THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S STATE-BUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN

Grzegorz Gil

Faculty of Political Science
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin
e-mail: greg.gil@umcs.pl

Abstract: The article is focused on armed state-building in Afghanistan during the presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017). The Afghan war was strongly debated in the early Obama administration, divided into proponents of an Al-Qaeda-focused approach (the Biden approach) with its limited military presence and those supporting a stronger military footing (the McChrystal approach). While the first Obama term employed counterinsurgency (COINtainment), the second employed a "non-kinetic" model and a phased withdrawal. Thus, the US has shifted its role from a regime-changer (but not a game-changer) with an anti-Taliban attitude to "Afghanistan good enough". Finally, the author argues that there were only some enclaves of state-building "in" Afghanistan as the country is extremely resistant to international engineering. The US's inconsistent, back-and-forth approach to Afghanistan should also be assessed in the context of the Taliban's re-emergence.

Keywords: Afghanistan, intervention, Obama administration, state-building

> *By 1986, Soviet personnel in Afghanistan, after over six years of near-fruitless efforts to stabilize the country, had begun to realize that the government they were supporting in Kabul was corrupt, ineffective and unrepresentative.*[1]

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[1] After the Soviet invasion in 1979, the Kremlin preferred to install and sponsor a puppet regime of Najibullah to secure the situation. Soviets aligned with Afghan Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras to fight the largely Pashtun mujahideen. In April 1992, the Najibullah government was defeated by US-supported mujahideen. T. Bird, A. Marshall, *Afghanistan. How the West lost its way*, New Haven, CT 2011, pp. 20–28, 218.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the above echoed loudly in the case of the US stabilisation and state-building effort in Afghanistan after 2001. While the Obama came to power vowing to end America's wars that he inherited from his precursor, the current political situation in and around Afghanistan, i.e., ISIS, remains extremely tense. That is why Afghanistan was all but ignored in the 2016 presidential race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. In retrospect, every single international state-building effort in this landlocked and multi-ethnic country has eventually changed into a slit-throat campaign for the interveners, who decided to leave with remnants of their political honour. Thus, success of all outsiders in Afghanistan is meagre--starting with Greeks, Britons, Soviets, and finally the US-led coalition as the country proved to be an empire-killer.[2]

Following the September 11 attacks, no one opposed the US intervention in Afghanistan, depicted as "a good war". The operation was perceived as utterly legitimate and legal and did effectively oust the Taliban regime. In fact, the US coalition started to build a post-intervention state created by the external intervention, something that differs from a post-conflict state. The end of the Taliban has brought as much comfort for the interveners as insecurity for the Afghan population. What is more, for some observers Afghan statehood does not really exist after forty years of civil strife and continuous foreign meddling. Even if this posture is too drastic, the overall situation is getting worse, as President Obama admitted in May 2016 when he decided to leave 3000 additional troops on the ground (i.e. 8,400 at the end of 2016), because "the security situation in Afghanistan remains to be precarious".[3] While the US was not the sole intervener, it makes up the backbone of stabilisation forces and shapes the state-building agenda.[4] Consequently, the longest US war has been extremely costly, yet despite US military casualties (2,300) and reconstruction spending ($750 billion), the Taliban has been making a comeback recently.

Afghanistan has always been a nightmare for those powers aspiring to subdue it. Since 1973 Afghanistan has been in a state of civil war.[5] A mountainous country (mountains cover about 40 percent of its territory) with many ethnicities

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[2]   For more on state-building failures in Afghanistan over the last two centuries, see e.g. C. Cramer, J. Goodhand, *Try Again, Fail Again, Fail Better? War, the State, and the 'Post-Conflict' Challenge in Afghanistan*, "Development and Change" 2002, vol. 33, nr 5.

[3]   S. Collinson, T. Kopan, *Obama to leave more troops than planned in Afghanistan*, "CNN Politics" 07.07.2016, available online: http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/06/politics/obama-to-speak-on-afghanistan-wednesday-morning/ (15.12.2016).

[4]   As of July 2009, the US deployed there 30,000 troops that made up about 46 percent of total ISAF forces.

[5]   Fully independent Afghanistan derived from the three Anglo-Afghan wars. The first Afghan successful state builder was the nineteen-century king Abdur Rahman. See D. Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 15–19.

failing to coalesce into a nation. As a patchwork of contending factions and ever-shifting alliances, the population (31 million) consists of seven main ethnic groups with dominant Pashtuns (42 percent) as a confederation of more than 60 major tribes.[6] Northern Afghanistan is dominated by Tajiks, and the south by Pashtuns. The country is home to two official languages (Dari and Pashto) and more than 40 minor tongues.[7] The duration of the conflict has fundamentally changed the basics of social-political relations, as ethnicity has become deeply politicised.[8] Secondly, as the Afghan population is growing fast, it is also characterised by a youth bulge (with over 42 per cent aged 0–14) and a high fertility rate. According to the UN, some 75% of Afghans still live in rural areas. Afghanistan also has one of the world's largest repatriated refugee populations. Due to decades of civil war, the population is subdivided into *qawm* – a structure based on kinship and patron-client relations – as a local survival strategy. These and other factors have only increased Afghanistan's resilience to international state-building. In 2009, with NATO states less willing to expand their operation, the conflict once again became an "American war".

STATE-BUILDING IN THE US PUBLIC DEBATE SINCE THE 1990'S

There are many definitions and approaches to state-building that expand the basic objective of this study. Although there is no clear-cut definition of international state-building, the following five core attributes describe it: (1) coercive, (2) territorial, (3) transformational, and (4) a temporary but extensive character. It usually also internationalises (5) the context of the so-called "failed" or "fragile" states.[9] State-building differs from place to place and takes the form of a "wicked problem" with no uniform solution to failing states.[10] Since the field

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[6]   The rest is composed of: Tajik (27%), Hazara (9%), Uzbek (9%), Aimak (4%), Turkmen (3%) and Baloch (2%), there are also 1,5 million nomads, the ethnic Kuchis; ethnic characteristics of Afghanistan deserves to be presented in a separate volume. Ethnicities largely act like voting blocs which was evident in the 2009 presidential race between an incumbent (Hamid Karzai – Pashtun) and a challenger (Abdullah Abdullah – Tajik). It was the Pashtun Durrani tribe, which founded the Afghan royal dynasty in the mid 18th century. For example, Mullah Omar represented its rival Pashtun Ghilzai tribe.

