

Research Article

The American Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Consequences and Perspectives

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Abstract:

After twenty years of war against al-Qaida and the Taliban, the US and its allies have withdrawn from Afghanistan, causing much ink to flow, for the return to power in Kabul on Sunday 15 August 2021 and the runaway of President Ashraf Ghani have exposed all the flaws that explain the American fiasco in Afghanistan. The consequences of the withdrawal are numerous and various. In Afghanistan, desolation and disenchantment were the most common feelings among many Afghans, immediately after the fall of Kabul. The new measures taken by the new authorities such as the abolition of mixed classes in the education system and the attacks on certain civil society authorities, women, and journalists, show that many democratic gains are being questioned. In the United States, the debacle in Afghanistan has not only prompted much of the public to question the chaotic management of the war by U.S political authorities, but also prompted a call for them to come home and manage domestic affairs. The recognition of the new afghan authorities by China, Russia, Pakistan and Iran foreshadows geopolitical prospects in the sub-region. The ineffectiveness and uselessness of the use of force to instill democratic and peaceful values are lessons to be learned from American foreign policy.

Key words: United States, Afghanistan, Withdrawal, Taliban, Terror

Introduction

On Sunday, August 15, 2021, the surrealist scene has been filmed and retransmitted by all the televisions around the world: the Taliban entered the Afghan capital of Kabul after 19 years 10 months 23 days of war against the American and NATO coalition forces, completing a rapid takeover of the country that surprised many Afghans, Americans and observers throughout the world. Another shocking event watched on television was the ballet of military jets which were evacuating hundreds of Westerners and their Afghan collaborators to the airport, then away from the country in an indescribable chaos. The Taliban advance came as the United States was completing the military and diplomatic withdrawal obtained in a February 2020 U.S.-Taliban accord, whose evacuation operations concluded on August 30, 2021, with the departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

In all evidence, the Taliban Kabul take-over happened unexpectedly and with great deception in the eyes of many when one reckons the patriotic determination and military might deployed by the then US Administration under the leadership of President, Georges W. Bush to chase and kill the perpetrators of the terror attacks in the American soil. Thus, in line with the US National Security Strategy issued in 2002 which stated that “*America will hold to account nations that are compromised by terror, including those who harbor terrorists*”, the US launched the operation Enduring Freedom against the Taliban on Sunday October 7, 2001. A few weeks after, the Taliban regime falls down and al-Qaida has been obliged to flee and hide to the bordering rocky hills between Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Bush celebrates a victory but the war seemed to have just started.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the consequences and perspectives of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. In the first part, we will examine the consequences on Afghans for whom desolation and

disenchantment are the most shared feelings on the one hand, and the celebration of a deserved victory on the other hand. Then, we will look at its effects on Americans who have been divided about the costs of the war, the war fatigue, and the efficiency of military forces.

The last part of the paper will explore the perspectives of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. We will thus put a particular focus on the different lessons to be learnt from it and its implications for the future of the United States from a geopolitical perspective.

1- Consequences in Afghanistan and in the US

The main purpose of the American presence in Afghanistan, after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, was to rid the threat of the Taliban and Al Qaeda off the US, Afghanistan and the world. Unfortunately, after twenty years (2001-2021) of innumerable bloodsheds and damages of all sorts, the country has fallen back into the hands of the Taliban on Sunday August 15 2021. The situation at the Kabul airport the same day showed that desolation and disenchantment were the most shared feelings, not only among the afghan people but also in the United States of America and in the world in general. Some people realized that this war has no real winners whereas others shouted out at a Taliban victory as there was a return to the starting point after 19 years 10 months 23 days of war.

Just after the collapse of the Afghan regime and the withdrawal of American troops, some human rights defenders, journalists, political leaders, civil society members and women have been attacked by the Taliban. In all likeliness, what many people feared started to happen right away. Memories are still fresh with harsh images of human rights violations and rigid Taliban governance of the 2000s. '*Women and girls will suffer unspeakable harm*' warned George W. Bush, former US President. '*Women, like Afghans working with Western armies, will pay a heavy price*' lamented German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Their predictions were soon to be confirmed by Abdul Baqi Hazzani, minister of higher education of the Taliban government who stated that '*women and girls could study at the universities, but in single-sex classes*'. These declarations show that some of the democratic achievements gained by women and the members of the civil society are being questioned by the new authorities.

Economically speaking, because of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, it becomes increasingly difficult not only for development organizations to work in the country but also for parliament to justify funding. Women, minorities, and the population in the countryside will be most severely affected by the decreased inflow of funding. In this perspective, a shift from development aid to humanitarian aid is necessary to save afghan people from looming hunger. The deal on the central level empowers local leaders and warlords, by further fragmenting the country and increasing the differences between regions. Sharia law is enforced in regions with Taliban rule, primarily in the southern and eastern parts. Neighboring powers continue to support their local beneficiaries in Afghanistan, maintaining a situation of stable instability in the power balance.

