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AFGHANISTAN AFTER ISAF WITHDRAWAL – a DECADE IN THE SHADOW OF CHANGE

Abstract

This article examines the origins, development and consequences of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Established in 2001 under UN Resolution 1386 with an initial mandate to protect Kabul, the ISAF mission quickly became NATO's largest military operation, involving more than 130,000 troops from 42 countries at its peak. Despite the end of the operation in 2014, scholarly discussion of its effectiveness continues, pointing to both the strengthening of NATO interoperability and the tensions between political and operational objectives. There is also criticism of the failure to rebuild Afghan institutions and the low public assessment of the mission, partly due to negative media coverage. The complete withdrawal of NATO troops in 2021 led to the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan. Despite formal authority, their regime has not gained international recognition, resulting in no access to the SWIFT system, frozen foreign exchange reserves and sanctions. The consequence is a catastrophic state of the economy, mass unemployment and poverty – the January 2025 report indicates that more than 90% of the population lives below the poverty line. The author of the article concludes that the ISAF mission made sense and had a positive impact on security and human rights, but its too short duration prevented lasting change, suggesting the need for a long-term approach similar to the Balkan mission.

Keywords

National security, Afghanistan, ISAF, military missions, human rights

Introduction

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), with the original mandate of protecting Kabul and the surrounding area, was established on 20 December 2001, under UN Security Council Resolution 1386.

Acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, ISAF was established for a period of six months to assist the Afghan Interim Authority with security¹. The constituent countries of the North Atlantic Alliance received a formal invitation to participate in ISAF. Participants were mandated to take all measures to properly fulfil the mandate of the operation². The ISAF mission quickly evolved into NATO's largest and longest military operation, outside treaty territory, involving more than 130,000 troops from 42 countries at its peak³.

Although more than 10 years have passed since the end of ISAF operations (2014), the scholarly discussion on the effectiveness and consequences of the intervention remains lively. On the one hand, the integrated operations of NATO troops in ISAF strengthened the interoperability of the alliance, while on the other, it affected the tensions between political objectives and operational constraints⁴. The capacity to rebuild the country's internal structures was also misjudged. There were significant systemic shortcomings during the reconstruction of Afghan institutions⁵. The last aspect of the performance of NATO troops in Afghanistan was the low public assessment of the ISAF mission⁶. This was undoubtedly influenced by inadequate media coverage. Governments, broadcasters and reporters mainly focused on negative events.

The complete withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan (2021) has contributed to the fact that Afghanistan is now formally controlled by the Taliban, however their regime has not gained official recognition from many key countries. Lack of access to the SWIFT system, frozen foreign exchange reserves and imposed sanctions negatively affect the entire national economy. This has direct implications for massive unemployment and poverty⁷. This is confirmed by a January (2025) report from the Ministry of National Economy of Afghanistan, which indicates that more than 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, leaving more and more families without the basic necessities of life⁸. In addition, human rights are not respected in Afghanistan, women have been completely marginalized in society.

1 F. Clements, *Conflict in Afghanistan: a historical encyclopedia*, ABC-CLIO 2003, p. 255.

2 J. W. Durch, *Twenty-first-century peace operations*. US Institute of Peace Press 2006, p. 542.

3 A. Kevlihan, ISAF: NATO's Evolving Mission in Afghanistan, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 37, no. 5 (2014), p. 620.

4 J. Seth, *NATO's Lessons from Afghanistan*, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/natos-lessons-afghanistan>, [accessed 02.06.2025].

5 Stabilization: Lessons From The U.S. Experience in Afghanistan, <https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Lessons-Learned/SIGAR-18-48-LL-Executive-Summary.pdf>, [accessed 02.06.2025].

6 S. Mann, *Afghanistan war not worth it, say most Americans*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/afghan-war-not-worth-it-say-most-americans-20101217-190pq.html>, [accessed 03.06.2025].

7 G. Clyde, J. J. Schott, K. A. Elliott, B. Oegg, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*, Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009, pp. 78-80.

8 *Ministry of Economy of Afghanistan – Poverty Analysis Reports*, <https://moec.gov.af/en/category/poverty-analysis-reports>, [accessed 03.06.2025].

Given the current situation in Afghanistan, the author hypothesizes that the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan has contributed to a significant reduction in security.

The political and military context of the ISAF mission

The strategic impetus for the deployment of NATO troops to Afghanistan was the terrorist attacks on the United States of America carried out on 11 September 2001, by the terrorist organization al-Qaeda. The worldwide threat of terrorism generated by the terrorist attacks contributed to the pressure from the international community to take action towards the elimination of al-Qaeda.

The breakthrough moment for the creation of the ISAF operation was the Bonn Conference held on 5 December 2001, at the initiative of the United Nations (UN). It was there that the idea of sending an International Security Force to Afghanistan was born. The Afghan side made a formal request for an armed force to be sent to their country, which would be able to support the security of the population as well as the reconstruction of the country. The formal request for peacekeepers paved the way for UN Security Council Resolution 1386 (20.12.2001) and the establishment of the ISAF mission⁹. In addition, the conference produced the following decisions:

- establishment of the Afghan Transitional Authority;
- establishment of a transitional administration;
- Preparation of the constitution and holding of general elections (up to 2 years);
- commitment to human rights (including women's rights)¹⁰.

Due to its ambitious objectives, we can divide the ISAF operation into 4 periods¹¹:

1. 2001 – 2003 Legal mandate and first operational phase. The mission initially consisted of approximately 5,000 troops under the rotating command of European countries and was to protect only Kabul.
2. 2003 – 2006 Geographical expansion and transformation of the concept of operations. On 11 August 2003, NATO took command of the alliance's first operation outside the treaty zone. This action was seen as a test of the credibility of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (despite the fact that, in legal terms, ISAF remained a UN mission). Sketch 1 shows the stages of the expansion of the operation in Afghanistan.
3. 2009 – 2011: ISAF at its peak – the 'surge'. In response to increasing Taliban activity and a deteriorating security situation, US President Barack Obama announced the so-called 'surge' (sending an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan). The size of the ISAF force fluctuated between 130,000 and 150,000 troops from more than 50 countries.

