Matthew Ross

Prospect Theory and Evolving SOPs

Modulating Reference Points in a Deteriorating Afghanistan

In the past 70 years, since the end of the Second World War, academics have coined and developed a commonly accepted observation of 'long peace.' Through this lens, we recognize a proliferation of civil conflicts, resulting from the cessation of great power wars, leading to a perspective that claims a decrease in armed global hostilities. So then why—during this lull that has lasted just short of a century—do we continue to observe great powers continually engaged in an array of prolonged, low intensity conflicts? It is not enough to simply rely on classical models of global rationality to justify these realities; A complete dissection must also address conditions of governance in intervening nations. This cannot be limited to the economic or political considerations of leadership, but should go beyond, to the stairwells and back rooms of Washington and Kabul, probing to the core of the personal convictions held by elected and appointed leadership. As Eulau says, "The root is man."[1] Any analysis of U.S. foreign policy pertinent to these concepts leads directly to its war in Afghanistan.

[1] Eulau, Heinz. *The Behavioral Persuasion in Politics*. New York: Feffer & Simons, 1963.

After two decades in the 'graveyard of empires', how is it that U.S. forces are still bunkered in the valleys of Panjshir Province? As our presence in Afghanistan continues, it draws broadened questions from the American public: What are we doing and why are we still there? In the pursuit of unbiased response, it is necessary to explore the means by which decisions concerning continued involvement are made, so as to develop a clear understanding of the United States' current geopolitical posture. Three weeks following a rehashed peace agreement with Taliban leadership, violence has spiked in the Central Asian country, reiterating a demand for this examination of the nature of the U.S. involvement. A conflict such as this—marred with factionalism and a confluence of foreign intervention—is a paradigm of violence in the 'long peace.' However, any continued impetus for the longest war in U.S. history goes far beyond international dynamics, stemming from decisions made at the highest levels of American government. These upper-echelon decision-makers are ultimately responsible for all recommended and enacted policies of the U.S. government. This group is composed of individuals that advise and determine—each with varied interests and perspectives—, all fallible and motivated by the priorities of the entity from which they originate. For these reasons, this exploration will initiate with the internal—considering positions of leadership—and expand outwards to meet the conditions that precipitated policy in the first place.

We humans are notoriously bad at making decisions. Subsequently, we tend to avoid them at all costs. So, decisions are put off and when circumstances arise where they must be made, we often follow patterns of previous action, patterns that don't necessarily match the problem at hand[2]. This condition extends all the way to the American executive, defining the

[2] McGuire, William J. (1960). "Cognitive consistency and attitude change". *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. **60** (3): 345–353.

nature of the Presidency and its relationship with agencies and advisors. In order to mitigate the inevitable delay of internal deliberation, entities develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) that allow for efficiency in recommendation and action. Such SOPs allow organizations to provide timely and decisive menus of options to decision-makers, a capability that ultimately becomes more valuable than presenting plans with increased applicability. According to the assessment of Bendor and Moe[3], this evolution towards responsive SOPs is reactive to internal demands, as bureaucratic organizations within government compete with one another to win the favor of decision-makers. Reliance on this hierarchical flow of options greatens when leaders are presented with contexts that require immediate action. As conditions deteriorate from the original point of reference, leaders begin to demand more of bureaucratic SOPs due to added complexity of external events. This is where we begin to see the intersection of bureaucratic dynamics and individual psychological conditions at the level of decision-making.

Though psychological cases differ between each person involved in the advisory and decision-making process, it is necessary to aggregate the activity of these individuals to the whole of the group in order to understand the process by which inputs are considered and acted upon. Subsequently, we can see the ways in which heuristics and psychological flaws manifest within this much larger collective. With reference to pertinent events, these hierarchical groups of advisors and decision-makers react, modeling behaviors that one would expect to observe of a singular person. Most applicable in the context of foreign affairs decision-making is Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's Prospect Theory[4], a descriptive model used to understand risk

[3] Bendor, Jonathan, and Terry M. Moe. "An Adaptive Model of Bureaucratic Politics." *American Political Science Review* 79, no. 3 (1985): 755–56.
[4] Kahneman, Daniel; Tversky, Amos (1979). "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk" (PDF). *Econometrica*. 47 (2): 263–291.

calculation and resulting selections of action. Constructed as a response to the Rationalist school's Expected Utility Theory[5], Prospect Theory attempts to explain fluctuations in perceptions based upon relative gains and losses, providing an apt description of the manner in which we frame and respond to received information. As such, Prospect Theory provides invaluable insight for an analysis of international events and government response, accounting for non-linear adjustments to policy.