With the withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan, a feeble, fragile, uncertain and unstable political environment is left behind. The situation in the battlefield did not favor Afghan security forces, as their own capacities could not compensate the withdrawal of US and NATO forces, leading to the recent fall of Kabul. Now, with the Taliban having control over the country, they are looking for a global acceptance from regional and global powers. To receive global acceptance, especially from the US, Taliban leadership will have to make sure that Afghanistan's soil is not used to threaten the security of the United States and its allies as agreed by both actors in the Doha Accords. However, it is too early to say if the Taliban will be able to gain global acceptance and legitimacy. In any case, there will definitely be countries willing to work with them. For instance, China has already expressed its desire for maintaining friendly relations with them.

A crisis of confidence and a breach of trust between the Afghan people and their political class, but also between the afghan people and Americans have been brought about by the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. Around 240,000 dead and 2,261 billion dollars (Adam, 2021:2) in a war that will have served no purpose and which has put us today in a situation worse than that of 2001. Can you image the moral shock in both countries which are economically touched by the covid-19 pandemic?

In the US, the withdrawal has, one more time, raised the political debate between democrats and republicans. President Biden and his administration have been harshly criticized by republicans just after the collapse of the Afghan government. As an illustration, Republican leader in the House of Representatives, Kevin McCarthy, said *'The president has abandoned Americans to the mercy of terrorists'* and Republican Senate leader, Mitch Mc Connell qualified the withdrawal as a *'big mistake,' an 'unwise decision'*. He further noted that *'The withdrawal of the Americans from Afghanistan is tantamount to retreat in the face of an undefeated enemy, and it is an abdication of the American leadership'* (CBS News, august 2021).

A breach of trust between the United States and its allies is looming in the horizon because the way the withdrawal has been conducted by the American leadership was not well-appreciated by all its allies. London has been critical of its American ally. On the first Friday after the Taliban return to power in Afghanistan, Boris Johnson, the UK prime minister pledged *'not to turn our back on Afghanistan'*. British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace described the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan on the BBC on Monday as a *'failure of the international community to understand that brings do not get sorted out overnight'*. He assured, however, that British commitment in Afghanistan, which has cost the lives of 457 British soldiers (CBS News, august 2021) in twenty years of intervention, *'did not count for nothing'*.

2- Significance of the Taliban Come-back

The American invasion of and consecutive war against the Taliban and al-Qaida is the longest war in American history. In a humiliating fashion, President Biden has decided to end US military operations and withdraw American troops from Afghanistan from a war of unpredictable implications launched almost 20 years ago by President Bush (in November 2001). The principal goal "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to prevent their return to either country in the future" (Qted in Obama, 2020p. 326) has failed as al-Qaida has not been dismantled and the Taliban have made a spectacular comeback. The latter have demonstrated that losing a battle does not mean losing a fight.

From a war-inclined Bush to a peace-looking Biden, we hear a different rhetoric. In The US National Security Strategy document of 2002 we could read: "The United States will make no concessions to terrorist demands and strike no deals with them. We make no distinction between terrorists and those who knowingly harbor or provide aid to them." Today, trying to find pride out of the failure, President Biden brags that "No nation has ever done anything like it in all of history. Only the United States had the capacity and the will and ability to do it, and we did it today."

What is most striking is how the US is putting the blame of their failure on Afghanistan's incompetent and corrupt political authorities. For the US, Washington spent 20 years and countless billions of American taxpayer dollars for the reconstruction of Afghanistan with no committed support and engagement from local authorities. There were shared feelings of despair and disappointment caused by "reports of rampant corruption and mismanagement within [Afghan] government" according to President Obama (2020, p.164). For the American establishment, Afghan political authorities, contractors, consultants, advisers and aid workers were not able to help instill a nonmilitant order in the country because big parts of the countryside were out of the control of the central government. They were in the hands of local warlords who maintained power everywhere.

Moreover, Washington blamed it on Pakistan and believed that it played a sneaky role and did not provide full support. As Obama acknowledged, "Pakistan had shown neither the capacity nor the will to dislodge al-Qaeda's leadership from its current sanctuary in a remote, mountainous, and barely governed region straddling the Afghanistan-Pakistan border." He added:

Despite the fact that we had more than thirty thousand U.S. troops on the ground and an almost equal number of international coalition troops there, the Taliban controlled large swaths of the country, particularly in the regions along the border with Pakistan. (2020, p. 321-322)

President Obama went further stating that "Not only did the Pakistan military (and in particular its intelligence arm, ISI) tolerate the presence of Taliban headquarters and leadership in Quetta, near the Pakistani border, but it was also quietly assisting the" (2020, p. 326). It was then clear, American efforts in Afghanistan had partially failed because of Pakistani support to the Taliban and al-Qaida. In the end, Biden seems to have heard from Obama that there was no guarantee of success." (Obama, 2020:436)