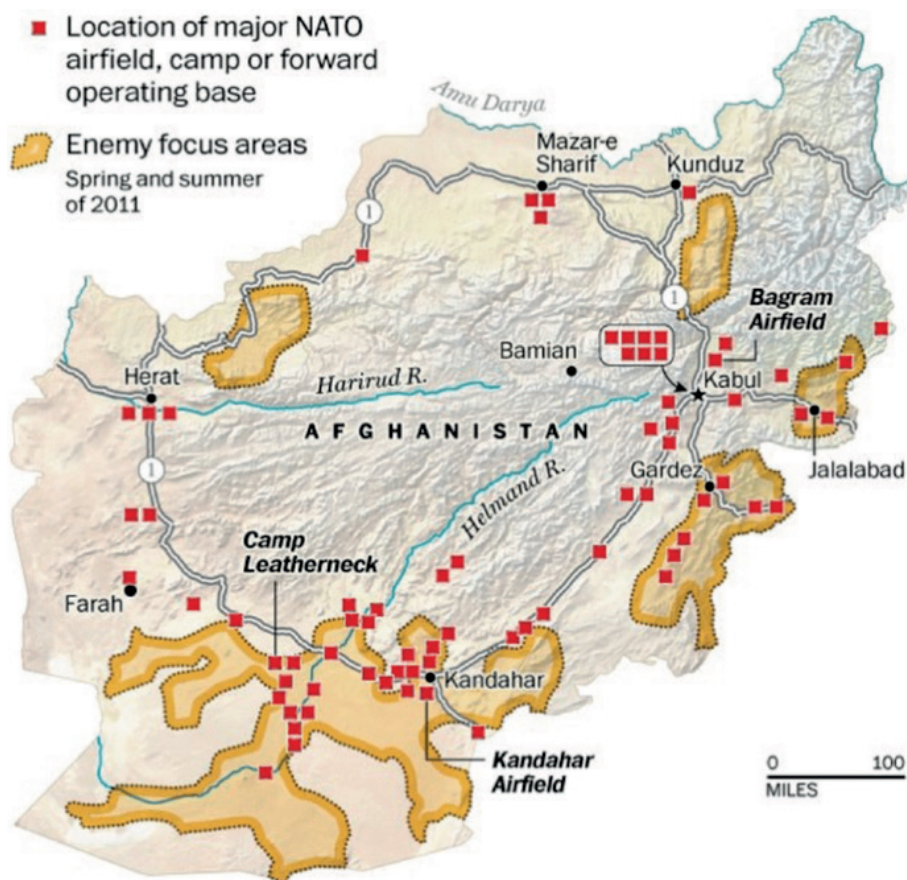
9 M. Fields, R. Ahmed, *a Review of the 2001 Bonn Conference and Application to the Road Ahead in Afghanistan*, Institute for National Strategic Studies Strategic Perspectives, No. 8, Washington, D.C., November 2011, pp. 1-35.

10 Security council endorses afghanistan agreement on interim arrangements signed yesterday in bonn, unanimously adopting resolution 1383 (2001), <https://press.un.org/en/2001/sc7234.doc.htm>, [accessed 03.06.2025].

11 M. Peck, *ISAF's Four Phases: Strategic Developments in Afghanistan*, International Peacekeeping, vol. 19, no. 3 (2012), s. 309-334.

4. Years 2011 – 2014 closure of mandate. Initiated the process of transferring security responsibilities to Afghan ‘transition’ forces. On 31 December 2014, the ISAF operation formally ended, while the Resolute Support mission began on 1 January 2015. The new mission was focused on training, advising and supporting Afghan security forces.

Sketch 1. Stages of expansion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2006.



Source: own compilation based on: C. M. Gourlay, *Security Transition in Afghanistan: The Expansion of ISAF Regional Commands 2003-2006*, *Survival*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2007), s. 87-110.

Approximately 1.3 million troops served in the ISAF mission between 2001 and 2014¹². Table 1 shows the main military contingents involved in the operation and their numbers.

¹² S. Parrish, *Coalition Dynamics and Troop Contributions in ISAF, 2001-2014*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 39, no. 6 (2016), s. 789.

Table 1. The most important military contingents

Key military contingents		
Lp.	State	Number of soldiers
1.	United States	775,000.13
2.	United Kingdom	150,000.14
3.	Germany	150,000.15
4.	Italy	50,000.16
5.	Canada	40,000.17
6.	Poland	33,000.18

Source: own compilation based on: footnotes 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16.

Delegating such a large number of troops to the task carried a gigantic cost for the ISAF mission. It is estimated that over a trillion dollars was spent on the ISAF mission¹⁹. The huge investment in expanding and strengthening the country's internal structures, the cost of maintaining thousands of soldiers, armaments and other essentials initially testified to the of a commitment and desire to rebuild a country that had been experiencing wars for many years.

Participation of the Polish Armed Forces in the ISAF mission

The decision to form the Polish Military Contingent ISAF was made at the political level in 2005. The Polish government accepted the withdrawal of soldiers from participation in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)²⁰ and decided to become involved in the ISAF operation. The final step in the decision-making process was the signing, on 22 November 2006, by the President of the Republic of Poland, of an order amending the decision to extend the deployment of the Polish Military Contingent in the Islamic State of Afghanistan²¹.

13 C. Whitlock, *At war with the truth*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents>, [accessed 03.06.2025].

14 *Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmdfence/725/report.html>, [03.06.2025].