Most integral to the explaining power of Prospect Theory is the asymmetrical perception curve, a central element which tracks risk calculation in reference to domains of gain and loss. In simple terms, Prospect Theory asserts that when people operate in a domain of loss, they make riskier decisions and when in a domain of gain, they avoid risk. Fundamentally, this is a description of loss-adverse nature, which leads to considerations of potential action that is biased by relative position, as opposed to the total potential for negative or positive outcomes. All of these tendencies are reliant upon the initial point of reference, the original condition of value that the decision-maker perceives prior to any following event[6]. In the context of foreign policy deliberation, the fundamentals of Prospect Theory materialize for each discrete set of issues, defining reaction dependent upon leadership's conception of their position relative to initial reference points. This application of Prospect Theory can aid in discerning the preferences of decision-makers, explaining a shift from low risk to high risk activities. Prospect Theory takes us only half-way however, losing its descriptive abilities without concurrent assessment of the menu of options.

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[5] Neumann, John von; Morgenstern, Oskar (1953) [1944]. *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Third ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

[6] Tversky, Amos; Kahneman, Daniel (1986). "Rational Choice and the Framing of Decisions" (PDF). *The Journal of Business*. 59 (S4): S251.

For this reason, options presented to decision-makers are central to the question of their loss adverse nature. As asserted in the previous introduction to bureaucracy and decision-making, humans avoid decisions, a condition that leads most organizations within government to develop defensive, redundant SOPs to present when requested. As a result, few entities have the capability to generate proactive solutions to external inputs, reinforcing this pattern-seeking principle of human behavior. There are, however, numerous instances in which governments take anticipatory steps to influence international events, how can we explain this in the face of individual indecisiveness? The key is in distinctions between organizational SOPs: defensive and offensive. The three fundamental characteristics that separate offensive from defensive SOPs—condition setting, surprise capabilities and plausible deniability[7]—are aptly described by an imaginary and highly unusual match of tennis. Just as it is better for a tennis player to serve than receive, it is better for leaders to *act* than *react*. This ensures that both tennis players and decision-makers alike are able to set the terms and conditions of engagement—the advantage of timing—in interacting with their respective adversaries. Even more beneficial than this serving advantage would be to catch the opponent with their back turned during our players initial move. The ability of decision-makers to commit to action with the element of surprise forces the adversarial decision-maker to pursue a response quickly, without time for full consideration of the breadth of options. In our imaginary match, the greatest advantage to our tennis player would be to have a court full of other players, all similarly dressed, in serving position, confusing the adversary as to which individual had originally served the ball. In international politics, this amounts to the benefit of plausible deniability, by which governments

[7] Central Intelligence Agency, Glossary of Counterinsurgency Terms, May 19, 1962, at https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80B01676R003000050019-6.pdf.

