically. Finally, the Afghan government, especially following the presidential elections of 2014, was a dysfunctional and disunited internationally negotiated arrangement that undermined the internationally backed democratic 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan as well as the hopes and aspirations of the people for transparency. According to Scott S. Smith, director of Afghanistan and Central Asian Programs for the United States Peace Institute, the 2014 elections not only silenced the voice of “ordinary people” but also thwarted the “minimalist goal of preserving the constitution as a set of rules for elite pact-making.”<sup>7</sup> There are also many other factors for the failure of the ANSF and the Afghan government that fall outside the scope of this article.

### **Population-Centric Strategies of the Taliban**

The Taliban’s strategies from the outset had the people and societal dimensions of warfare at their core. Using the weakness of Afghan governmental systems to their advantage, the Taliban managed to bring disenchanted, more conservative, and rural populations to their side using three broad and intertwined methods. First, they showcased their piety and portrayed themselves as true guardians of Afghanistan’s independence. Ironically, the oft-repeated “graveyard of empires” allegory increased the Taliban’s standing among an increasing number of people. Second, the Taliban used managed violence to demonstrate the inability of the Afghan government to protect its people and dispensed swift and uncorrupted justice, contrasting official performance in this arena. Third, while there is not enough material to examine the leadership qualities of the Taliban, the lack of leadership in the Afghan government can be clearly illustrated by the escape of President Ashraf Ghani on 15 August 2021, as Kabul fell to the Taliban. Ghani’s flight from Afghanistan decapitated the highly centralized security system while also solidifying the Taliban’s narrative of the “outsider status” of the Afghan elite.

### **A Brief Look at Ukraine**

Russia’s strategies before and in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 will be scrutinized by Western and other analysts for longer periods of time than the winning strategies of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Regardless of the outcome of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the resistance of the Ukrainians has reconfirmed the Clausewitzian trinity

—that an accountable and legitimate government leading an effective military with the backing of the society is a winning strategy for warfighting. Of course, there are other factors, such as the logistical and technological dimensions that Howard describes, also at play here that will keep those analyzing Russian performance in Ukraine busy for many years.

Before the Kremlin decided to invade Ukraine, Levite and Shimshoni wrote that “Russia’s contemporary non-linear-warfare doctrine, in keeping with the tsarist, and even more so, Soviet-Leninist strategic tradition, reflects a society-centric paradigm.” Russia has applied elements of this pattern in Chechnya, Crimea, Donbas, and Syria and includes “extensive meddling in U.S. and Western European society and politics.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, Russia seems to not have done this in Ukraine. The key to Ukrainian resistance during the initial two months of the Russian invasion has been the societal dimension, which includes Russia’s misunderstanding of the nature of the Ukrainian people and misreading of the legitimacy that Ukraine’s democratically elected president Volodymyr Zelenskyy enjoys within the Ukrainian society.

### **Conclusion**

The West’s notions about the world are being contested by active and diverse players. Awakening to this reality and tackling these threats require an honest and thorough reexamination of the basic strategic assumptions that the West has made regarding Afghanistan for 20 years and is now making about Ukraine to ensure that in future engagements, the West is better informed and positioned to shape the conditions on the ground to meet its strategic objectives. It would be beneficial if Western strategists paid more heed to Howard’s lament and Clausewitz’s wisdom and rebalanced the scales in their analysis to position the societal dimension on an even footing with the other components of warfighting.

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### **ENDNOTES**

1. See Amin Tarzi, “Transition in Afghanistan: Lessons from the Past,” *Middle East Studies Insights* 4, no. 2 (March 2013).
2. Brian Cole, “Clausewitz’s Wonderful Yet Paradoxical Trinity: The Nature of War as a Complex Adaptive System,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 96 (1st Quarter 2020): 42–49.
3. Michael Howard, “The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 57, no. 5 (Summer 1979): 977.
4. Ariel E. Levite and Johnathan (Yoni) Shimshoni, “The Strategic Challenge of Society-Centric Warfare,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 60, no. 6 (December 2018–January 2019): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.154280>. The author is grateful to Dr. Levite for inviting them to the Emotions and Strategy Workshop held in Israel in November 2021, where the author presented Afghanistan as a case study in society-centric warfare.

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5. Roger Petersen, "Emotions as the Residue of Lived Experience," *Political Science and Politics* 50, no. 4 (October 2017): 932–35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517001019>.
  6. Amin Tarzi, "The Neo-Taliban," in *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, ed. Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 274–310. Afghan president Hamid Karzai made this remark about the Taliban in April 2003.
  7. Scott Smith, "'We Like Democracy, but Elections Ruined It': Thoughts on Democratization in Afghanistan after 2014," *Middle East Studies Insights* 6, no. 3 (May 2015).
  8. Levite and Shimshoni, "The Strategic Challenge of Society-Centric Warfare," 98.