[7]   Article 16 of the 2004 Afghan Constitution states that "The Turkic languages (Uzbek and Turkmen), Balochi, Pashayi, Nuristani and Pamiyi are – in addition to Pashto and Dari – the third official language in areas where the majority speaks them […]".

[8]   For more on relationships between Afghan ethnicity and conflict, see e.g.: R. Sharma, *Nation, ethnicity and the conflict in Afghanistan: political Islam and the rise of ethno-politics 1992–1996*, Abingdon 2016; cf. T. Bird, A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–19.

[9]   On semantics of failed states, see e.g.: G. Gil, *Doubletake: Is Ukraine a Failed State?* "New Eastern Europe" 2015, nr 3–4, pp. 97–103.

[10]   Wicked problems – as opposed to tame ones – are complex and extremely resistant to general solutions (for their distinctions, see more: H. Rittel, M. Weber, *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning*, "Policy Sciences" 1973, vol. 4, pp. 155–169.

of international state-building activities is wide-open (with development aid, electoral assistance, security sector reform, etc.), the author limits its application to an embodiment that entails using military means to promote a liberal form of governance in foreign state(s).[11] Consequently, security provision (stabilisation) seems to be part and parcel of every armed state-building operation. Such state-building may result in the creation of a hybrid state with an encounter between international (liberal) state-building and (endogenous, "bad") state-formation.[12] Post–2001 Afghanistan seems to be such a hybrid polity.[13]

In the 1990's, the term "state-building"[14] was chiefly used to describe international (multinational) actions in stagnant and conflict-affected countries that were extremely prone to delegitimisation, defragmentation and economic distress ("3D"). In other words, apart from its axiological entanglement, the concept depicted failed states as those that failed to meet Western conditions of modern statehood.[15] The US government also used the term **"rogue states"** in the 1990s, but these deserved more to be contained or defeated rather than to be rebuilt. As the rogue state notion was officially abolished by the US State Department in 2000, the post-September 11 Bush doctrine used the "axis of evil" semantics

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[11] According to Charles Call state-building denotes "actions undertaken by international or national actors to establish, reform, or strengthen the institutions of the state which may or may not contribute to peacebuilding". State-building differs from nation-building, while the two are confusingly equated, as the latter is used most in the US and entails elements of social-engineering (actions at national level aim at forging a sense of common nationhood, usually in order to overcome ethnic or communal differences), see C. Call, *Ending Wars, Building Peace*, [in:] *Building States to Build Peace*, C. Call, V. Wyeth (eds), Boulder 2008, p. 5. Some scholars even treat nation-building as an oxymoron – as nationhood is naturally resistant to outsiders' logic, see e.g. M. Mason, *Nation-Building is an Oxymoron*, "Parameters" 2016, vol. 46, nr 1, pp. 67–79. For other definitions of state-building, see P. Miller, *Armed State Building: Confronting State Failure, 1898–2012*, London 2013. State-building is also distinct from state-formation as the latter is a long-lasting process, cf. B. Bliesemann de Guevara, *Introduction: statebuilding and state-formation*, [in:] *Statebuilding and state-formation: the political sociology of intervention*, B. Bliesemann de Guevara (ed.), Abingdon 2012, pp. 4–6.

[12] The first internationalised context is akin to Doctor Jekyll's personality while the local political economy is perceived as failed or dysfunctional (Mr Hyde). This metaphor has been used by Oliver Richmond in: *Jekyll or Hyde: what is statebuilding creating? Evidence from the 'field'*, "Cambridge Review of International Affairs" 2014, vol. 27, nr 1, pp. 1–20.

[13] An extended study of Afghan state-formation see in R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System,* Oxford 1995.

[14] In the US academic discourse and military manuals, there are also some state-building-related terms as nation-building, peacebuilding, stabilisation, operations other than war (OOTW), postconflict reconstruction, and regime change.

[15] The term was invented and firstly applied by the Clinton administration's research project – known as State Failure Task Force – which was established in 1994 and later renamed to Political Instability Task Force (2003). It aimed to identify the main determinants of political instability (e.g. coup d'état, genocide, civil strife). There is a broad debate on the limitations of the failed states concept as well as its state-building counterpart, see e.g. P. Englebert, D. M. Tull, *Postconflict Reconstruction in Africa: Flawed Ideas about Failed States*, "International Security" 2008, vol. 32, nr 4, pp. 106–139.

designed to stigmatise and engage governments that harbour terrorists, prolifer-
ate WMD, and violate other international standards (specifically, Iran, Iraq and
North Korea).[16] Since 2001, paradoxically, in the US public debate Afghanistan
seemed to stand somewhere between these two categories – both failed and rogue.
Firstly, it used to be ranked as one of the world's least developed countries, with
a plethora of internal problems. Secondly, since 1996 Afghanistan was also pre-
sented as a breeding ground for narcobusiness and terrorism, with well-known
links between the Taliban (Mullah Omar) and al-Qaeda (Osama bin Laden). After
September 11, such a designation forced the US to initiate "regime-change" and
to restore the semblance of normalcy before the exit.

Debates on state-building activity have been influenced by the words of
George W. Bush, who emphasized "no nation building" in his 2000 presidential
campaign. But in his memoir, *Decision Points*, he bluntly admitted: "After 9/11,
I changed my mind".[17] This change was reflected in decisions made by the Bush
administration, e.g. the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Recon-
struction and Stabilization (CRS) was established in 2004 and the Defense Depart-
ment's Directive 3000.5 (2005) made stabilisation a core military task. However,
no nation has ever been "built" at gunpoint by an occupying power, since nations
are similar to "stalagmites" (state-formation); their development is evolutionary
and cannot be accelerated militarily.[18] Since 1963, the US has tried to do so at
least three times (South Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq). For others – unlike nation-
building – internationalised state-building is not only possible but essential and
emanates from the "sovereign obligation" of international society in a new world
order.[19] But it is all about adequate goals, means and time-frames of state-building.