15 *Germany pays tribute to troops who served in Afghanistan*, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-frank-walter-stein-meier-angela-merkel-united-states-taliban-ea65dba7d2f808a317b6e9d4bcbd8e0c>, [accessed 03.06.2025].

16 A. Gul, *Germany, Italy Complete Troop Exit From Afghanistan*, https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_germany-italy-complete-troop-exit-afghanistan/6207646.html, [accessed 03.06.2025].

17 O. Ayyad, *Following service together in Afghanistan, American, Canadian militaries train in US*, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/885153/following-service-together-in-afghanistan-american-canadian-militaries-train-in>, [accessed 03.06.2025].

18 *End of the Polish mission in Afghanistan*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/the-end-of-the-polish-mission-in-afghanistan>, [accessed 03.06.2025].

19 J. Dobbins, *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq*, RAND Corporation, 2008, pp. 346-347

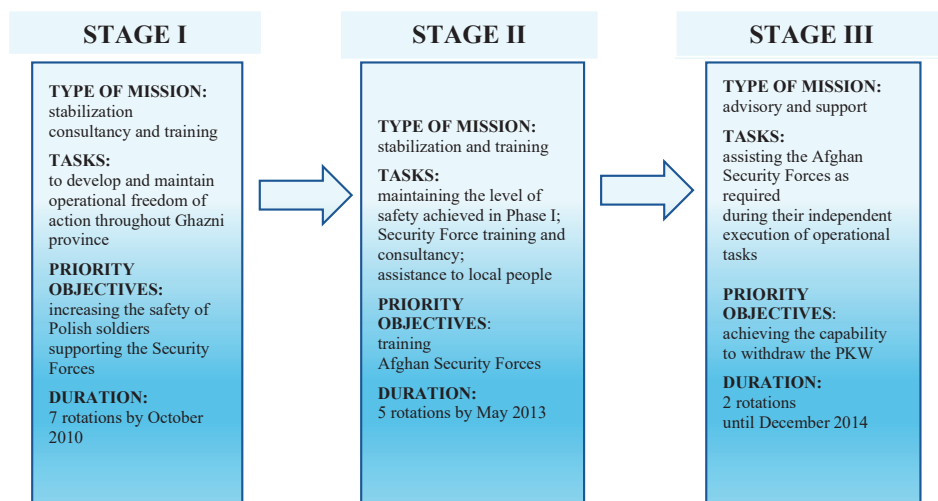
20 P. Gąsiorowski, *Polish military presence in Afghanistan: from OEF to ISAF*, National Security Yearbook, vol. 8 (2016), pp. 101-105.

21 *Decision of the President of the Republic of Poland of 22 November 2006 amending the decision to extend the period of use of the Polish Military Contingent in the Islamic State of Afghanistan*, Monitor Polski 2006, No. 85, item 862.

The Polish Military Contingent ISAF became a priority task for the armed forces, at the same time posing one of the greatest challenges since the end of the Second World War. Polish soldiers carried out mandated tasks from April 2007 to December 2014. During this time, XV shifts of ISAF PKW were formed and deployed to Afghanistan²². The Polish Armed Forces continued to evolve during the execution of tasks on Afghan territory by developing their structures and increasing their operational capabilities.

Taking into account the specificity of the ISAF mission at the level of the Ministry of National Defense, the “Strategy for Poland’s involvement in Afghanistan” was developed²³. The document defined Poland’s participation in ISAF into three key stages of the mission²⁴:

Diagram 1: Poland’s engagement strategy in Afghanistan



Source: Own elaboration based on: G. Piątkiewicz, R. Socha, *Evolution of Polish Military Missions on the example of the Polish Military Contingent of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan*. Part 2, *Security Forum*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (2024), p. 40.

Following NATO’s decision to put Poland in charge of the entire Ghazni province, an official handover of responsibilities took place on 30 October 2008²⁵. Located on

22 T. Kowalik, *Polski Kontyngent Wojskowy w Afganistanie: Misja ISAF 2003-2014*, Bellona Publishing House, Warsaw 2017, p. 88.

23 The Strategy for Poland’s Engagement in Afghanistan was developed at the Ministry of Defence by an inter-ministerial team led by the MON plenipotentiary for Afghanistan, Col. Piotr Łukasiewicz. The political ‘hosts’ of the document were then Ministers Bogdan Klich (MON) and Radosław Sikorski (MFA), who presented it to the public after approval by the Council of Ministers on 5 December 2009. J. Walczak, *We are leaving Afghanistan*, <https://www.magnum-x.pl/artykul/wychozimyzaafganistanu>, [accessed 04.06.2025].

24 M. Pytel, B. Pytel, *Security in Afghanistan*, *Zeszyty Naukowe. Wyższa Szkoła Oficerska Wojsk Łądowych* 2013, no. 3, p. 22.

25 Ministry of Defence official website for the military mission in Afghanistan, *Official handover of Ghazni province to Polish command*, http://isaf.wp.mil.pl/pl/1_484.html, [accessed 26.04.2025].

the outskirts of Ghazni, the Polish military base was named after Jack Winkler²⁶. The area of PKW responsibility in Ghazni province and the location of Polish bases where Polish soldiers were stationed is shown in sketch no. 2.

Sketch 2. Area of responsibility and location of Polish bases in Afghanistan.



Source: own compilation based on: G. Piątkiewicz, Socio-professional inclusion of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) soldiers in Afghanistan, Krakow 2021, p. 60.

During the 7 years of the ISAF mission, Poles participated in 494 operations and 21,754 patrols. Approximately 33,000 soldiers served as part of fifteen contingents²⁷. The high level of threat, as well as the number of operations carried out, contributed to the death of 40 soldiers and 2 military personnel, in addition 869 soldiers were injured²⁸.