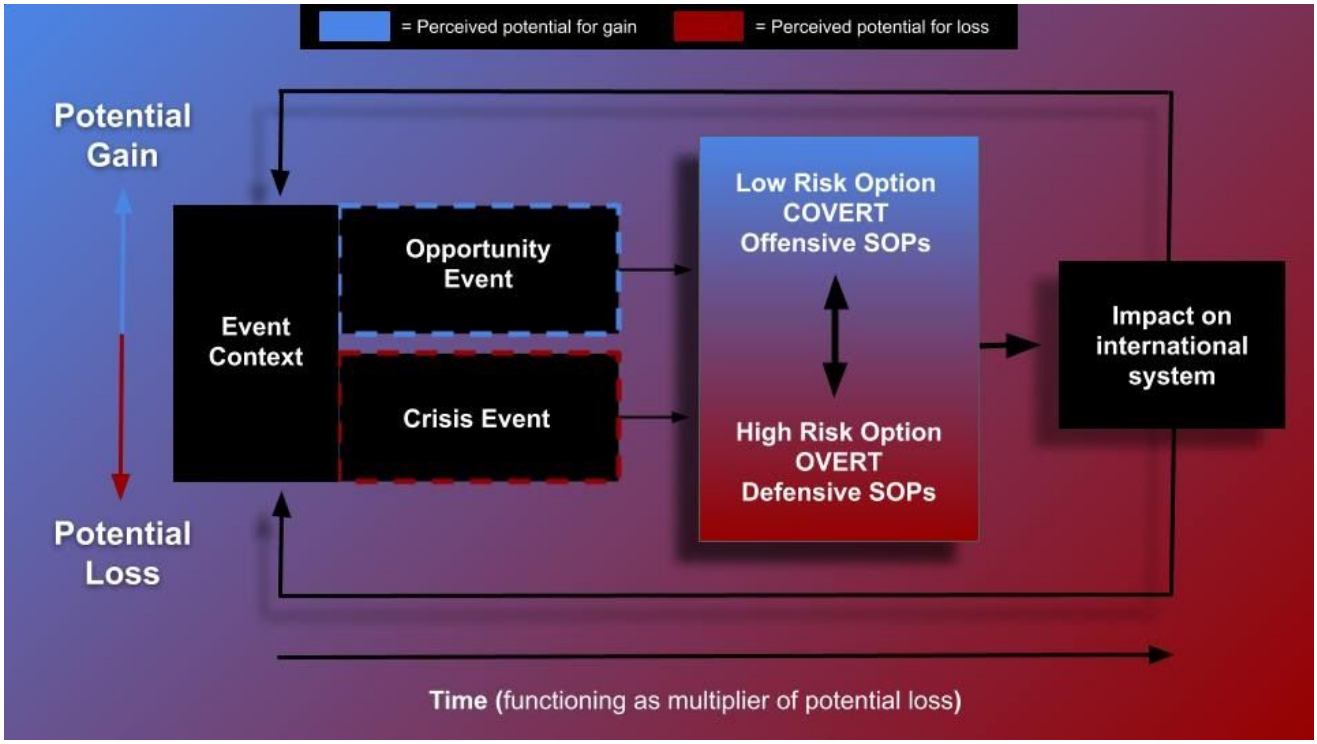
can absolve themselves from any responsibility for their response, causing misdirected and inadequate action on the part of the adversary. These elements together constitute the effectuation of offensive SOPs—covert action—which allow decision-makers to tap applicable agencies to implement proactively, just as our imagined tennis player overwhelms their opponent.

This covert action, governed by the offensive SOPs enumerated above, fundamentally deviates from overt action—our defensive SOPs—in regard to autonomy. Covert action is low risk, benefited by all the advantages presented in the tennis match model. Despite these assets, covert action is not internally efficient like overt action. Offensive SOPs are less stringent, relying primarily on the increased competency and operational autonomy of personnel, often preventing deliverable and tangible results, and differing significantly from the highly bureaucratized defensive SOPs. For our purposes we will concentrate on governmental entities working within the executive branch, as these agencies have a totalitarian role in the effectuation of U.S. foreign policy. The majority of these operate using defensive SOPs, creating rigid, hierarchical structure of recommendation and decision out of necessity: the Center for Disease Control, the Department of Energy and the aptly named Department of Defense, among others. Each has specific roles and responsibilities, delineated by the U.S. Congress, which evolve at the pace of bureaucracy to meet the demands of the U.S. government. Organizations that are enabled with offensive SOPs emerge from identical authorities, but often modulate their purview and methods at the behest of the President and national security leadership. Most relevant in its operations is the Central Intelligence Agency, the only stand-alone U.S. intelligence entity, which was developed originally as a flexible intelligence collection apparatus in the wake of the

second World War. Since, it has evolved to include all manner of activities, focusing the bulk of its energy to increase covert action capabilities as a response to requests of the President. Every Chief Executive since Truman has used the CIA in this manner, attempting to influence international affairs to benefit U.S. interest. While both covert and overt actions have equal worth in the execution of the U.S. foreign policy, each plays a very different role.

With a clear understanding of the options on the table, these SOPs become apparent within the risk calculating framework of Prospect Theory. Below is a chart that details the process by which perceptions of decision-makers and organizational procedures interact.