In 2001, contrary to American inclinations and state-building capabilities in
non-democratic, unresponsive and conflict-ridden countries, the Bush adminis-
tration had launched a state-building project, which Obama inherited and had to
perform. As the initial US war against the Taliban ended (Operation *Enduring
Freedom*, OEF[20]), the US succeeded in burden-sharing and NATO formally took
responsibility for maintaining security in Afghanistan (the UN authorised Inter-
national Security Assistance Force, ISAF). Finally, in late 2003 the US assumed

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[16] George W. Bush used the term "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address on 29 Janu-
ary 2002.

[17] One chapter of this memoir (p. 183–222) is devoted to Afghanistan, Bush states that US
operation there "was the ultimate nation building mission", he also admits that the US government
"was not prepared for nation building". G.W. Bush, *Decision Points*, New York 2010.

[18] See M. Mason, *Nation-Building…*, p. 68.

[19] For more about a concept of "sovereign obligation", see R. Haass, *World order 2.0. The
case for sovereign obligation*, "Foreign Affairs" 2017, vol. 96, issue 1. See footnote 11.

[20] Prior to Obama, the US (OEF) and NATO (ISAF) missions evolved from a light military
presence to a combat mission (during 2004 alone, US troops in Afghanistan more than doubled);
such a light footing approach prevailed until 2006. See, e.g. A. Suhrke, *A Contradictory Mission?
NATO from Stabilization to Combat in Afghanistan*, „International Peacekeeping" 2008, vol. 15,
nr 2, pp. 214–236.

ISAF leadership with troops from 43 countries.[21] Leaving its structure and operation aside, with a new Constitution adopted in 2004 and Hamid Karzai elected as a president, the internationally-recognised Afghan government has struggled to broaden its authority beyond Kabul or to forge national unity. Consequently, the initial US-led regime change has been increasingly translated into international state-building (ISAF) with a dominant role for the United States.

COINTAINMENT AND AF-PAK (OBAMA'S FIRST TERM)

In late 2008, "finishing the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban" was listed as one of Barack Obama's top priorities.[22] Obama's first term approach to Afghanistan was greatly influenced by the choices made by his predecessor and other external players who defined the context for coercive state-building. Subsequently, Obama's Afghan policy has been presented as a continuation of a "good war" (just war) contrasting with George W. Bush's "bad war" in Iraq.[23] However, opinions in the early Obama administration were divided. One camp was led by Vice-President Joe Biden and advocated limited objectives (counterterrorism) focused on the al-Qaeda threat (chiefly the use of drones and special forces already deployed in Afghanistan). The second camp, reportedly including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and General David Petraeus, preferred expanded counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts as adequate to combat terrorism there.[24] A policy review on Afghanistan was ordered when Obama took office in January 2009. Since then, his rhetoric about US goals in Afghanistan became far more limited and incoherent.[25] As President Obama announced his Afghanistan-Pakistan comprehensive strategy that combined counterinsurgency and large-scale development and governance assistance (March 2009), the latter state-building project was almost completely subordinated to the former military task ("clear, hold and build").[26] Consequently, democracy and human rights were emphasised far less in the early Obama administration than was true in the Bush administration. The White House preferred to describe the mission as counterterrorism (the

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[21] Operation Enduring Freedom was launched by the US and the UK on 7 October 2001, on 20 December the United Nation Security Council mandated (UNSC res. 1386) ISAF, which was later formally assumed by NATO (August 11, 2003).

[22] 2008 was a fatal year for US troops in Afghanistan as by the end of that year US casualties amounted to 108 – more than in any prior year.

[23] Even if he did never actually use the phrase himself, it became to be attributed to him.

[24] V. Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence. Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State Building in Afghanistan*, Washington D.C. 2013, p. 25. The term "counterinsurgency" itself was coined by the Kennedy administration, which defended the governments of South Vietnam and Laos (the first use of the word in the English language was in 1962).

[25] See T. Bird, A. Marshall, *op. cit.,* p. 221.

[26] It is worth noting that Afghan agricultural production in 2008 was less than in 2001, the last year of Taliban rule.

Biden approach) and never dared speak about state-building.[27] Obama's public speeches on Afghanistan also hardly ever included language about governance. It clearly reflected reality since, instead of building the Afghan state, the March 2009 White House strategy set up a roadblocks to state-building induced by lessons of a post-Saddam Iraq.[28] The US determination to supply more to Afghan statehood was further weakened by the 2009 presidential election in Afghanistan (with Karzai re-elected) pervaded with fraud and corruption in the first round.[29] The failure to avert the rigged election showed Afghans that the United States was not as demanding about good governance as it could have been. The election also reflected rising enmity between Afghan warlords and technocrats in the government that made Karzai's position progressively weaker.[30]

With Karzai re-elected, the second White House review (December 2009) prepared the ground to for a surge of US forces. Obama was urged by military commanders to choose the costly counterinsurgency strategy to win the war, and 30,000 reinforcements were ultimately sent after a few months of debate.[31] Apparently, the president wasn't satisfied with the dominant COIN narrative in the US military (the McChrystal approach) and no broader options were presented to him. However, despite the Afghan election fiasco, the second review did publicly focus on governance. Ironically, it was a retired general, Karl Eikenberry, who emphasised the fallacy of the Afghan surge and portrayed Hamid Karzai as an unreliable partner.[32] As the counterinsurgency approach goes hand-in-hand with an expensive state-building project, the US declared itself to be more interested in Afghan governance. However, the Obama administration was much more concerned with a deadline for the US military presence in Afghanistan. In

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[27] V. Felbab-Brown, *op. cit.,* p. 26.