As a reliable and loyal NATO member, Poland was actively involved, as part of ISAF, in several key programmes. One of the most important was the reconstruction of Ghazni Province, which was struggling with aggressive Taliban activities, the collapse of the local government administration, and the lack of basic services. In July 2007, Poland was put in charge of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT Ghazni). Its main objective was to create a secure environment for the development of local institutions, infrastructure reconstruction and socio-economic support. The reconstruction plan was divided into four pillars: security, local administration, infrastructure development and socio-economic support. The large

26 Jacek Winkler – Polish mountaineer, opposition activist, partisan during the Afghan-Soviet war, photographer and journalist. A. Wojciechowska, Jacek Winkler – from mountaineering to Afghan partisans, *Polski Przegląd Alpinistyczny*, no. 2/2017, pp. 10-19.

27 T. Kowalik, *The Polish contingent in ISAF: operations and patrols 2003-2010*, *National Security Review*, no. 2/2011, pp. 48-51.

28 P. Gąsiorowski, *Balance of losses of the Polish Contingent in Afghanistan 2003-2010*, *National Security Yearbook*, vol. 10 (2015), pp. 75-76.

size of the contingent, as well as the high level of training of the soldiers, contributed to the completion of 99 infrastructure projects, 50 training projects, and 45 procurement projects. These projects, among others, contributed to the construction of 40 km of new roads, construction of 25 km of water supply network, construction of 5 bridges, construction and renovation of 19 schools, kindergartens and orphanages, construction of 3 hydroelectric power plants, construction and renovation of 4 dams, construction of sewage treatment plants, construction of rubbish dumps, renovation of 4 hospitals, expansion of the power grid of Ghazni city, development of green areas and service and technical areas, training of 4,000 people in administration, judiciary, education and vocational activation, and equipping 130 public facilities²⁹.

Another task was the establishment of a Crisis Management Centre (CZK) in Ghazni city. The CZK is tasked with collecting data in case the city's residents are threatened by a terrorist attack, fire or other unforeseen situations. The CZK has also been equipped with CCTV, which has provided an overview of the most threatening areas to public order. In addition to this, a voice notification system integrated with the CZK was set up in Ghazni. Megaphones placed in the city center make it possible to quickly and effectively notify residents of threats such as flooding or storms³⁰.

Humanitarian aid is another extremely important area of service activity of the ISAF PKW. Between 2008 and 2014, more than 130 tones of various types of donations, obtained from social partners and NGOs, were transported and distributed to the people of the province. Meanwhile, approximately 137 tones of various material resources (including medical equipment, medicines, clothing, food, etc.) were provided as aid from the resources of the Ministry of National Defence³¹.

Crucial to ensuring community security in Ghazni province was the training of Afghan police officers and soldiers. This task was carried out by soldiers of the OMLT, POMLT and TSS teams³². Training of Afghan Security Forces also took place in Poland. At the Joint Force Training Centre (JFTC) in Bydgoszcz, 1052 soldiers and officers were trained³³.

The proper level of training of the Afghan Security Forces was confirmed by, among other things, the independent implementation of security for the 2014 presidential elections and the celebration of the 'Ghazni World Capital of Islamic Culture' festival.

In 2013, the NATO Commander-in-Chief (Admiral James G. Stavridis) awarded the 3rd Brigade of the Afghan National Army, stationed in Afghanistan, the title of

29 P. Kowalski, *Civil-military projects of the Polish Contingent in Afghanistan*, *Militaria XXI Wieku*, no. 3/2012, pp. 58-62.

30 P. Nowak, *Integrated emergency alert systems in Afghanistan: the example of Ghazni*, *Security and Military Technology*, No. 1/2019, pp. 112-114.

31 G. Piątkiewicz, *Socio-professional inclusion of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) soldiers in Afghanistan*, Krakow 2021, p. 65.

32 Ł. Jureńczyk, *Polish mission in Afghanistan*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz 2016, p. 280.

33 G. Piątkiewicz, *Inclusion...*, op. cit. s. 65.

best trained unit in Afghanistan. Afghan police officers, in turn, were considered among the most effective and best trained in the country³⁴.

The implementation of the tasks and projects presented has had a measurable impact on temporarily improving the living and security conditions of the people of Ghazni Province³⁵.

After the end of the ISAF mission (2014), Polish soldiers carried out tasks in Afghanistan as part of the Resolute Support Mission (until 2021). It was a mission of an advisory nature, without involving Polish soldiers in combat operations³⁶. The military contingent consisted of approximately 200 soldiers and was deployed in three bases: Bagram, Kabul, Gamberi.

It should be noted that in Afghanistan the Poles had at their disposal: wheeled armoured personnel carriers (KTO) Rosomak, wheeled armoured vehicles with increased resistance to mine and ambush attacks MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected), helicopters Mi-17, helicopters Mi-24, cannon howitzers "DANA", artillery reconnaissance radar "LIWIEC" and unmanned means of reconnaissance (BSR): Aerostar, Orbiter and Scan Eagle³⁷.

Social assessment of the mission

One of the highlights of the official ceremony marking the end of the ISAF operation was a speech by Afghan Interior Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar, during which he referred to the heroism and sacrifice of ISAF soldiers. Coalition troops suffered very heavy losses on Afghan soil, with more than 2.5 thousand soldiers killed and more than 10 thousand wounded³⁸. The following are the personnel losses of each coalition country: Australia (28), Belgium (1), Canada (157), Czech Republic (4), Denmark (41), Estonia (8), Finland (2), France (70), Georgia (9), Germany (53), Hungary (6), Italy (39), Jordan (2), Latvia (3), Lithuania (1), Netherlands (25), New Zealand (2), Norway (10), Poland (40), Portugal (2), Romania (19), Republic of Korea (1), Spain (33), Sweden (5), Turkey (2), United Kingdom (377), United States of America (1725)³⁹.

