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**AVOIDING UNSUSTAINABLE DEFENSE RESOURCES  
MANAGEMENT PRACTICES: LESSONS FROM THE U.S.  
MILITARY MISSIONS IN AFGHANISTAN**

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**Abstract:**

Defense resources management is a complex process aimed at accomplishing the assigned missions while making the optimal use of the limited financial resources. However, its efficiency and sustainability are truly tested when it comes to effects created on the ground. Based on the long-term meaning of sustainability, this paper looks into the recently ended mission of the US military forces in Afghanistan, to discover whether defense resources were properly implied and to identify lessons that could contribute to enhanced sustainable results in the future. Therefore, this paper adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, based on the case study method, which reveals important lessons that should generate future changes, not only in the way resources are planned but also in their sustainable usage. At a time when there are voices that question the agility of the PPBE process, and there is also evidence related to a high level of waste generated in Afghanistan, this paper supports the idea that the way things are done should be reconsidered and raises awareness to look more into the long-term effects of the military decisions.

*Key words: long-term; sustainability; capability; defense resources; waste; PPBES*

## **1. Introduction**

Efficiency in utilizing the defense resources is a permanent desideratum at the military management level. It involves using resources without wasting them [1]. However, this is not such an easy task, not even for the American military managers, though the country is a pioneer in solutions that prove their efficiency even today. An example in this respect is the *Planning, Programming and Execution System/PPBES* developed in this country in 1961, with applicability in the entire American public system [2], which was adopted at a larger scale in different other countries and which ensures the base of public spending [3]. But mentioning the PPBES does not have the only purpose of highlighting the fact that, taking into account the broad experience in managing public resources, the institutions of this country should not have flaws in terms of public spending. The idea is to highlight that the long-term vision, which triggers this process, should not be lost when it comes to involving the defense resources on-hand in different types of missions.

Consequently, besides efficiency, there is another aspect that raises a lot of debates when it comes to public spending: sustainability. This term has multiple meanings, the most prominent being: 1) a superior form of economic development that looks not only into economic gains, but also into social and environmental benefits [4]; (2) the long-term ability to support the readiness of military forces [5]; and (3) the long-term effects of some measures/actions [6]. Therefore, it should be clearly stated from the beginning that this paper offers a perspective focused on the third meaning, though there are a lot of aspects that could be tackled in relation with the U.S. military from the other two angles.

Therefore, this paper aims to examine, through the case study method, the extent to which the American defense resources were wisely allocated in Afghanistan, with an accent on the sustainability perspective or the durable effects, versus waste. The main goal is to determine whether the U.S. military owned at that moment a reconstruction capability that allowed them an optimal



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allocation of resources in this type of missions. To accomplish this goal, the research question that needs to be answered is: *how sustainably were the main types of defence resources allocated to support the missions in Afghanistan?* Derived from this, there is also a subsequent research question: *why should the lessons identified in Afghanistan count?*

The paper analyzes the reconstruction mission in Afghanistan from a new perspective, starting from reasoning that the long-term approach should be taken into consideration when involving the existing capabilities in a mission. Then, the US *DOTmLPF-P framework* was used to check the suitability of the military capability involved in the reconstruction mission of Afghanistan, which was very helpful in organizing and synthesizing the great amount of data available on this case. The main result consists of the recommendation to integrate the long-term approach not only in the planning phase of the PPBE process, but also after the capabilities had been operationalized.

## **2. Unsustainable U.S. Defence Resources Management Practices in Afghanistan**

This section is three-folded. The first subsection argues the need for maintaining the long-term focus on the effects that need to be created through involving the existing defense resources in various types of missions. Additionally, the second subsection brings into light the unsustainable effects generated in Afghanistan. The framework used and the examples provided contribute to establishing whether the US military owned a reconstruction capability that could have generated durable effects, taking into consideration that the reconstruction missions differentiate from humanitarian ones through the long-term benefits that have to be provided [7]. Last but not least, the third subsection offers a list with the lessons identified after the case study.