[28] At the same time, the US and ISAF commander General Stanley McChrystal reported on the shortages of resources that undermined counterinsurgency goals; he demanded a heavy footprint (at least 80,000 troops) and reflected "the security gap" concluded in one of RAND reports (2006). McChrystal was appointed by Obama as part of the Afghanistan policy-review. See also: D. Auerswald, S. Saidman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone*, Princeton 2014, pp. 100–103.

[29] The election itself was the first not to be policed by the UN but by a Karzai-created Afghan electoral commission; consequently, Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan indicated that there were more counted votes than voters in the southern and eastern provinces (Helmand, Kandahar, Paktika).

[30] For instance, Ashraf Ghani openly condemned Karzai for massive corruption.

[31] Initially, the US (i.a. Richard Holbrooke) opted to "regionalise" the intervention and build a coalition for a stable Afghanistan (Pakistan, India, China, Iran, Russia), which turned out to be elusive. Cf. T. Bird, A. Marshall, *op. cit.,* pp. 226–227. The deployment was based on condition that additional US forces would begin to withdraw by mid 2011.

[32] Karl Eikenberry served as the commander in Afghanistan in Bush's administration and later the US Ambassador in Kabul. In his cables that became public, Mr Eikenberry opposed the McChrystal approach by warning that significant Afghan surge would only made the Afghan government too dependent on external efforts with the US stranded in an open-ended state-building process.

other words, the White House aspired to "Afghanise" the war by imposing such timelines.[33] In fact, however, it did little capacity-building and even generated short-termism in Afghan political behaviour.[34] The last (but not least) failure of the US strategy review was to rule out the inauguration of unofficial negotiations with the Taliban leadership (supported by UK military officers and statesmen) as the political face of counterinsurgency. Generally, Americans simply focused on an all-out victory that disqualified barbarians ("clear+hold"). The US also preferred a bottom-up approach to weaken the Taliban through defection and reintegration.[35] In short, an operational and tactical military approach defined the intervention in the medium term.

On the other hand, US relations with Pakistan started to deteriorate after several US incursions into its territory against militants (September 2008). Following the reset with Russia, the White House planned a new channel for distribution of supplies to Afghanistan (Northern Distribution Network) to partially offset these problems.[36] Generally, for the US, Afghan political economy mirrored its neighbour, Pakistan. In this context, the Obama administration even used "Af-Pak" as an acronym, which referred to a policy approach binding two countries into a single theatre of operations.[37] This also indicated that the US government treated Afghan statehood mostly in negative terms as a terrorist threat located somewhere around the ill-defined Durand line. It turned out to be true as ISAF continued to battle the Taliban insurgency and fighting crossed into neighbouring Pakistani territory that served as a safe haven for the Afghan Taliban. Finally, in 2010, the Obama administration stopped using the term, which was strongly opposed by Pakistani and Afghan authorities.[38] However, it left unaddressed the issue of the open border with Pakistan. In 2010, the surge in US forces was countered by more insurgent attacks than any previous year.[39] Then, the Taliban begin to penetrate north-west, rural Afghanistan, which undermined the viability of a population-centric counterinsurgency model.

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[33] For example, recruitment to Afghan security forces was prone to Taliban infiltration due to lack of effective identity card system.

[34] For more about different and sometimes conflicting contexts of international intervention, see e.g. K. Friis, *Which Afghanistan? Military, Humanitarian, and State-Building Identities in the Afghan Theater*, "Security Studies" 2012, vol. 21, pp. 266–300.

[35] It ended up with only few hundred Taliban fighters defected. See T. Bird, A. Marshall, *op. cit.,* pp. 228–232.

[36] By 2011, the NDN handled about 40 percent of Afghanistan-bound traffic (versus 30 percent through Pakistan).

[37] The term was popularised (and probably coined) by Richard Holbrooke, the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan in Obama's administration; its official use has been echoed by the media (i.a. *the AfPak War* series in "The Washington Post", and *the Af-Pak Channel*, a joint project of "Foreign Policy" magazine launched in August 2009).

[38] C.D. May, *The AfPak Front,* "National Review" 16.07.2009, available online: http://www.nationalreview.com/article/227888/afpak-front-clifford-d-may (15.05.2017).

[39] In mid 2010, General McChrystal was replaced by David Petraeus.

After 2010, the White House has also started to talk of **"Afghanistan good enough"**, further abandoning extensive state-building in favour of preserving the country from Taliban rule.[40] The US preferred to depict COIN activity in more "non-kinetic" terms, e.g., Operation Hamkari in Kandahar and Operation Moshtarak in Helmand. At the end of the Afghan surge, US special forces killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan (May 2011). That fact convinced Obama the US was near the end and he continued to drawdown the Afghan surge. Following these events, the administration began to prepare an exit strategy and negotiate a status of forces agreement to end speculation about any significant US open-ended involvement in Afghanistan. Then, the US administration started to channel international debate on the mineral wealth in Afghanistan that would "naturally" secure its future sustainability in economic terms. This issue was not new, but for years Afghanistan had lacked the security, expertise and infrastructure necessary to exploit its mineral deposits. The geography of the insurgency also provoked debate during 2011 on a "plan B" for Afghanistan, with more state-building in the north and more COIN in the south.[41]

In May 2012, the US-Afghanistan strategic partnership agreement (SPA) was signed in Kabul; this set the terms for relations after 2014 when Afghans were scheduled to resume responsibility for security. This agreement was vital to carry on the counterterrorism mission beyond 2014. Although the text lacked many details, the US agreed to classify Afghanistan as a major non-NATO ally that would allow Kabul to receive some sophisticated equipment and training. It also paved the way for a decade-long US engagement in development projects and security sector reform in Afghanistan (although with no concrete financial commitments).[42] President Obama was advised not to go to Kabul for security reasons. Even if this was an element of his re-election campaign, the trip was momentous because Obama started to demand more from President Karzai.[43] As their relationship deteriorated, Obama shifted to look at his successor, Ashraf Ghani (also a Pashtun).[44]

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[40] By 2010, Afghanistan was – according to Transparency International – the second most corrupt country in the world (after Somalia).