The ISAF operation, despite being a global security operation and an attempt to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan, was regarded by the societies of many countries as an action to the detriment of the implementing countries. The societies of Western countries feared possible retaliatory actions, by Afghan terrorists. Therefore,

34 E. Wessels, Building the Afghan National Security Forces: the ANA and ANP in 2013, *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2013), s. 45-52.

35 *Implementing the Ghazni Province Reconstruction Programme*, https://isaf.wp.mil.pl/pl/1_2486.html [accessed 30.05.2025].

36 T. Kowalik, *The Polish contingent in the Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan 2015-2021*, *National Security Yearbook*, vol. 12 (2019), pp. 142-145.

37 J. Kamiński, *Equipment of the Polish Contingent in Afghanistan – from Rosomak to drones*, *Nowa Technika Wojskowa*, no. 1/2018, pp. 55-61.

38 A. Zieliński, *Ending the ISAF mission: ceremony and Afghan perspective*, *Political Studies*, no. 21 (2015), s. 112-118.

39 *Afghanistan Fatalities*, <http://icasualties.org/App/AfghanFatalities?page=6&rows=10>, [accessed 05.06.2025].

the ISAF mission had very low public support. This was influenced by two factors, the deaths of soldiers and inadequate media coverage of ISAF mission activities⁴⁰.

International evaluation of the mission in Afghanistan

The opinion of the majority of the international community on the NATO intervention in Afghanistan was negative from the outset. In a 2007 global survey of 47 countries conducted by the Pew Research Institute (PRI), only in Israel and Kenya did a majority of respondents express positive feelings towards the presence of allied troops in Afghanistan. In contrast, respondents from 32 countries wanted forces withdrawn from Afghanistan as soon as possible⁴¹.

In 2008, in another survey, PRI polled the opinion of 25 countries on the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan. 21 countries were in favour of withdrawing their troops from Afghanistan as soon as possible. 50% support for leaving troops until the situation stabilises was expressed by the United States of America, Australia and the United Kingdom⁴².

In 2009, NATO asked member states to increase the number of troops in Afghanistan. The citizens of most countries were against it: Germany – 63%, France – 62%, Poland – 57%, Canada – 55%, UK – 51%, Spain – 50% and Turkey – 58%⁴³.

Another survey (a group of 22 countries) was carried out in 2010. The only country where a majority of the public was in favour of the continued presence of coalition troops in Afghanistan was Kenya 57%⁴⁴. The biggest supporters of the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan were Germany (63%) and France (62%). In Poland, 57% of respondents were in favour of troop withdrawal⁴⁵.

According to a survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (June 2011), for the first time, the withdrawal of Nato troops from Afghanistan was supported by such a large number of respondents in the United States (66%) and the European Union (66%). The average result of support for keeping troops in Afghanistan was (29%). Only 3% of respondents wanted an increase in the size of the force⁴⁶.

In 2018, a survey was conducted in the US to take stock of the activities of coalition troops in Afghanistan. Only (18%) of surveyed Americans considered the operation a success. In contrast, (39%) of respondents considered participation in the war a mistake. Despite the end of the ISAF operation, a part of the public demanded

40 M. Brown, Public Perception and Media Framing of NATO's ISAF Mission in Western Societies, *Journal of Military Media Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2014), s. 78-92.

41 *Global Unease With Major World Powers. 47-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2007/06/27/global-unease-with-major-world-powers>, [accessed 14.04.2025].

42 Ibid.

43 R. Heimlich, *NATO Opposition to More Troops in Afghanistan*, Pew Research Center Portal, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2009/09/15/nato-opposition-to-more-troops-in-afghanistan>, [accessed 14.05.2025].

44 Kenya is not a formal member of NATO. However, for the United States, it is a major non-NATO ally (MNNA). It has a close defence and security relationship with the US.

45 The Economist portal, *Losing Afghanistan?* <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2009/08/20/losing-afghanistan> [accessed 14.05.2025].

46 Z. Nyiri, *Transatlantic Trends: Public Opinion and NATO*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, <https://www.gmfus.org/search/troop%20withdrawal?page=7> [accessed 14.05.2025].

(24%) the complete withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Only (18%) of respondents indicated that the current number of troops should be maintained. In contrast, (44%) of respondents opposed the US commitment to building democracy, ensuring equal rights for citizens and developing education in Afghanistan. (57%) of respondents would immediately support a decision to withdraw troops⁴⁷.

The results of a survey (Pew Research Institute – June 2019) of US veterans are interesting. (58%) of those surveyed indicated that being involved in the conflict in Afghanistan was not worth it. The opposite view was held by 33% of the military respondents. US veterans rated the intervention in Iraq even worse 64%⁴⁸.

When analysing the attitude of international public opinion towards the intervention in Afghanistan, reference should also be made to the Afghan people. In 2005, a positive opinion for the military intervention was expressed by (83%) of the respondents, of which (68%) were of the opinion that the coalition's tasks were being performed correctly. In the following four years, the positive assessment of the operations decreased significantly and in 2009 it was (47%) and (32%).

Year by year, support for attacks on coalition forces gradually increased: 2006 (13%) 2009 (25%). In 2009, a reduction in the number of NATO troops was supported by (44%) of citizens.

It is also puzzling to compare the results of surveys on feelings of security. In 2005 (72%) Afghans indicated that they felt safe, while in 2009 their sense of security was rated positively (55%) by respondents. There were also provinces in Afghanistan where only a few percent of respondents felt safe, e.g. Helmand 14%⁴⁹.