Prospect Theory and Operation Selection Tendency (fig. 1)



As decision-makers consider international context, they are presented with one of two types of events: those that require response and those that present opportunities. Though these are not mutually exclusive in nature, the degree to which circumstances fall into either category

determines the reference point by which potential actions are considered. If intelligence collection determines that there is potential for the effectuation of national priorities—assuming that the decision-maker is acting as opposed to reacting to an input—they are operating in a domain of gain. In this condition, in accordance with observations of Prospect Theory, those responsible for the decision-making process tend to proceed in a more risk averse manner. As discussed previously, this desire to minimize loss induces leaders to pursue low-commitment, non-apparent activities which allow them to manage awareness with relatively small chances of international or domestic blowback. Though these proactive measures can take a number of forms relating to economic, political or military activities, they are most often carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency, which has significant legal flexibility when engaging in covert operations. Therefore, it is most probable that leadership will opt for clandestine, covert operations in order to force desired contexts to fruition, unless there is an ensuing period of loss or an adjustment to the original reference point. When either of those latter events occur, or the initial context is that of a crisis event, decision-makers perceive their reaction occuring in a domain of loss. This condition substantially changes the nature of response, and whether influenced by domestic or international perceptions, those at the helm are forced to respond with action or inaction, understanding that time wasted in resolving the matter at hand will result in additional complications and fresh intelligence for consideration, further convoluting any reply. Operating in this domain of loss, the executive seeks to reverse any degradation of conditions by pursuing far riskier recommendations, relying now on more overt and direct methods of problem solving. In a military engagement, this could translate to general personnel increases in response to the failures of one specific combat situation. For economic statecraft, it could mean the public

pursuit of ambitious multilateral sanctions that have a high potential for failure. It is solely a function of the desire to correct previous decline from the original reference point taking priority over considerations of further loss. Naturally, both covert and overt activities have ramifications that extend beyond the offices of leaders, fomenting change in the international landscape and creating the recursive decision-making environment that is displayed above (see fig.1).

With a solidified basis for interpreting foreign policy within the context of U.S. decision-making infrastructure, we return to our primary investigation: By what process have three presidential administrations continued the longest war in U.S. history? The observations presented so far offer an efficient structure for this analysis by which it is possible to account for the general trajectory of U.S. involvement in the mountains and deserts of Afghanistan. Tracing back to the presidential directives of the Carter administration, the time the U.S. has spent in the country has been overwhelmingly defined by a reliance on *tertia optio* (the third option). The U.S. interpreted the Soviet Union's initial invasion of Afghanistan in the December of 1979 as an indication of further expansionist ambition—an attempt to destabilize South Central Asia and the greater Persian Gulf—constituting a breach of norms between the two superpowers. Just months after the Soviet's offensive, the Carter administration began to lay the groundwork for new initiatives aimed at entrapping the Soviet Union in its own "Vietnamese quagmire" set in the treacherous valleys of Afghanistan[8] . Over the course of the next ten years, the intensity of U.S. involvement grew, with gradual amendments during the Reagan administration, allowing both the supply of lethal provisions to the Mujahideen and an increase in CIA operational spending[9].

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[8] Gates, Robert (2007). *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*. Simon & Schuster. pp. 142, 144–145.
[9] Ibid.

For our purposes, we are primarily concerned with events in Afghanistan following the victory of the Taliban in the 1996 Civil War and the contemporaneous return of al-Qaeda to the country. Though many of the same actors reappear from the era of U.S. support for the Mujahideen insurgency, things begin to change drastically in the late 1990s regarding U.S. posture. Central to this shift was the emergence of al-Qaeda as an international actor, as it extended operations throughout East Africa and the Middle East. Prior to Osama bin Laden's rise to infamy in 1998, the United States had pursued a fairly hands off approach to Afghanistan, a country that had once received $630 million a year covert investment[10]. Both George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton took the position that there were 'bigger fish to fry', allowing the complex civil war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance to play itself out. From the perspective of both administrations, the United States was operating in a domain of significant gain, having managed a decade-long covert initiative that had ultimately forced the Soviet Union's withdrawal from South Asia and elsewhere, essentially standing up the so-called dominos and pushing them back towards the adversary. The United States had effectively designed a personal quagmire for the Kremlin, using human fallibility as explained by Prospect Theory to their own advantage. However, it never takes long for the pendulum to swing back to the opposite side, and this is exactly what the U.S. government saw when it experienced the African embassy bombings of 1998.