[41] See e.g. R. Blackwill, *Plan B in Afghanistan: Why a De Facto Partition is the Least Bad Option*, "Foreign Affairs" 2011, vol. 90, nr 1, pp. 42–50.

[42] White House, *Factsheet: The US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement*, Washington D.C. 1.05.2012, available online: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/fact-sheet-us-afghanistan-strategic-partnership-agreement (7.02.2017).

[43] Asked by his opponents about limitations of settling a 2014 deadline, Mr Obama responded: "Our goal is not to build a country in American's image, or to eradicate every vestige of the Taliban […] These objectives would require many more years, many more dollars and many more American lives." M. Landler, *Obama Signs Pact in Kabul, Turning Page in Afghan War,* "New York Times" 1.05.2012, available online: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/02/world/asia/obama-lands-in-kabul-on-unannounced-visit.html (07.01.2017).

[44] In March 2010, Obama criticised Karzai for the corruption in the Afghan government, ten months later he only telephoned Karzai on occasion of his stay at Bagram.

It is worth noting that since 2001 the United States has acknowledged that the Taliban is an "insurgency." However, both the Taliban and Afghans fighting them are inarguably "citizens of the same country," so this easily fills the criteria of a civil war.[45] However, if the main goal of the counterinsurgency is to increase the level of legitimacy for the ruling government, any counterinsurgency is doomed to failure in a country without a nation such as Afghanistan.[46] It is worth noting that in its *Field Manual 3–24,* of 2014 the US military made fostering legitimacy the main goal of counterinsurgency (1–78) and the document itself openly refers to failing and failed states.[47] Nevertheless, since the 2001 intervention, the Afghan government has won the support of perhaps 20–30 percent of the population. Thus, it can be stated that COIN turned out to be statistically irrelevant or even disruptive to peace and the legitimacy of the Afghan government.[48]

THE ENDGAME OF INTERVENTION (OBAMA'S SECOND TERM)

Paradoxically, if modern Afghanistan had become a pawn in geopolitical struggles over political ideology and commercial affairs, the multinational coalition led by the US became a pawn in the post–2001 Afghan political economy, one that is distinct from modern state formation (post-colonial, post-Communist and post-conflict). In describing Afghanistan's state-building project over the last two centuries, it can be shown as non-linear and bumpy, with an Afghan "big state" always provoking peripheries to counter.[49]

Thus, the endgame for the intervention would be just the next movement in such an "up and down" motion. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was accelerated by the 2012 re-election contest between incumbent Obama and his Republican opponent Mitt Romney. In fact, the search for a US exit started in 2009. The Afghan "surge" stemmed from Obama's belief that the war was winnable, but the reinforcements failed to suppress the Taliban insurgency. At a May 2012 NATO summit in Chicago leaders endorsed an exit strategy to withdraw international forces by the middle of 2013. In January 2012 President Obama declared the policy a success, because it had "de-capacitated" Al-Qaeda. The

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[45] Conversely, the semantics of the US foreign policy in the case of Syria is much different as the former disavows Assad's regime rather than the insurgency.

[46] Cf. M. Mason, *op. cit.*, pp. 71–72.

[47] For more, see: Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3–24 (FM 3–24 MCWP 3–33.5 Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies)*, Washington D.C. 2014, available online: https://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf (10.03.2017). Interestingly, words such as state-building or nation-building were not referred to in this document.

[48] For more see e.g.: C. Mason, *The Strategic Lessons Unlearned from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan*: *Why the Afghan National Security Forces Will Not Hold, and the Implications for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan*, Carlisle Barracks 2015, p. 66.

[49] See D. Mukhopadhyay, *op. cit.,* pp. 9–24.

transfer of security responsibilities was completed in June 2013. A new threat appeared in 2013, a rising Taliban, but this did not impede the withdrawal of multinational forces.

Following the victory of Ashraf Ghani in the September 2014 presidential election, the US has had more opportunities to engage with an eligible Afghan partner. Ironically, given Ghani's personal record as a former world banker, he is a state-building expert and insider in one of the most fragile countries. Consequently, the US has strengthened its position as the country's biggest donor (42 percent of total ODA).[50] A few days after Ghani was sworn in, two security pacts were signed: a bilateral agreement between the US and Afghanistan (BSA) and a SOFA for the NATO-led mission. Under the agreements 9,800 American and at least 2,000 NATO troops were allowed to remain in the country beyond 2014.[51] By the end of 2017 US force was to be further reduced to several hundred.

The definition and labelling of the intervention was defined and labelled is also important to understand "the geography" of state-building in Afghanistan. A counterinsurgency approach suggested that the interveners focus their efforts in the areas where the insurgency was the most severe, using development projects to reduce the likelihood that young men would join the militias. Conversely, in theory, a development approach argues that resources should be more equally distributed around the country, but in fact, they tended to go to more secure areas where such projects were likely to have a higher chance of success. Thirdly, a state-building approach might prioritise the promotion of technocratic officials who could run the government's administration at a local level, while a stabilisation model would favour any local commander who might be potent enough to control violence regardless of his (in)ability to govern effectively or legally.[52] The US Department of Defense was clearly the greatest supporter of the COIN strategy in Afghanistan. However, within both the coalition and the US government, those approaches clashed as the State Department almost always preferred state-building over either counterinsurgency or counterterrorism. These conflicting or inconsistent international strategies produced back-and-forth state-building with finally disoriented Afghans.[53]

In 2014, President Obama said America's longest war was ending. The number of US troops had peaked between 2010 and 2013 (about 100,000 troops in August

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[50] This amounts to $1791 million as 2014–2015 average; source: OECD-DAC, *Interactive summary charts by aid (ODA) recipients*, 2016, available online:http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/aid-at-a-glance.htm (10.03.2017).

[51] The US was also allowed to have nine separate bases across Afghanistan and the agreement prevented US troops from being prosecuted under Afghan laws for any crimes.