Since the beginning of the intervention in Afghanistan, numerous marches and protests have been organised around the world calling on the US and the North Atlantic Alliance to withdraw troops. Among other things, the lack of legitimacy of the action according to international law, the deaths of many servicemen and civilians, the huge financial outlay, and accusations of the US satisfying its own interests were pointed out. In 2015, an open letter from Czech Lieutenant Colonel Mark Obrtel (a veteran of the Afghanistan mission) to the Czech Defence Minister, in which he returned the war decorations awarded to him and called NATO “a criminal organisation conducting fraudulent activities around the world”, resonated loudly in international circles⁵⁰.

47 Walter McDougall on the Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy, <https://www.charleskochinstitute.org/news/afghanistan-17-anniversary-poll/W>, [accessed 15.05.2025].

48 Majorities of U.S. veterans, public say the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not worth fighting, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/10/majorities-of-u-s-veterans-public-say-the-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-were-not-worth-fighting>, [accessed 15.05.2025].

49 Afghanistan: Where Things Stand. Support for U.S. Efforts Plummets Amid Afghanistan's Ongoing Strife, <http://abcnews.go.com/images/PollingUnit/1083a1Afghanistan2009.pdf>, [accessed 15.05.2025].

50 An open letter by Mark Obrtel to Minister of Defence of Czech Republic, <https://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/a-quiet-european/>, [accessed 15.05.2025].

Polish assessment of the mission in Afghanistan

At the beginning of 2001, the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) published the results of a survey on the American-British intervention in Afghanistan. (63%) of those surveyed expressed support for the action taken, while (60%) feared that armed intervention could lead to World War III⁵¹.

CBOS asked the public about their opinion on sending Polish troops to Afghanistan (2002). Opinion was very divided – (43%) supported the army's participation in the operation and exactly the same number were against it. The NATO operation itself was supported by more than two-thirds of the respondents (68%). However, fear of terrorist attacks was expressed by (49%)⁵².

Year by year, public support for the participation of Polish soldiers in the mission decreased. When respondents were asked in 2006 whether they supported the decision to increase the size of the Polish Military Contingent, (73%) of respondents expressed their opposition.

There was also a noticeable division of public opinion in the area of the anticipated effects of the Polish Army's participation in foreign missions. (41%) indicated that such activities significantly contribute to strengthening Poland's position in the world, while (39%) of respondents did not share this opinion. As many as (79%) of respondents feared that military involvement in foreign missions might result in terrorist attacks. This attitude may have been influenced by the terrorist attacks carried out by Al-Qaeda in Madrid (2004) and London (2005)⁵³.

Opinion on the intervention in Afghanistan was also surveyed among soldiers of the Polish Army. Professional soldiers about the threat to Poland's security. Concerns about the country's security in the context of the war in Afghanistan were held by (2%) of respondents in 2005, in 2007 (11%) and in 2010 (20%). This upward trend may have been influenced by the developing instability in the Middle East and the increase in terrorist activity in Europe⁵⁴.

In 2007, CBOS conducted a survey in which (75%) of respondents did not support Polish involvement in the operation in Afghanistan. Support for the mission was declared by every fifth respondent (20%), while (5%) of respondents had no opinion on the subject. The death of the first Polish soldier, Second Lieutenant Łukasz Kurowski from the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade, reinforced the negative attitude of the public towards Poland's involvement in the ISAF mission (77%)

51 *Polish reactions to the bombing of Afghanistan and opinions on terrorism*, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2001/K_150_01.PDF, [accessed 16.05.2025].

52 *Afghanistan: Polish soldiers' departure and opinions on NATO operations*, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2002/K_019_02.PDF, [accessed 16.05.2025].

53 *Public opinion on the participation of Polish soldiers in missions abroad*, https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2006/K_161_06.PDF [accessed 16.05.2025].

54 A. Orzyłowska, *Społeczne aspekty udziału polskich żołnierzy w misji wojskowej w Afganistanie (Social aspects of the participation of Polish soldiers in the military mission in Afghanistan)*, p. 86, after: WBBS, *Generalny sondaż nastrojów żołnierzy zawodowych w latach 2007-2011*.

of respondents were against the mission's continuation, while (73%) of respondents were of the opinion that the ISAF mission would not contribute to peace in Afghanistan⁵⁵.

The very low level of support for the participation of Polish soldiers in the ISAF mission remained at a similar level over the following years. This may have been influenced, among other things, by successive casualties among Polish soldiers. On 10 August 2009, Captain Daniel Ambrozinski was killed in an ambush set by the Taliban. The officer's death further increased public doubts about the justness of the stay of Polish soldiers in Afghanistan.

The most likely key reason for public opposition was scepticism about the possibility of peace in Afghanistan. In addition, media reports of further civilian and soldier casualties created a picture in which the material costs and loss of life were out of all proportion to the benefits gained.

Political situation and human rights after the departure of NATO troops from Afghanistan

After the end of the ISAF mandate (31.12.2014), Afghanistan continued to be led by the government of President Ashraf Ghani⁵⁶. The Afghan president was supported by NATO's Resolute Support mission (2015-2021). Its mandate was to train and advise the Afghan Security Forces (ANSF). However, the lack of a proper political strategy, as well as growing tribal and ethnic tensions, was a major impediment to the consolidation of central power.

In Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, peace negotiations with the Taliban began in 2019 and continued in the Qatari capital Doha (2020). The start of negotiations was influenced by the United States, which reached an agreement with the Taliban in February 2020 (Doha Agreement)⁵⁷.

The United States of America conducted negotiations with the Taliban bypassing the Afghan government. This way of conducting policy was criticised by world experts. It should be added that the whole idea of the ISAF operation was to cooperate with the government and build its social standing. The US actions significantly

55 Public opinion on the participation of Polish soldiers in missions abroad and recent events in Iraq, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2007/K_019_07.PDF, [accessed 16.05.2025].

