

How to Leave Afghanistan

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I talked in about 2010 in Afghanistan with a cogent, personable young Indian, who was openly skeptical about the NATO mission there. He said, “I want the US to be the world’s superpower.” With a scowl, he added “I don’t want it to be China. But if you keep getting into stupid wars, you won’t be [the world’s superpower].” His vision was comparable to that of the Biden Administration, which urges that the US should lead its democratic allies, mostly through the soft power of example, against what has been an authoritarian tide.

Foreign policy Realists – led these days by John Mearsheimer and Stephan Walt – are mostly right about Afghanistan. As a regional hegemon in the western Hemisphere and an essential offshore power elsewhere, the US has readily defined interests in the Eurasian landmass. It is in the US national interest to prevent another power from becoming a hegemon in Europe, the Far East, or perhaps around the Persian Gulf. As Germany and Russia are in sustained demographic decline, there is now little hegemonic threat in Europe. As oil production from outside the Middle East increases, and as replacements for oil-based energy are in the wings, the US has less reason to be concerned about any power becoming dominant in the Persian Gulf. China, massive though it is, is also in demographic decline: but China remains the one power that could become a hegemon in its region, thereby challenging vital US interests in the 21st century.³

The US became involved in Afghanistan around 1980 as part of a worldwide effort to contain the Soviet Union, and again after September 2001 in a reactive effort to hit back at Islamist terror. The recent wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq were complicated by the premise – mostly illusory⁴ -- that the US could intervene with military force to re-make traditional Moslem societies into liberal democracies. Neither war had or was intended to have anything to do with countering China. From a perspective either of the US national interest or of an effort to advance an anti-authoritarian agenda, the Afghan war has been a deadweight from the beginning.

Neighboring countries – including Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia and China – will scramble for position in a post-NATO Afghanistan. Pakistan is likely to want “strategic depth” in the form of an Islamist leadership in Kabul; India and Russia will have different ideas. A guideline for

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² My understanding of Afghanistan has benefited from frequent discussion over the years with Lynda Roades, who has spent much more time than I have in-theatre.

³ Mearsheimer’s argument is that *any* regional hegemon – not just the US -- will act to avoid emergence of a peer competitor. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Norton, 2014 Revised).

⁴ Mearsheimer calls it “delusion” in *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (Yale, 2018).

offshore powers like the US is to stay clear of conflicts in locations that have little relevance to their security interests. Unless an improbable turn of events in Afghanistan would greatly boost China's geopolitical position, the US interest (and that of European and offshore Asian allies) will be to stay – offshore.

Nevertheless, there are costs in leaving, in what will with some probability be a collapse of the government the US and its allies have been defending and funding for nearly 20 years. A Taliban takeover will likely mean hundreds of thousands or even millions of refugees into Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – with hard to anticipate impacts in those countries. It will mean a rollback of progress for women and girls across Afghanistan. (The most encouraging sight I saw around Kabul during my deployments was of elementary or middle school girls appearing in groups on city streets wearing matching uniforms.) It is likely to shift domestic resistance against the Taliban back to re-energized Tajik and Uzbek warlords in the north and west of Afghanistan, and possibly even to equivalents in the Pashtun south, similar to the case during most of the 1990s. If time is as short as it may be, it will be difficult to process US visa papers for Afghan translators and others who assisted the war effort during the last two decades.

The optic is terrible; but in a cynical world, it might not matter. On balance, French prestige and power likely benefited following DeGaulle's withdrawal from Algeria in 1962, just as US power and prestige soon recovered from leaving Vietnam in 1975. In both cases, the exiting power left behind tens of thousands, or more, who had taken their side during hostilities. Most of America's friends around the world believe its post-9/11 wars have been misguided, fools' errands, and will look past an ugly Afghan exit.

It may be too late for a better outcome. Pakistan policy continues to provide succor and refuge to the Taliban and other extremist groups. The Afghan administration in Kabul has not established legitimacy beyond slivers of the population. Extreme versions of Islam have long had sway in large portions of the country. I am told that US intelligence has gathered data indicating there is much popular support for a return to Taliban rule; a comforting conclusion for Americans is that the Afghans will have brought it on themselves.