[52] Cf. N. Coburn, *Losing Afghanistan: An Obituary for the Intervention*, Stanford 2016, p. 204.

[53] For instance, after initial negligence of an opium industry problem in southern Afghanistan, interveners began a campaign of opium eradication, which pushed young underemployed farmers to the Taliban insurgency. Finally, the interveners were back to ignoring the opium issue and in some cases even paying compensation to farmers whose opium crops were damaged by helicopters landing in their fields. Since 2010 cultivation of opium has been growing that makes opium Afghanistan's biggest export.

2010) and was systematically reduced after that. As Barack Obama leaves office, 8,400 US troops and a large air force contingent remain engaged in Afghanistan. The thirteen-year combat missions, Operation *Enduring Freedom* and NATO's ISAF, were formally concluded on December 31, 2014. In 2015 the follow-on US mission, Operation *Freedom's Sentinel*, was launched to sustain international engagement in Afghanistan. Since then the US has been pursuing two missions – one within the framework of the NATO-led Resolute Support training mission, and the second the counterterrorist one. Apparently, Obama's recent decision on a larger than planned US military presence relates to the performance of the second function.

In early August 2015, President Obama stated in a National Security Council meeting: "We are no longer in nation-building mode". This statement clearly reflects the failure of the US concept of transformation in Afghanistan. Late Obama administration postures suggest an enduring but lower-profile US presence there, one that focuses exclusively on the real terrorism threat. The US could not afford to abandon this area and allow the country to become a terrorist hotspot again. Since 2015, despite the official end of the combat mission, the US has conducted airstrikes as an element of a "secret war" against Islamic militants. The increased raids of US Special Forces and their Afghan allies were apparently the result of intelligence seized in October 2014. These raids were only possible under new President Ghani, who loosened restrictions on nighttime operations in early 2015, apparently to slow the US withdrawal.

At the same time, President Obama perceived every state-building effort as "a long slog".[54] This has only proved that the US did not intend to abandon its counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions. It started to think about relocating its forces in the country based on fears of a Taliban re-emergence in the coming months. The capacity-building, local ownership and the transfer of security provision to Afghans seem to be illusory. The Afghan army and police are plagued by endemic corruption and ineffectiveness that have only deepened during the US training efforts. In 2016, according to the UN, nearly 2,500 civilians died, many killed by government forces. Two years earlier, the US reported that the level of desertions in the Afghan National Army (ANA) represented 45 percent of the entire army (almost 68,000 of 149,185).[55] Compared to civil wars in South Vietnam and Iraq, Afghanistan has by far the lowest ratio of armed and police forces per square mile of territory (1,4) and per 1,000 citizens (12,8) with a dangerously weak security apparatus.[56]

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[54] The president remains defensive in an interview in September 2015 by saying that Americans "shouldn't assume that every time a country has problems that it reflects a failure of American policy", M. Landler, *The Afghan War and the Evolution of Obama,* "New York Times" 1.01.2017, available online, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/01/world/asia/obama-afghanistan-war.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share&_r=0 (02.01.2017).

[55] M. Mason, *op. cit.,* pp. 70–72.

[56] For effective COIN operations 20 counterinsurgents per one thousand residents is often believed the minimum troop density. SIGAR reported the number of ANA soldiers using drugs

Nevertheless, the US alone has allocated some \$117 billion for the reconstruction of the country since FY 2002 trying to strengthen Afghan security forces, build government capacity, promote development promotion, and counter the drug trade.[57] Despite this, only a few ANA battalions are considered as being able to operate fully without the American advice or support. In 2013, Afghan government security forces suffered two casualties for every one Taliban casualty they caused. After 2014, with the US-led coalition in a training mode, the statistics can only get worse.[58] Implanting western-style institutions in Afghanistan after 2001 turned out to be less problematic than their maintenance. For example, despite the conscript character of all previous Afghan armies, the US Army decided to build the all-volunteer ANA despite critical voices from the Afghan military that it would be unsustainable in the long run.[59] Moreover, some experts agreed that building and training indigenous armies in the interveners' image have often resulted in failed counterinsurgency.[60]

On the other hand, the US-led state-building has provoked ethnic imbalance and artificiality in many areas of Afghanistan.[61] The propensity for sectarian violence has also grown with the political empowerment of the Hazara people. Despite prejudices against them as a permanent underclass, Hazaras are now prominent in the army and at Kabul University.[62] On the other hand, dominant Pashtuns are far from being monolithic as the intervention intensified ongoing feuds between clans like the Mashwari and the Salazai, and exacerbated some clans' opposition to the Taliban.

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was at least 50 percent. Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 14, 86. ANA forces were also described by Americans as "addicted to bases" (p. 135).

[57] Since FY2008, a vast part of the US-sponsored projects has been audited by SIGAR (the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction) – a specifically-mandated and independent structure; Its work helps prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse in reconstruction programs and operations. See: Office of the Special Inspector for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Request*, Arlington, VA 30.01.2016, available online: https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/budget/FiscalYearBudget.pdf?SSR=1&SubSSR=5&WP=Budget%20 (PDF) (03.02.2017).

[58] M. Mason, *op. cit.* p. 77.

[59] The Afghan government is unable to sustain its security forces without international funding of some \$4.1 billion per year. Afghanistan currently pays only 10 to 12% of its annual security costs, which makes its self-sufficiency in military terms rather impossible by 2024 (as originally planned in a NATO summit in 2014).

[60] Cf. K. Sepp, *Best Practices in Counterinsurgency*, "Military Review" May-June 2005, p. 10.

[61] For example, the Taliban portrayed the heavy Tajik ANA as an occupying power in the south. The Tajik representation in the ANA reflects the so-called Eikenberry Rule (guidelines promulgated by Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry in 2002), which stipulates that the ANA's composition mirrors Afghan society. In fact, these two are much more problematic due to the Tajiks overrepresented in the ANA at the expense of Pashtuns.