56 Ashraf Ghani was twice elected president of Afghanistan (2014 and 2019). He was accused of forgery and corruption, which undermined the population's trust in state institutions. *Afghanistan's Ghani Wins slim majority in presidential vote, preliminary results show*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/afghanistans-ghani-wins-slim-majority-in-presidential-vote/2019/12/22/73355178-2441-11ea-b034-de7dc2b5199b_story.html, [accessed 05.06.2025].

57 The Doha negotiations between the US and the Taliban (launched in September 2019) were the culmination of an of an 18-month diplomatic process aimed at ending the ongoing US intervention in Afghanistan since 2001. After Donald Trump took office, for the first time, (2017), Zalmay Khalilzad, the US representative for Afghanistan, stepped up talks, arguing that withdrawing troops was the most effective way to avoid further US troop casualties and financial costs. *Taliban-US agreement: How the world reacted*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/29/taliban-us-agreement-how-the-world-reacted>, [accessed 05.06.2025].

weakened the government's defence capabilities, which consequently led to the collapse of the Afghan forces after the withdrawal of international troops⁵⁸.

Although the Doha agreement provided for monitoring mechanisms, it did not set out any specific criteria for assessing the reduction of violence, nor did it indicate the sanctions that might be imposed for its violation. Civilians and government forces were left without any physical or legal support. Table 2 provides details of the agreement.

Table 2: Details of the Doha Agreement

No.	Category	Order	Details
1.	Withdrawal of US/NATO troops	Gradual reduction in numbers	Reduction of US forces in up to 135 days from 29.02.2020 to 8,500 troops. Before 01.05.2021 reduction to 2,500 US troops. After reaching 2,500 troops withdrawal of all NATO combat troops
2.	Anti-terrorism guarantees	Ensuring that Afghanistan does not serve as a base for attacks	The Taliban has committed that Afghan territory will not be used to plan, train or launch attacks against the US and allies. Establish mechanisms to monitor the fulfilment of these commitments (oversight committees, intelligence sharing).
3.	Intra-Afghanistan negotiations	Start of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban	Not later than 10.03.2020 start of talks, Government – Taliban. First 7 days ceasefire jointly verified by Taliban and third parties.
4.	Exchange of prisoners	Release of prisoners in exchange for the release of government forces	The Afghan government was to release up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners by 10.03.2020. Condition Taliban to release 1,000 members of the security forces of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Verified, unequivocal amnesty supervised by UN commission, government, Taliban and Pakistan, US and Qatar.
5.	Timeframe	Deadlines for key commitments	29.02.2020 signing of agreement in Doha. By 10.03.2020 reduction of violence by 80%, prisoner exchanges, start of intra-Afghan negotiations. 01.05.2021 withdrawal of all US and NATO forces, provided the anti-terrorist clause is respected.
6.	Verification mechanisms	Structures overseeing the fulfilment of conditions	Four bilateral commissions: US-Taliban, anti-terrorism clause oversight. US-Republic verification of violence reduction. Republic-Taliban dialogue on unrest and civilian casualties. United Government coordination of contentious issues. Co-ordination Operations Centre in Doha: collection of reports and recommendations.

Source: own compilation based on: A. Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001-2020*, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 172-178.

58 A. H. Cordesman, *Afghanistan: The Peace Negotiations Have Become an Extension of War by Other Means*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghanistan-peace-negotiations-have-become-extension-war-other-means>, [accessed 06.06.2025].

The Doha Agreement brought a short-lived calm only in the first week of March 2020. (a decrease in attacks of around 80 percent). Attacks on Afghan forces and violence against civilians quickly returned to high levels (April 2020). Despite this, the withdrawal of NATO and US troops was carried out on schedule. Other commitments, notably counter-terrorism guarantees and intra-Afghan negotiations, were implemented piecemeal, some of which were broken in practice (the Taliban tolerated the presence of ISIS-K and al-Qaeda and fought government forces)⁵⁹.

The international community has reacted to this development. In the United States of America, Republicans and Democrats voiced their concerns. The former supported the agreement as an opportunity to reduce US involvement, but criticised it for excluding the Afghan government from peace negotiations. In contrast, the other political side warned that the agreement could quickly lead to the collapse of the Afghan government.

The Afghan government initially opposed the terms of the agreement, but supported it on 5 March 2020, recognising that it was the only chance to end the war⁶⁰.

The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2513 on 10 March 2020, which called on all parties to fully implement the agreement and start intra-Afghan negotiations as soon as possible. In turn, the EU promised financial support of up to €500 million for peace programmes if the agreement proves sustainable⁶¹.

Neighbouring states i.e. Pakistan and Iran supported the deal as they saw it as an opportunity to stabilise the region. Besides, Iran pressured the Taliban to respect the rights of the Shia minorities in Afghanistan⁶².

Despite the US announcement that the agreement reached would be sustainable and improve security in Afghanistan, on 15 August 2021 the Taliban entered Kabul, overthrowing the Ghani government. This led to the swift seizure of control of the entire national territory and the creation of the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan'⁶³.

For the first few months of Taliban rule, there was a relative decline in the level of clashes, the main anti-Taliban groups were disorganised and ISIS-K (Islamic State of Khorasan) had limited capacity to conduct operations. However, from 2022 onwards, ISIS-K attacks increased, particularly in Nangarhar, Kunduz and Kabul provinces, including suicide attacks in markets and state institutions. On

59 J. F. Sopko, *Why the Afghan government collapsed*, <https://www.sigar.mil/Portals/147/Files/Reports/Audits-and-Inspections/Evaluation/SIGAR-23-05-IP.pdf>, [accessed 06.06.2025].

60 *Taliban-US agreement: How the world reacted*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/29/taliban-us-agreement-how-the-world-reacted>, [accessed 06.06.2025].

61 L. Maizland, *U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know*, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war>, [accessed 06.06.2025].