### **2.1 The PPBE framework for U.S. Defence Resources Management and Sustainability**

The PPBE instrument for the management of defence resources mentioned in the introduction of this paper was designed to ensure a long-term integrated planning of defence resources used by the U.S. Department of Defense [8], which encompasses mission alignment with all types of defense resources needed for its accomplishment [9]. There are multiple reasons to consider that there should be a strong connection between this process and the need for sustainable measures in managing the available defense resources, at least from the perspective of the third meaning of sustainability, which refers to durability. For instance, the long-term perspective should not be related to the time-consuming process associated with developing a capability through the PPBE instrument [2], but should aim to generate long-term beneficial effects.

This long-term orientation can be sustained by the analyses included in the process related to the PPBE, on one hand, and, on the other hand, by one of the principles which govern defense resources management. From the analyses point of view, the long-term approach is given by the usage of estimates based on life-cycle cost analysis and cost-benefit analysis. While the long-term view is by default integrated when dealing with assessing costs over the entire life-cycle of a product, the cost-benefit analysis in the military domain does not provide such an evident durable aim, as it intends not only to establish the policy of allocating defense resources along different missions and goals, but also to make the best choice between various projects that contribute to mission accomplishment [10] and the associated long-term benefits [11]. From the principle's perspective, the idea of durability is given by the fact that consequences of current decisions have to



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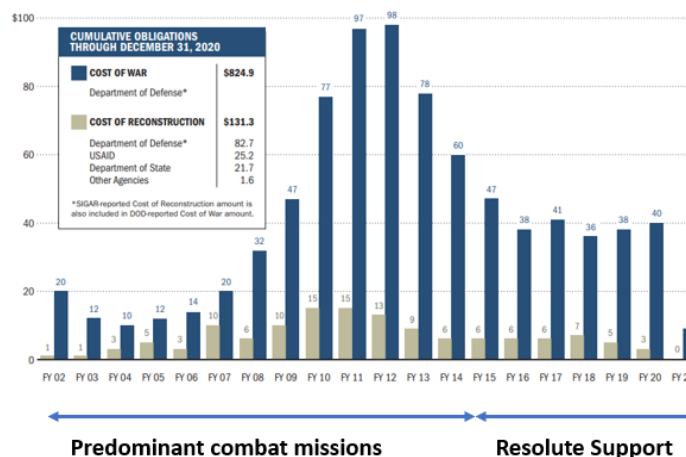
be projected into the future by making use of multi-year plans associated with the force and its financial support [8].

Another argument which supports the connection of the PPBE instrument with the durable results stands into the innovation brought by this instrument, which is mostly supported by its first phase. Thus, the planning phase takes into consideration goals that need to be reached on the long-term [12].

But the capability development process, which starts with the strategic planning phase in PPBE, is not the only one which generates consumption of defense resources. Once the military systems and structures were created and manned to accomplish certain missions which contribute to reaching the established end state, it is important to use them accordingly, and not to deviate from the need that stood at the core of their development. In other words, practices that are associated with the effective usage of the already developed capabilities could also generate expenses that were not envisioned during the operational planning process. This aspect is seen as a shortfall of the actual way of using the PPBE instrument, which is blamed of not taking into consideration the reality on the ground [2], is *“too slow and inflexible to meet warfighter needs”* [Apud 3]. As a consequence, there are voices that support the idea of getting every request for resources through the PPBE process and the necessity to mention the budgetary sources associated with sustainable projects [13], at this moment the process covering *“almost everything DoD does”* [3], but not quite everything, as it will be shown in the following subsection. However, this “everything” is not clearly developed into the analysed literature. Therefore, the following subsection provides a brief analysis of the way defense resources were used in Afghanistan, to identify the aspects that could be included in the PPBE process and valuable lessons to avoid unsustainable defense resources management practices in the future.