[62] See M. Mason, *op. cit.*, p. 58. All four Hazaras nominated to ministerial posts by President Ghani were rejected by the Wolesi Jirga in January 2015.

TOWARD NEO-TALIBAN STATE?

Incompetent institutions are not the only curse of post-intervention Afghanistan. In retrospect, liberal state-building in Afghanistan is akin to squaring a circle of competitive ideas and politics. The Taliban's re-emergence is the best evidence. Since the middle of the decade, US allies, including the United Kingdom, have called for negotiations with the Taliban, arguing that the conflict could not be resolved without them. However, even if Obama was more open to talks with the Afghan Taliban, he doubted their credibility given several previously broken ceasefires in South and North Waziristan by their Pakistani counterpart. Such US inconsistency toward the Taliban has only strengthened its grip in some regions. As long as the Taliban was aligned with the Al-Qaeda, the US rejected any formal talks. In September 2009, the US did not formally respond to Karzai's public plea for negotiations with the Taliban. Three years later, when Obama visited Kabul in May 2012, his words acknowledged the US direct negotiations with the Taliban.

The kleptocratic Karzai government's record, massive electoral frauds, and political stalemate have created very limited legitimacy for the Ghani administration. Thus, only approximately one-third of the Afghan population supports Pashtun Ashraf Ghani, a figure equivalent to support for the Taliban (30 percent).[63] In 2016, according to the survey, popular support for the Taliban increased as Afghans were more fearful about their security, more dissatisfied with the economy and less confident in their government.[64] The peace deal with Hezb-i-Islami (February 2017) has not changed much, as such an agreement with the Taliban was the most anticipated. However, early 2016 saw failed peace talks with the Taliban.

The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, IS) in the Middle East has also transformed the Taliban movement, creating a context of a larger jihad that also maintains a measure of regional autonomy through the production and trade of opium. With the slow progress of the anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq and Syria, the relocation of ISIL fighters eastward to Afghanistan should be considered highly possible. When the Islamic State got a foothold in Afghanistan and declared the so-called Khorasan Province in 2015, competition with rival

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[63] N. Hopkins (ed.), *Afghanistan in 2013: A Survey of the Afghan People*, The Asia Foundation Report, San Francisco 2013, available online: https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/2013AfghanSurvey.pdf (01.02.2017).

[64] For more on the issue see: Z. Warren et al. (eds), *Afghanistan in 2016: A Survey of the Afghan People*, The Asia Foundation Report, San Francisco 2016, pp. 6, 9, available online: http://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016_Survey-of-the-Afghan-People_full-survey.Apr2017.pdf (01.02.2017). In 2016, the lowest level of national optimism was recorded as only 29,3% of Afghans say the country is moving in the right direction (a record 66% said just the opposite). Afghans' perception of the Ghani administration declined also to historically low levels of 49,1%.

Taliban fighters began.[65] Thus, global jihad will probably internationalise the insurgency with counterterrorist measures redirected there.

Finally, as the Taliban is virtually a completely Pashtun movement, today's Afghanistan seems to be on the brink of a north-south civil war similar to the 1996–2001 Taliban period, rather than being trapped in a simple "insurgency". After 2001, observers quite quickly started to talk of a "neo-Taliban" Afghanistan.[66] The US government estimates that the Taliban now controls more territory than at any time since 2001. It is present chiefly in southern, Pashtun-dominated provinces as well as in the northern districts (Kunduz). Taliban control over Afghanistan has fluctuated widely, but it has recently reconsolidated. It is estimated that since the beginning of 2017, the Taliban has gained control of nearly 5 percent of Afghanistan's territory (mostly rural areas) and is the real government there. They perfectly understand the Afghan way of war, which relies on the "snowball" effect and assimilates fighters from overrun local militias into their ranks.[67] Eventually, a partition of the post-intervention country into North Afghanistan (Tajik and Uzbek) and South Afghanistan (Taliban-dominated) might also take place, allowing two *de facto* states to emerge side by side. Unlike the inept ANA, the Taliban is absolutely confident of victory. A report prepared in January 2014 by the Department of Defense concluded that a Taliban victory is inevitable in the Afghan population's perception because coalition forces will soon leave. Paradoxically, if the Afghan government has to restore order in all 34 provinces, the Taliban would only need to hold one province to present it as a strategic victory.

Given these trends, how can we assess the impact of the intervention? These answers have to be difficult on a national level. On the one hand, in terms of human development, accessible data confirm that since 2011 significant progress has been made in Afghanistan.[68] On the other hand, these achievements are easily offset by costs and casualties provided by programs such as iCasualities.org.[69] The exact numbers are impossible to manage due to the long-term repercussion of the intervention.[70] Even if there were some isolated and ephemeral successes

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[65] A word Khorasan refers to an old name for Afghanistan and surrounding areas; NATO estimates that there are 1,000–1,500 IS fighters in Afghanistan – about 70% of whose come from the Pakistani Taliban group.

[66] The one of prophetic texts about this trend was made by: A. Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop. The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan,* London 2007.

[67] For more about this logic, see e.g.: R. Johnson, *Afghan Way of War: How and Why They Fight*, Oxford 2011.

[68] In 2001, ¼ of children died before reaching the age of five; by 2010 that number was one in ten. Life expectancy has also increased by at least ten years since the intervention began: Afghanistan's HDI has visibly risen from 0,334 (2000) to 0,465 (2014). UNDP, *Afghanistan. Briefing note for countries in the 2015 Human Development Report (2015)*, available online: http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/AFG.pdf (04.01.2017).

[69] The figures from February 13, 2017 show 2392 US fatalities out of 3528 total casualties (67 per cent).