From a different perspective, William D. Hartung, director of the Arms and Security Program at the Center for International Policy, tells us that the ones to blame are the war profiteers whose only concern is capital, not the life or well-being of Afghan populations. For him, the Afghanistan invasion and reconstruction process was tainted with “fraud, waste, and abuse.” Between the US oil trading companies (contracted to supply fuel to American operations), private security businesses like Blackwater and Dyncorp, weapons companies like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, General Dynamics, Raytheon and Northrop Grumman (the big five), and logistics and construction firms like Halliburton (through its KBR subsidiary: Kellogg, Brown & Root) and Bechtel, Hartung reveals “a two-decade explosion of corporate profits”. Since the outburst of 9/11, there is a continuous surge of military spending and almost over half of Pentagon’s budget is absorbed by these giants. He concludes stating that ‘we’re in for decades of more war profiteering by weapons contractors reaping massive profits with impunity.’

However, we do believe that the US switch of objective from tracking and dismantling terror-related groups in Afghanistan to nation-building and development was of paramount importance. But, such a change of strategy looked too late at the period it happened as Obama reminded:

“What was clear, though, was that the U.S. commitment the Riedel report was calling for went well beyond a bare-bones counterterrorism strategy and toward a form of nation-building that probably would have made sense—had we started seven years earlier, the moment we drove the Taliban out of Kabul.” (2020, p. 434)

This reshuffling of US strategy from hard to soft did not make things move for better. The task was difficult and the “Taliban was too deeply woven into the fabric of Afghan society” (Obama, 2020:436).

Now that the Taliban have taken over control, many fear that Afghanistan will become a theocracy like Saudi Arabia and Iran and that there will be a surge of radical Islam. But for the new Taliban authorities, feelings are different. For instance, Zabihullah Mujahid, the main spokesman of the Taliban, celebrated ‘Our country has regained its full independence’. ‘We have made history again’ declared Anas Haqqani, one of the leaders of the movement. For President Putin ‘it is time to respect the rights of the Afghan people to decide their own fate and future’. What is sure is the Taliban return to power will cast a blow to the US as global power and will definitely have geopolitical implications.

3- Geopolitical Implications of the American Withdrawal

What will be the implications of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan? Will it give a blow to the US as a global power and to its international system? We will address these questions in this section.

There is no doubt that the American withdrawal from Afghanistan will have serious geopolitical implications for the US as a global power, particularly in the Eurasian region. Immediately and outright, the relatively easy capture of Kabul (in less than 9 days by a less trained and equipped Taliban army) and Taliban victory may stimulate jihadi groups like the Islamic State or al-Qaida. This was the case felt with the attack of the Kabul airport by the Islamic State in Khorsan (IS-K) and the killing of American soldiers during the Afghanistan evacuation. It will contribute to the fading of myth of American world power. In the same vein, it will affect American capacities for building and supporting allied armies. This has been the case in Iraq and Libya which have almost become failed states now.

Furthermore, despite the fact that the Taliban did not display any sign of plotting attacks against the US outside Afghanistan, there is a major international concern of seeing them host jihadi groups or Afghanistan being used as a safe haven for the latter. In a recent speech, Iad Ag Ghaly, the leader of the Sahelian branch of al-Qaida, congratulated himself on what he called ‘our victory’, underlining the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaida. The opening of the Afghan government prisons, namely in Bagram, has also led to the release of al-Qaida fighters and authorities.

Secondly, the Afghanistan chaos will severely hit American world leadership and will surely bring about geopolitical perspectives. As a first sign, the first countries to recognize the Taliban regime was China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, blatantly called ‘the new friends of the Taliban’. Some of them did not hesitate to openly criticize the US. For instance, President Poutine said that ‘The American presence in Afghanistan ended up

into a tragedy.’ Alongside him, the Iranian Prime Minister, Ebrahim Raisi, held that ‘The military defeat and the departure of the United States from Afghanistan must be transformed into an opportunity to establish security and lasting peace in Afghanistan.’ These strong positions in favor of the Taliban presage a reshaping of political, diplomatic and economic relations in the Middle East.

Traditional US enemies/rivals in Asia like Iran and North Korea and elsewhere, might have a greater margin for future negotiations with the US on issues of international resonance. This adds up to what seems a decreasing US military influence since the Vietnam War, concomitantly to the quagmire created in Iraq, Libya, Yemen and the Russian victory in Crimea. Thus, President Biden seems to have understood some of the likely geopolitical implications of his withdrawal decision. He made it clear that ‘The world is changing. We’re engaged in a serious competition with China. We’re dealing with the challenges on multiple fronts with Russia.’ He has thus pledged and succeeded to have the House Armed Services Committee endorse a staggering budget for the Pentagon that will be in the range of \$740 billion dollars in 2022.