### 2.2 Unsustainable US Defence Resources Management Practices in Afghanistan

It all started with the 9/11 terrorist attacks on emblematic infrastructure elements in the USA, that determined the American officials to send military troops in Afghanistan, fact considered, twenty years later, an *“unsustainability trap”*, taking into account the effects generated not only on the US defense resources, but also on the host nation reconstruction [14]. Although this paper will focus on the effects generated on the US defense resources, the reconstruction perspective is very important, as the initial mission established for the military forces changed from a predominant combat one, to a reconstruction support mission. The figure below shows the transition from one type of mission to another and the costs supported between 2002-2021:





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Fig. 1 *The US financial effort in Afghanistan (combat and reconstruction missions) - annual and total (2002-2021) [Apud 15].*

Once the type of the mission had changed, there should have also appeared a change in the way funds were allocated [16]. But the presented figure indicates this change did not happen and although the military forces should have focused more on reconstruction programs, the level of money received for this destination was lower than the one directed towards combat activities. Additionally, as it can be noticed from the above figure, they were assigned two types of missions at the same time, as the costs associated with combat activities were higher than the ones directed to reconstruction. These were only a few aspects which contributed to failure in reconstruction mission. Another major factor that generated non-durable effects was that the reconstruction was carried out mostly by the military instrument of power (63% as it results from data presented in the figure above), although other specialised actors should have been in lead.

The lack of an end state and of a strategy to guide the mission accomplishment, coupled with the one-year planning horizon, were also signalled as sources of failure [7]. This aspect is crucial taking into consideration the wide area of reconstruction activities [7] assigned to the military forces, that are briefly presented in the following figure:



Fig. 2 *The US military involvement in reconstruction activities*

Analysing all these reconstruction activities, one cannot help wonder: *Were the military forces prepared for such diverse actions? or, Had the US military a capability developed for this kind of missions?* To answer these questions, the *DOTmLPF-P* framework will be used, as it comprises the lines that the US decision-makers should consider when developing a capability (doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership & education, personnel, facilities, policy) [17].

Firstly, from *doctrine* point of view, it cannot be considered that all the activities mentioned in Figure 2 are covered, the *US Stabilization and Reconstruction Doctrine* being seen as a “failure” when it comes to supporting transition from authoritarian regimes like the one in Afghanistan, as it does not provide sufficient details related to activities that enter under its umbrella [18]. It refers generically to applying the American model of democracy, but does not take into account actions aimed at developing the country, remaining at the idea that military forces should contribute to stabilizing a conflict environment on the near or intermediate term [18]. However, it seemed that the American model of reconstruction was not suitable for Afghanistan. For instance, the military forces developed in this country costly infrastructure projects that the local authorities, which were not consulted, were not able to maintain, fact that generated an additional financial effort of \$800



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million [19]. Although recommendations to assess the sustainability of the Afghan government’s ability to finance the developed projects had been issued, they were not respected, the amount of waste related to a single unsustainable project/program exceeding \$11 billion [19]. These facts also alter the *facilities* side of the US DOTmLPPF-P framework, enhancing the idea of an incomplete reconstruction capability at the disposal of the US military.

Moreover, the components referring to *organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, and personnel* were also disregarded. As a result, a lot of the necessary resources came from outside the military structures, contractors being involved at a large scale, most of the times as an “*implicit*” solution, with results difficult to monitor and evaluate [19]. Additional drawbacks can be associated with the *personnel* component, as the human resource involved by the US military in Afghanistan was insufficient, unable to cope with the variety of tasks [7], and above these, involved in activities that should have been performed by the Afghan forces [20]. What is more, is that the availability of the needed human resource was not evaluated when the reconstruction mission was planned [7], fact that generates doubts related to the application of the PPBE process in this case.

The *leadership* component was also avoided, as the decision-makers disregarded the reality on the ground. They failed in understanding the Afghan cultural context and their measures were not adapted to the real needs of the population [7]. From the *educational* component perspective, the available data show that the insufficiency of personnel was tackled through a decrease in the level of employment criteria [7], fact that can also explain the unsustainable results. In terms of *training*, the best unsustainable example is associated with the US military forces involvement in the training of the female Afghan military, as the withdrawal from Afghanistan gave Talibans the opportunity to take discriminatory measures against women in this country [21]. But the human and financial effort of the US military forces remained.

The *material* component can also offer insights in terms of unsustainable effects. For example, the great volume of supplies and maintenance services provided to the Afghan forces stood at the basis of their dependence on the US military support, offering fast, but non-durable solutions [20]. Moreover, some logistic solutions provided by the American forces to the Afghan counterparts did not pass the life-cycle cost analysis test. For example, in 2008, when the spare parts were no longer available on the market, the US military leaders decided to spend \$549 million to equip the Afghans with the G222 transport aircraft; this decision proved to be unsustainable in only six years, when the equipment was sold as waste for only \$40,257 [7]. In fact, the waste in this case is represented by the difference between the amount spent and the one recovered, without taking into consideration further expenses with training the human resource or others like this.