Following a long period of relative success and disinterest in Afghanistan, the deaths of 224 at American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania sent shockwaves through the Intelligence Community, reverberating all the way to the desk of the President. Decisive actions were taken

[10] Bergen, Peter, *Holy War Inc.*, Free Press, (2001), p.68

by the administration when Clinton called upon his "Small Group" of trusted advisors: National Security Advisor Sandy Berger[11], CIA director George Tenet, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Attorney General Janet Reno, Defense Secretary William Cohen and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Hugh Shelton[12]. In the following two weeks, Operation Infinite Reach was initiated, utilizing more than 70 Tomahawk missiles[13] launched from offshore U.S. Naval vessels to neutralize targets at al-Qaeda training camps in the Khost region of Afghanistan and destroy production capabilities of the implicated al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum North, Sudan. Pressured by domestic demand and expectations of global leadership, the Clinton administration was caught flat-footed by the attacks and forced to pursue direct action with limited time to deliberate. While a host of options were presented, including special forces raids and airstrikes on urban centers, Clinton's "Small Group" settled on these limited airstrikes out of perceived necessity. Operating in reaction to a crisis event, Clinton and his group of advisors disregard trepidations of CIA analysts regarding the likelihood of an al-Qaeda connection to the al-Shifa plant. Senior CIA officer Paul R. Pillar recalled, "it [was] unclear precisely when U.S. officials decided to destroy the....plant."[14] Despite hesitation on part of the advisory intelligence community, senior actors made the call that "the risks of hitting the wrong target were far outweighed by the possibility that the plant was making chemical weapons for a terrorist eager to use them."[15] Resulting criticism and a myriad of congressional investigations perfectly illustrate

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[11] 9/11 Commission Report, p. 115.
[12] Coll, Steve (2005). *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (Updated ed.). New York: Penguin Books.
[13] Wright, Lawrence (2006). *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
[14] Barletta, Michael (Fall 1998). "Chemical Weapons in the Sudan: Allegations and Evidence". *The Nonproliferation Review*. **6** (1): 115–136
[15] Risen, James (October 27, 1999). "To Bomb Sudan Plant, or Not: A Year Later, Debates Rankle". *The New York Times*.

the dangers associated with the rushed decision-making that occurs in the context of a crisis event. Relying on standardized SOPs, developed by entities attempting to maximize the selection of their own presented options, holes in recommendations are patched by superiors, with Clinton counterterrorism advisor Richard Clarke describing the intelligence as a "slam dunk."[16] This analysis suggests that it is not necessarily the options that become riskier in a domain of loss but rather it is the willingness to overlook the potential for further damage in the pursuit of expediency that complicates the environment further. This desperate race back to the reference point would go on to define the next two decades of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

Having decisively responded to the Embassy bombings of 1998, internal perceptions of the role of the U.S. in Afghanistan had stablized, resulting in a calculated approach to offensive SOPs that was presented earlier. As the Bush administration took command in 2001, it began to pursue more aggressive, covert activities to counter the ability of the Taliban to provide al-Qaeda refuge. Developed by CIA lawyers, a revamped plan for low-intensity operations was introduced to National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice in January 2001 and enacted that August. The directive committed to notify the Taliban that they would be required to deliver Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda leadership. If Mullah Omar, the Taliban Emir, refused this request, top National Security officials pledged to provide covert arms and military aid to Ahmad Shah Massoud's Afghanistan United Front (Northern Alliance). If neither option produced satisfactory results, "the deputies agreed that the United States would seek to overthrow the Taliban regime through more direct action"[17]. The Bush administration's national security team, led by Rice, Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, observed an

[16] Clarke, Richard (2004). *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*. New York: Free Press.
[17] Julian Borger (March 24, 2004). "Bush team 'agreed plan to attack the Taliban the day before September 11'". *The Guardian*. London.

opportunity event (see fig. 1) by which they forestall further attacks by al-Qaeda and address the underlying power vacuum that enabled bin Laden's organization in the first place. Such action would allow the U.S. to force the Afghanistan government into a corner, provoking a decision requiring a pressured Taliban response (one prone to error). However, at this point there existed no impetus to pursue risk-laden adventure in Afghanistan, as Secretary of State Colin Powell recounted "We did not take into account during that period the kind of actions we were prepared to follow after 9/11. It was not clear how to get at al-Qaeda in a way to destroy al-Qaeda, and we were not prepared, before 9/11, to take down the Taliban."[18] Despite having carriers with full airwing capability in the Persian Gulf, no individual in leadership was willing to advocate for the 'pulling of the trigger' for fear of precipitating undesired response through direct, overt action. Such hesitance is accounted for in the model previously presented, considering decision-makers opting for low-risk condition setting as opposed to publicly fallible solutions. However, all Bush administration calculus changed in September of that year.