As far as China is concerned, a consolidation of Beijing’s rising presence and power in Asia is predictable. To date, it is pushing forward development framework putting the country in its stronghold, specifically in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which is the Chinese project to build ‘an economic belt along the silk road and Eurasia.’ In the last decade, China has spent over a trillion dollars “to construct a transcontinental grid of railroads, oil pipelines, and industrial infrastructure in a bid to become the world’s premier economic power” and reinforce its “dominance over the vast Eurasian land mass, home to 70% of the globe’s population and productivity” revealed Alfred McCoy in Tom Dispatch. By so doing, China is softly paving itself the way without the slightest killing.

Regarding oil exploration and importation, China is gaining the market in Asia. As McCoy adds,

To the north of Afghanistan, the China National Petroleum Corporation has collaborated with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan to launch the Central Asia–China gas pipeline, a system that will eventually extend more than 4,000 miles across the heart of Eurasia. Along Afghanistan’s eastern frontier, Beijing began spending \$200 million in 2011 to transform a sleepy fishing village at Gwadar, Pakistan, on the Arabian Sea, into a modern commercial port only 370 miles from the oil-rich Persian Gulf. Four years later, President Xi committed \$46 billion to building a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of roads, rails, and pipelines stretching nearly 2,000 miles along Afghanistan’s eastern borderlands from China’s western provinces to the now-modernized port of Gwadar.

In line with the Chinese economic deployment, the Taliban might find deals for the exploration and sale of the country’s vast mineral resources. They might also collect taxes from China using the country as transit, ending thus their dependence on opium harvest that many fear.

With Tehran, China broke its diplomatic isolation and landed a \$400 billion development accord to build ‘a transit corridor of oil and natural gas pipelines to China’ and ‘a vast new rail network that will make Tehran the hub of a line stretching from Istanbul, Turkey, to Islamabad, Pakistan.’

Thirdly, the US-Europe/NATO relations will be considerably impacted. As we noticed, despite full support and engagement of its NATO allies for almost 20 years in the Afghan invasion and reconstruction, President Biden unilaterally withdrew from Afghanistan without the slightest consultation with their very allies despite having suffered over a thousand people killed. There is no doubt such a decision grieved them. They felt it as an offense and could not refrain from commenting and taking resolutions. Thus, former German ambassador to Washington, Wolfgang Ischinger, observed, “There is serious loss of trust,” and “the real lesson... for Europe is this: Do we really want to be totally dependent on U.S. capabilities and decisions forever, or can Europe finally begin to be serious about becoming a credible strategic actor?”

Soon after the American withdrawal, in an anger-reaction-summit held after the last planes left Kabul, European Union officials made it clear that the time had come to stop “depending on American decisions” and to create a European army that would give them “greater decision-making autonomy and greater capacity for action in the world.” More courageous and visionary leaders like the French President, Emmanuel Macron, called for the building of a European military force that will free them from Washington and a looming new US-China bipolarization.

On another token, the viability of a sustainable peace settlement depends on the development of the Afghan economy and strong support from regional actors that need to increase their investments for viable projects. The lingering question that is raised is whether or not regional and international powers are going to condition their engagement in Afghanistan to their local or geopolitical interests. Their commitment and priorities will surely depend on the US as well.

Conclusion

Twenty years after the 9/11 attacks, the American military invasion in Afghanistan boils down to a total failure. The American withdrawal from Afghanistan which brings about the return to power of the Taliban and the collapse of the Afghan regime has many consequences both in the US and in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has now become a warzone under the rule of terrorists and violent jihadi extremists that is exponentially more dangerous than before the American withdrawal. This threat is compounded by the risk of having abandoned Americans in Afghanistan. The United States must hold to its promise that every American citizen, permanent resident and special immigrant visa (SIV) applicant who wants to leave Afghanistan can do so. Until then, this mission is not complete, but has rather failed.

The withdrawal of US and allied troops has left the country without a free government and political system, the population without protection, as well as an ingrained economic and humanitarian crisis. When combined with dire socio-economic conditions and a gaping power vacuum, the recent Kabul airport attack created conditions that are ripe for insurgency.

The 'Costs of war' project has estimated the number of victims at about 240.000, 80 times more than those of the September 11 attacks. Combined with the war fatigue and the military defeat, many American people and observers think that it is high time American leaders rethought the use and utility of military force. Many voices have been raised to ask American political leaders to focus now on the vital interests of the US at home, specially the competition with China in the technological and economical fields. The time to privilege the investments in the American infrastructures and the climate has arrived. They believe that the American foreign policy should be now based on the use of the soft power, smart power and shared values.

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