Last, but not least, from the *policy* component perspective, it can be also stated that the US military lacked a reconstruction capability in Afghanistan. This statement is supported by the fact that specialists recommended that future reconstruction missions be planned on the idea of sustainability [7], the long-term benefits standing at the core of reconstruction efforts.

**2.3 Lessons from the US Defence Resources Management Practices in Afghanistan**

Taking into consideration the aspects presented so far, we identified several important lessons that should be considered, to avoid the unsustainable defense resources management practices. These are briefly presented in the following table:

Lesson	Content
Lesson 1	Avoid involving the military structures in activities for which they were not prepared for
Lesson 2	If military structures must be involved in activities for



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	which they were not prepared for, involve also other specialised instruments of power (collaborative approach)
Lesson 3	If the end state is vague and there is no clear strategy, put a stronger accent on information provided and the reality on the ground
Lesson 4	If the type of the mission changes, adapt the resource management practices
Lesson 5	Always take into consideration the cultural context
Lesson 6	Do not let the yearly budget decide what to do on long term
Lesson 7	Outsourcing should be considered only after studies had proved it is an optimal alternative
Lesson 8	Identify clear indicators of sustainability and use them in planning reconstruction mission (and not only)
Lesson 9	Embrace the long-term perspective in the way existing capabilities are used
Lesson 10	Always take into consideration a sustainable guided policy in solving the tasks

**Table 1** Lessons identified

### 3. Conclusion

From the facts presented in the previous chapter, it cannot be inferred that the US military had a wise approach in allocating the defense resources in the reconstruction mission in Afghanistan. The evidence presented in this study shows that the US military forces lacked such a capability, conclusion supported by the fact that their specific doctrine was too broad to answer to the wide range of reconstruction activities. Moreover, the data that indicate the reconstruction capability missing elements, support the improper use of the military instrument of power. This is, in our opinion, a very clear case of using wrong instruments and achieving nothing more than negative effects.

What is more, from the PPBE perspective, the reconstruction mission in Afghanistan and the associated waste, highlight the idea of other researchers, who stated the necessity to pass every financial request through the PPBE cycle. If this had happened, the amount of waste would have considerably decreased, in our opinion. However, taking into consideration the long timeframe associated with this process, it becomes obvious that it would have been too slow for the needs of that mission, without taking into account a high scale combat mission. Consequently, the results of the mission in Afghanistan should be seriously taken into consideration and stand at the base of PPBE process adaptation to become more agile.

Another important aspect refers to the reactive nature of the defense resources management applied in Afghanistan. The US military decision-makers longed for a more rapid intervention in Afghanistan, had no vision related to the real amount of effort and no proper reaction to adapt to the recommendations issued by specialists. This could be, in our view, an explanation for the avoidance of the in-place capability development instruments. They relied heavily on the existing resources and tried to make the best use of them, but did not succeed, as this type of mission was not envisioned from the beginning, in the strategic planning phase. Moreover, without a clearly defined end state of the mission, it can be considered that the operational planning process was inexistent, generating the poorest results. Thus, two major processes, namely the capability development process and the



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operational planning process, did not prove their efficiency, because they seemed unsuitable for that context.

Finally, the case of the reconstruction mission in Afghanistan clearly shows an unbalanced ratio between the financial effort and the unsustainable results. It also reveals the high determination of the higher-level decision-makers to use the military forces, in a first-feeling that this measure will imply a lower level of financial effort. From that perspective, we recommend that each involvement of the military forces in combat or other types of missions be treated similarly with the PPBE process, though a more rapidly alternative of this process should be used. Another recommendation is to avoid the usage of defense resources in activities they were not meant for. From this perspective, the case related to the reconstruction mission in Afghanistan is, in our view, very eloquent, reminding the decision-makers the limits of the military instrument of power and the negative consequences associated with their neglectation.

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