There is no way to dissect current U.S. interest in Afghanistan without an in-depth discussion of the impacts of 9/11. Following the first attack on the U.S. mainland since 1941, the events of September left both the public and government in shock. This crisis event fundamentally altered the reference point of both, creating a sense of unified will that allowed Bush to pursue bold initiatives throughout both of his terms. The reference point from which the administration had previously operated shifted from complacency with Taliban governance to a guarantee of deposition for any who aided and abetted al-Qaeda operations. Bush announced the commencement of the Global War on Terror the very same day, signing the Authorization for

[18] Borger, Julian (March 24, 2004). "Bush team 'agreed plan to attack the Taliban the day before September 11'". *The Guardian*. London.

Use of Military Force Against Terrorists only seven days later, setting into law the still-active authorization for conventional military forces to pursue affiliated targets globally, a task formerly relegated to covert paramilitary forces[19]. Providing these rules of engagement within the framework of longstanding U.S. Armed Forces Title 10, authorities delivered the global posture that we see today[20]. As Bush said, "Our war on terrorism begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there."[21] The War in Afghanistan began as a brief and unique confluence of public and bureaucratic opinion, allowing for its initiation as a vast and loosely defined operation, designed to take all risk necessary in order to restore the U.S. to its initial point of reference.

Ironically, after expansive authorizations at the onset, the U.S. commenced operations in Afghanistan with unconventional covert activities. Officially designated as the Northern Afghanistan Liaison Team (NALT), the seven man team flew in a Soivet Mi-17 helicopter from Uzbekistan, across Taliban controlled territory and over the 14,000 foot peaks of the Hindu Kush, to land in the Panjshir Valley, situated just north of Kabul[22]. There, carrying only small arms and three million dollars in a duffel bag, the tip of the U.S. spear secured their inroads with the Northern Alliance. In the following weeks, NALT, led by Senior CIA Officer Gary Berntsen, developed intelligence collection capabilities and prepared their allies for the arrival of the 5th Special Forces Group[23]. Within a month, special operations forces (SOF) working with CIA personnel were able to target and direct conventional aerial strikes critical infrastructure, thanks

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[19] "Report on the Legal and Policy Frameworks Guiding the United States' Use of Military Force and Related National Security Operations" (PDF). The White House. 2016

[20] "U.S. Code: Title 10. ARMED FORCES." Legal Information Institute. Legal Information Institute-Cornell University, 1956. https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10

[21] Mann, Jim. (2004). *Rise of the Vulcans: the History of Bush's War Cabinet*. New York: Viking,

[22] "CIA's Mi-17 Helicopter Comes Home." Central Intelligence Agency. Central Intelligence Agency, October 1, 2019.https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2019-featured-story-archive/cia2019s-mi-17-helicopter-comes-home.html.

[23] "Jawbreaker - CIA Special Activities Division." American Special Ops, n.d. https://www.americanspecialops.com/cia-special-operations/jawbreaker/.

to the years of HUMINT intelligence collection and alliance building. While this was unequivocally not the last action seen by the CIA in the country, decision-makers understood that the last covert steps to secure desired capabilities was paramount to the success of further operations and let the quiet option take precedent at first. While the 1990s backburner commitment to Afghanistan was not much, it had been enough to get the job done in 2001.

After initial success in capturing Taliban occupied cities, the Bush administration continued the fruitless hunt for adversarial leadership, many of which slipped across the porous borders of to Pakistan, through sympathetic Pashtun tribal lands (Federally Administered Tribal Areas or FATA). A combination of covert and overt operations continued throughout the country pursuing both Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership, and as American forces came close to achieve the primary objectives set out by the Bush administration—ending Taliban rule and removing al-Qaeda capability in Afghanistan—leadership began to confuse the effectuation of strategic goals with a return to reference point. As attention moved away from the task at hand in Afghanistan, both the American public and the Bush administration lost interest in the continued defense of their original ambitions. As conditions in Afghanistan deteriorated throughout Bush's first term, the formerly exiled Taliban filtered back through the mountain passes to wage asymmetrical warfare against the fragile Afghan government and ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) deployments. The countryside devolved from bad to worse and visions changed as the Bush administration exited and the Obama White House took over.