62 *USA-Taliban Peace Deal*, <https://www.drishtias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/usa-taliban-peace-deal>, [accessed 06.06.2025].

63 A. Rashid, *The Taliban's Return: Afghanistan in 2021*, *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 5 (2021), pp. 58-68

average, there have been several large explosions every month, causing numerous civilian casualties and undermining the stability of the Taliban regime⁶⁴.

The Taliban tried to build their own security forces (they recreated the former ANA/ANP structure as the 'Islamic Emirate Security Forces'), but due to a lack of professional training and internal tribal tensions, most provinces were only nominally controlled. In the mountainous regions in the north and in the belt near the border with Pakistan, underground resistance cells (including the Republican Freedom Front – NRF) and ISIS-K front groups continued to operate, which meant that the Taliban had to constantly pull resources away to suppress local insurgencies and terrorist attacks⁶⁵.

After the Taliban seized power in August 2021, Afghanistan experienced profound changes in its political and social structure. The Taliban formed a government composed exclusively of members of their movement, which led to the marginalisation of other ethnic and political groups and a weakening of the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of citizens and the international community⁶⁶.

Economic and humanitarian crisis

Human rights, especially those of women and minorities, have been systematically violated since the Taliban took power. Women have been virtually excluded from public life, denied access to secondary education and many forms of employment. They have been banned from working in NGOs and restricted from moving around without the presence of a male guardian (mahram)⁶⁷.

Afghanistan is currently facing one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world. According to UN data, by 2025, some 22.9 million Afghans are in need of humanitarian assistance, including 14.8 million suffering from hunger, while 14.3 million have limited access to health care⁶⁸.

Since 2021, the country's economy has shrunk by around 30-40%, unemployment has risen to 40%. The freezing of central bank assets and the withholding of foreign development and military aid, which had previously accounted for 75% of the budget, led to the collapse of public finances⁶⁹.

64 A. Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: a Case Study in the Strategic Implications of the Islamic State in Afghanistan*, CTC Sentinel 15, no. 6 (2022), s. 21-28.

65 A. Giustozzi, *Taliban's Security Forces and Insurgency Challenges: Post-2021 Dynamics in Afghanistan*, Small Wars & Insurgencies, vol. 32, no. 4 (2023), s. 615-622.

66 A. Rashid, "The Taliban's Return: Governance and Exclusion in Afghanistan." Foreign Affairs, vol. 101, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 2022), pp. 78-87.

67 E. Ferris, *Taliban Gender Policies and the Erosion of Women's Rights in Afghanistan*, Journal of International Women's Studies, vol. 23, no. 4 (2022), s. 45-59.

68 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2025), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2025*. UNOCHA, New York, pp. 22-23.

69 F. Nawabi, *Economic Collapse in Afghanistan: Aid Dependence and Fiscal Crisis*, Journal of South Asian Development, vol. 45, no. 1 (2022), s. 88-104.

Education

The Taliban have imposed a number of restrictions on women's education. Girls are not allowed to attend secondary schools and universities have been closed to women. Women's work in the public sector has been restricted to jobs 'unsuitable for men' and many women have lost their jobs due to new regulations⁷⁰.

UNICEF called for the ban on girls' education to be lifted, stressing that lack of access to education can lead to disastrous consequences for society as a whole, including a shortage of skilled health workers and an increase in maternal mortality and children⁷¹.

Conclusions

Thirteen years of tasking by the International Security Assistance Force (20.12.2001–28.12.2014) have contributed to strengthening Afghanistan's internal security structures. However, decisions taken after that time no longer had a positive impact on the country's development. The impasse was exploited by the Taliban, who declared in Doha, their readiness to take responsibility for the whole of Afghanistan.

Several factors influenced the decision to withdraw NATO troops from Afghanistan. Among the most important we can include high personnel costs (loss of soldiers) and financial costs, as well as the negative attitude of public opinion and the governments of the countries sending soldiers to the mission area.

The effect of the actions taken by NATO and the United States of America is to exclude Afghanistan from many international forums and initiatives, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Lack of access to climate funds prevents the country from adapting to the effects of climate change, such as droughts and floods, which destroy crops and exacerbate the food crisis.

Afghanistan's future is unknown. The key to breaking the impasse perhaps lies in restoring the ancient balance between central authority and the power of local tribal structures, between respect for Sharia law and acceptance of customary *urf* law⁷², between sovereignty and rational compromises with neighbours.

Afghanistan, as the glue of Central and South Asia, has a chance of survival, however, provided it adapts to changing conditions – but only if it does not reject its own identity.

In conclusion, it is not possible to assess conclusively whether the attempt to introduce the rule of law and democracy in Afghanistan was a mistake. As a result of a comparison of the situation of the country during the period of ISAF operations

70 L. Safi, *Afghanistan's Education Crisis: the Taliban's Ban on Girls' Education*, World Policy Journal, vol. 39, no. 1 (2022): 80–95.

71 J. Smith, *The Consequences of Banning Girls' Education in Afghanistan: a UNICEF Perspective*, Journal of International Women's Studies, vol. 23, no. 3 (2022): 112–118.

72 *Urf* (Arabic: *فروع*) in Islamic law means 'custom' or 'locally accepted practice'. Its main features and meaning are: source of complementary law, condition of permissibility, examples of application. K. M. Hashim, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge 2003, pp. 135–137.

and now under Taliban rule – it can be concluded that ISAF activities have had a positive impact on the security of citizens and the observance of human rights, mainly women's rights.

The information presented in this article supports the hypothesis that the ISAF mission was an initiative that made sense and had a positive impact on the security of the Afghan people, but its status should be based on long-term ideas. Thirteen years of the ISAF mission is far too short a time to bring lasting changes to the country and society.

The mission in Afghanistan should perhaps be based on similar assumptions, which have been consistently implemented since 1999 in the Balkans.

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