

Review of: "American Mission in Afghanistan: Geopolitical Interests, Strategies and Reasons of Failure"

Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro¹

¹ Universidade de Coimbra

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Discussing American interests in Afghanistan over time, as this piece seeks to do, is as ambitious an endeavour as it is important. But a few key qualifiers need to be added.

- First, as the titles suggests, the US government has indeed had many interests in the country, and has for that reason been engaged in many missions: not just one. US interests over the course of the so-called “War on Terror” were not analogous to those it harboured during the cold war. This is a subtle, albeit a relevant, point, because if failures are to be discussed they must be questioned in light of what the mission was at any point in time. In this respect, it could well be argued that the US (covert) mission in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s was scarcely a failure in that it managed to halt the Soviet Union's advance. Moreover, the piece points to several, lasting geostrategic interests in the country, which, to my mind, were scarcely ever consensual amongst American policy-makers. As the article itself admits at one point, for all the geopolitical potential of Afghanistan, US joint chiefs of staff once claimed that “Afghanistan is of little or no strategic importance to the United States”. Barring the War on Terror, and the lasting political and military commitments that arose from that struggle, Washington did and does not consider Afghanistan, including former Soviet Central Asia, to be of major strategic interest.
- Second, the author is likely to disagree with my latter assessment, but the evidence that is nevertheless put forward does not fully clarify what those strategies and interests were and how they changed over time. The essay references the potential of country, not least its potential as a major transit route. And yet, while several US geostrategists have invoked that potential over time - and the article mentions a few of them - that need not imply that their ideas infiltrated the establishment or that they led to a coherent and lasting American policy. If anything, as the article itself admits when discussing the Clinton administration, US politicians were divided as to how to engage with Afghanistan and with the whole of Central Asia.
- Third, the article often refers to American tacit support for the Taliban in the 1990s, but more evidence is required to advance that claim.

I nevertheless thank the author for the opportunity to engage with such an ambitious and relevant piece.