[70] N. Coburn, *op. cit.,* p. 201.

and an appearance of normalcy brought by Operation *Enduring Freedom*, since the interveners have left Afghanistan their survival is at risk with the Taliban resurgence.[71] Consequently, the argument is that the US has implemented state-building "in" Afghanistan but not "of" Afghanistan, since the latter seems to be mission impossible. For example, consider the partial success of 2010 village stability operations in the Dan Aw Patan district of Paktia province. While U.S. Army units were able to create and train squads of local police and establish relative security in its north and central regions, in the southern part of the district their efforts failed despite the small distance between them (10 miles).[72]

If looking at the big picture, despite interveners' correct guidelines and rules of engagement, they faced enormous problems with Afghanistan's social and political fabric, as there is no uniform Afghanistan given its complex history, topography and ethnicity. As a result of this, the intervention became "stilted" over time (as put by Noah Coburn) and risked losing everything it had created. Apart from the Taliban's consolidation, a former US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Roland E. Neumann, stressed the fact that, although Afghanistan's economy had experienced significant growth, that progress had created a war-oriented economy. Yet, this could be at partially offset by a continued but conditional US troop presence and dependable funds. Finally, in 2017, eventual an ANA victory over the Taliban is unimaginable without US air support.[73]

CONCLUSIONS

The way American politicians discussed the intervention changed significantly over time. G.W. Bush's war on terror eventually morphed into a state-building mission, which was then replaced by Barack Obama's counterinsurgency doctrine. These changes in semantics had far-reaching implications. Nevertheless, lessons learned in Afghanistan have also shown that – in terms of semantics – the US prefers counterinsurgency (*Field Manual 3–24*) to state-building but their goals, ways, means and risks are virtually the same. Apart from this rhetoric – as state-building is always political – international stakeholders failed to secure continuity and consistency in their actions. For example, the US State Department tended to rotate every official at the same time each summer, preventing them from getting in-depth knowledge about Afghanistan. Moreover, given the variety of international state-builders since 2001, the spectrum of interveners' goals was much more diverse and sometimes contradictory. Problems also stemmed from

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[71]   This paradox resonates in the words of one of the interviewed US soldiers, who served in Afghanistan: "My presence there might have been keeping a village safer for a limited amount of time, but since then maybe that village has been completely routed by the Taliban". *Ibidem*, p. 202.

[72]   See *Field Manual 3–24...* (7.112016).

[73]   In February 2017, Afghanistan's national security adviser appealed to the US to provide air support for combat operations.

two parallel contexts of US state-building, because America's civil and military structures have tended to look within their institutional framework.

The crucial question remains: what did Americans and the international community want to achieve when deciding to intervene? Was it Afghan unity, a national vendetta against bin Laden, democratisation and promotion of human rights, or a simple neo-colonial action? The passage of time seems to deny all of these goals as the US-led coalition turned out to be somehow trapped in a prisoners' dilemma, where boots on the ground ("clean") to secure the initial – often blurred – goals of the operation shifted to COIN and, more recently, the US has opened discussion on a neo-Taliban Afghanistan ("cooperate"). For Richard Haass, a critical flaw of Obama Afghan policy was tying US military presence to the arbitrary calendar (Doctor Jekyll), not realistic local conditions (Mr Hyde).[74]

Apart from deficiencies of the intervention, US military presence was transformed from counterinsurgency to training and advising Afghan forces (NATO Mission Resolute Support). However, the net result of the intervention was that the US-led coalition defeated Al-Qaeda but failed to eradicate the Taliban, something that seems to be extremely difficult if possible at all. This undercut the very basis of an intervention driven by Western ideas and institutions. On the other hand, the early Obama administration tended to treat Afghanistan in terms of international security rather than governance and state-building. No assessment of the fourteen-year intervention in Afghanistan would really doubt its failure in terms of overall democratisation and stabilisation. In the bigger picture, US state-building in Afghanistan will probably reshape the overall US approach to foreign conflicts toward a more reluctant mode. Therefore, the Trump administration will likely resort to an armed state-building formula in a more limited manner, clinging to international terrorism.

In January 2017, just days after Trump's inauguration, a Taliban spokesman, in a four-page letter written in English, argued that the departure from Afghanistan by international forces is vital to peace building there. Indeed, the political future of the country cannot be prescribed without Taliban involvement. This was gradually acknowledged by Obama's administration that welcomed the October 2016 restart of secret talks in Qatar between the Afghan government and the Taliban. One of the crucial lessons unlearned from previous US interventions is that the security forces they create and equip, e.g., ANA, are simply not willing enough to fight and die for weak, illegitimate post-intervention governments. The only two Afghan sources of legitimacy – the traditional (the monarchy) and the religious (the Taliban) – have had to collide with one established by the Coalition, approaching a neo-Taliban state.

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[74] This view was expressed on Twitter on January 2, 2017.

Tytuł: Budowanie państwa w Afganistanie w trakcie prezydentury Baracka Obamy

Streszczenie: Problematyka artykułu koncentruje się na zbrojnym budowaniu państwa w Afganistanie w trakcie dwóch kadencji prezydenta Baracka Obamy (2009–2017). Afganistan traktowany jest w kategoriach państwa postinterwencyjnego. Autor przedstawia podejścia USA do interwencji państwotwórczej po 2009 r., które oscylowały wokół dwóch przeciwstawnych opcji: antyterrorystycznej z ograniczoną obecnością militarną USA w Afganistanie (m.in. Joe Biden) oraz przeciwpartyzancką (gen. Stanley McChrystal). O ile w trakcie pierwszej kadencji dominowało podejście przeciwpartyzanckie (COIN) do interwencji, po 2013 r. operacja zaczęła przybierać mniej kinetyczny kształt z docelowym wygaszeniem operacji „Trwała Wolność" (OEF). Równolegle doszło do zmiany roli USA, które ze stojącego za zmianą reżimu interwenta przeobraziły się w zwolennika Afganistanu „w wersji minimum". Biorąc pod uwagę historyczną odporność Afganistanu na wpływy zewnętrzne, Autor suponuje jedynie fasadowy charakter koalicyjnego budowania państwa w Afganistanie. Ocena szeregu niespójności w polityce USA wobec Afganistanu powinna być także dokonana w kontekście odnowy sił Talibanu.

Słowa klucze: Afganistan, interwencja, prezydentura Baracka Obamy, budowanie państwa

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