The remainder of the War in Afghanistan can best be described as a backwards slide into quagmire. Within the context of the post-9/11 framing of U.S objectives, Prospect Theory endured as the pendulum alternated between gain and loss. As public concern with Afghan

affairs lessened, policy makers modulated prioritization to match. After pushing back Taliban and elements of the Haqqani Network, the U.S. lessened commitments, unwilling to take risk of further economic expenditure or military loss in a domain of gain. These risk aversion patterns continued until the resurgence of Taliban capabilities, leading the U.S. and coalition partners to engage in more high-risk operations for fear of backslide. This recommitment came in the form of a surge comprised of 140,000 ISAF personnel, to which the United States contributed 100,000 [24]. This pattern ran cyclically, enabling increased operational success, subsequent cessation of Taliban advance and inevitable withdrawal in anticipation of operational loss after strategic gain. Fundamentally, the mistakes made in U.S. calculation of Taliban intention result from a misunderstanding of the latter's aggregate organizational position. Whether a result of coalition activity or economic hardship, Taliban leadership and insurgents have operated from a domain of loss for the duration of the engagement, leading their forces to consistently engage in risk seeking campaigns. Operating with entirely different constraints on potential courses of action, Taliban leadership does not rely on a broad body of popular opinion to justify or condone their actions. Instead the factionalized conglomerate operates with the long game in mind. They have been able to tailor operations to efficiently counter those of ISAF and the U.S. And so, as the factor of time passed compounds from the initial event context (see fig.1), conditions complicate and leave U.S. decision-makers in a double-sided tug of war, engaging both strategic interests in Afghanistan and domestic governing priorities.

The past three administrations have managed to hold on to both ropes, but current peace-talks may change the fundamental nature of the U.S. relationship with the reference point

[24] "International Security Assistance Force (ISAF): Key Facts and Figures" (PDF). *nato.int*. 4 March 2011.

that it developed nearly twenty years ago. The atrocity of 9/11 brought the collective nation to an agreement concerning the appropriate action to rebound from the loss that it had endured. But as time passes, could it be that our reference point has shifted to that of the Clinton years? Through seven Secretaries of Defense, the primary focus of the United States in Afghanistan has been the removal of all Taliban capabilities, military and political, as a response to the conditions that allowed for al-Qaeda attacks on U.S. soil. However, recent actions of the Trump administration suggest that the national reference point may not be exactly where it was ten years ago. The Doha peace talks of February indicate a willingness of the U.S. to accept terms in which the Taliban could potentially reacquire control of the Afghan government. The current agreement promises a removal of all U.S. and coalition forces within 14 months, on the condition that Taliban leadership provides no safe harbor to operatives who intend to launch attacks against the United States[25]. Readiness to accept these terms is a vast departure from previous policy, similar negotiations only occurring in the days immediately following September 11th, 2001. Perhaps the Taliban do not mean today what they meant then. If the plan does succeed in implementation, it confirms that the Trump administration has accurately concluded that the U.S. reference point has been adjusted to accept the possibility of Taliban governance. The United States has reframed 9/11 as a historical event to be considered among other stimuli. If it fails, then this process is yet another undulation in a series of risky, compounding decisions made in a domain of loss.

This model of analysis is certainly not applicable to every instance of foreign affairs decision-making. Instead, it is meant to describe the manner in which highly insular, powerful

[25] Maizland, Lindsay. "U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, March 2, 2020. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war.

executives principals react to internal and external perceptions in the process of presenting and selecting options. In this model, the ultimate decision-maker is wholly responsible for the structure of advisory actors and their role in accepting and deliberating inputs. This task is the most consequential by far, as the construction of recommendation channels determines the selection of policy. What we observe with Afghanistan goes beyond Janis's conception of 'groupthink'[26], influenced more by commonality of attitude and a sense of collective responsibility. Fundamentally, it comes down to human aversion to decision-making and biased perceptions of risk.

No element of this paper is intended to be normative in nature. It does not advocate for increased implementation of covert action or aversion to defensive standard operating procedures. All manners of response have a time and a place and each can be used to successfully benefit the national interest of any implementing government. What is true is that every individual has shortcomings, even at the highest levels of responsibility, and oftentimes delegation of authority and consideration is necessary to fill in the gaps. The two decades in which the U.S. has been involved in Afghanistan, have presented ample opportunity for lessons learned and successive adjustment. On almost all accounts—save for targeted tactical raids—the U.S. has failed to connect motive to strategy to action, in Afghanistan. Similarly ineffectual responses will continue for the numerous extended conflicts encompassed by the Global War on Terror unless subsequent administrations are able to identify these tendencies and create structures to dissuade them. If rational response is the goal, we cannot expect to come to it naturally.

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[26] Janis, Irving L. 1972. *Victims of groupthink; a psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.