But the US has long been enmeshed in Afghanistan's prospects. It would have been possible for the US to have intervened more effectively in 2001, or even earlier during the anti-Soviet war in the 1980s and in the civil war of the early 1990s. In fact, during the 1980s and into the 1990s, the US mostly outsourced its Afghan policy to the jihadist-dominated Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), thereby undermining support, for example, for the anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban forces led by Ahmad Shah Masood.⁵ (Pakistan leaders have always seen their security threat as coming from India, never from the Soviet Union. US diplomats were usually placated by the charade that Pakistani leaders shared American anti-Soviet sentiments.) After September 2001, the US intervention went back and forth between trying to create a viable

⁵ For more on US policy and Masood, see Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (Public Affairs, 2011). *Passim*.

national government in Kabul and undercutting that strategy by supporting anti-Taliban regional warlords who had survived from the domestic wars of the 1990s.⁶

Alongside support for a central government, a coherent US and allied strategy during the past two decades would have built on traditional tribal culture and indigenous Afghan opposition to extreme versions of Islam. It would have embraced tribal leaders and moderate clerics. Afghans I knew described such people as “the real leaders of Afghanistan”, and added that the US-NATO effort was looking past them. A better approach would have sought also to nurture provincial government responsibilities, an alternative to near-total reliance on building a centrally-administered nation. The US might also have engaged the Afghan Human Rights Commission, better to have isolated those with unsavory backgrounds from holding senior government positions or participating in elections.⁷

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in May of this year, subsequent to the Biden Administration’s decision to withdraw by September.⁸ He proposed that the Taliban might moderate its views, and that perhaps Pakistan would broker some compromise settlement. He hopes that NATO-trained Afghan troops will be up to the task. On a second reading, it is hard to take Ghani’s arguments seriously; he wants the unexpected to happen, perhaps via a foreign intervention, and is trying to say diplomatically correct things. He mentions none of the agenda items from the previous paragraph. One gathers the impression that leaders in Kabul have viewed traditional tribal and religious leaders as domestic opponents.

Prior to departing Afghanistan in 2014, I met with the Minister and/ or Deputy Minister at the Ministries of Borders and Tribes and of Hajj and Islamic Affairs. At both, I was told emphatically of interest in getting US political and modest material support. They wanted to resume initiatives opened by General Stanley McChrystal in 2009 and 2010 – prior to his dismissal for unrelated reasons – but which were then neglected. The cost to the NATO-led coalition of providing such support would have been low measured in both people and money. Months earlier, I was told by a senior person at the State Department that self-described “realists” there had decided not to meet with anyone from the Human Rights Commission; the State official even encouraged me to try on my own to have such a meeting, as I eventually did – as a DoD civilian, I might have such a meeting without the implicit diplomatic message that a State Department contact would imply. A senior person at the Hajj/ Islamic Affairs Ministry told us that a ranking US official advised him it would violate unwritten US policy to make common cause with an Afghan cleric, even a moderate one.

A cogent war strategy requires gathering in as many allies as possible – not freezing them out. In fact, an agenda that emphasizes working with traditional leaders, expanding subnational governance, and taking rights issues seriously could have boosted the national government’s

⁶ Ahmad Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: the United State, and the Failure of Nation-Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (Viking, 2008), especially Ch. 7, “The One-Billion Dollar Warlords.”

⁷ For more on these agenda items, see Clark Johnson, “Missing Political Front in Afghanistan”, *Small Wars Journal*, January 2016. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/clark-johnson>

⁸ Ashraf Ghani, “Afghanistan’s Moment of Risk and Opportunity”, *Foreign Affairs*, May 4, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-05-04/ashraf-ghani-afghanistan-moment-risk-and-opportunity>

legitimacy. It would have been a step away from the neo-conservative (or neo-liberal) effort to instill Western-style democracy in untilled soil. It would have been a more “realist” – less illusory -- path to stabilization, if not exactly to nation-building. Absent a NATO-led military presence, Afghan leadership may consider anew potential power relationships in their country; they may yet pursue such an agenda.

Shortly after the Ministerial meetings, I talked with a senior person in Commanding General Joseph Dunford’s office to share my impressions. I suggested that our policy might become more imaginative and politically-informed. That person finally told me – in what I took to be more than a deflection -- “The problem is, no one cares.” I commented that, coming from the Commander’s office, and considering that the US still had tens of thousands of soldiers in-theatre, that was a “revealing” remark. He then implied that someone in Washington had lost interest. If we consider the years of upbeat reports before and since from the US military on the war’s progress, it is hard not to conclude that senior officials were either ill-informed or deliberately misleading.

The US and allied countries will continue to have some sway over developments in Afghanistan. Money will continue to flow, although in smaller amounts; with or without NATO, the US may maintain residual military capacity occasionally to act in-theatre. The US has and will have potential leverage, although it has thus far scarcely used it. Parallels with the US disengagement, and near-implosion of Afghanistan, during the 1990s are more than coincidental. Support can be contingent on adoption of a politically cogent agenda, and on including provincial and traditional leaders who have thus far been left on the sidelines. We should encourage an active role for the Loya Jirga, an assembly of tribal leaders, in negotiations with insurrection leaders. What should be the pressing question now is whether Afghans can develop a political front to counter what Taliban-linked groups will soon offer – and whether NATO and the US can do anything to influence Kabul’s agenda.

The prospects for Afghanistan are not good. But within the corners of a Realist geopolitical framework, NATO and the US can begin to improve the odds.