



Withdrawal From Afghanistan Must Continue: Afghan Government's Potential Collapse Is Another Reason To Leave

Doug Bandow

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The Biden administration continues its military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Opposition from the U.S. foreign policy establishment known as "the Blob" is fierce. Most Washington policymakers would have American military personnel stay in Afghanistan forever, or at least until the Second Coming, plus a few extra years, just to be safe.

The president's plan naturally is opposed by most Republicans, who have turned themselves into the forever war party. The country doesn't matter. Whether it is Afghanistan, Germany, Iraq, Syria, South Korea, Lithuania, Turkey, or elsewhere, no US military personnel once deployed can ever be withdrawn, under any circumstances. To even suggest doing so anywhere at any time, argue the uber-hawks who now dominate the GOP congressional caucus, is to signal weakness, invite war, risk chaos, and even chance a new Dark Age.

When it comes to Afghanistan center-left legislators and policy advocates appear to have only a slightly less apocalyptic attitude. The president has received surprisingly little support even from members of his own party. Most of the Washington policy community backed the war in Afghanistan over the past two decades and will never believe a safe withdrawal to be possible.

Nevertheless, members of the war forever crowd claim to hold the position of reasonable moderation. For instance, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius contended that "Leaving the modest remaining forces of 2,500 US troops there a while longer would have been a low-cost way of sustaining the shaky status quo." However, the Kabul government would be no more ready for independence in another year, five years, or two decades. So members of the Blob no doubt would make the same argument for staying whenever any administration proposed withdrawing US forces in the future.

Moreover, the fact that no Americans have been killed in combat over the last 16 months is deceptive, a temporary peace kept by the Taliban as Washington negotiated its withdrawal.

Renewing the US combat mission would make Americans targets again. US personnel would keep dying on behalf of unfathomable and unattainable interests until a future president had the political courage to finally say enough.

Although the administration hopes the worst won't happen, last week Pentagon spokesman John Kirby suggested that the withdrawal timetable was flexible, depending on circumstances: "If there needs [sic] to be changes made to the pace, or to the scope and scale of the retrograde, on any given day or in any given week, we want to maintain the flexibility to do that." However, fear of a potentially disastrous final denouement is no argument for halting or even slowing the US withdrawal. A slightly delayed pullout would not change the ultimate result while making renewed Taliban attacks on American forces more likely.

In a city usually filled with false optimism, there are surprisingly few Pollyannas regarding Afghanistan. Almost everyone assumes that the Kabul government is a goner, with the Taliban likely to quickly triumph. Then the educated urban class will face extinction. Women will end up beneath the hijab if not the burka. Al-Qaeda terrorists will plot the next 9/11. The Islamic State will scout new locations for its caliphate.

This is what two decades of effort by the US, NATO, and other allied states, involving hundreds of thousands of combat personnel and trillions of dollars in expenditures, have wrought. Little other than Western money appears to hold the Ghani government together. It presents only a democratic façade, a compromise regime concocted to avoid a civil war within a civil war. Freedom House rates the system as "not free," observing: "Political rights and civil liberties are curtailed in practice by violence, corruption, patronage, and flawed electoral processes."

No wonder so few Afghans want to die on behalf this system. The security forces, both police and army, have proved to be a costly bust. With the ranks filled by "ghosts," an officer corps bedeviled by corruption, units exhibiting minimal battle worthiness, and personnel demonstrating little loyalty to Kabul, few government forces can operate independently. The special forces fight well and hard, but are too few and overextended.

Even with expansive foreign support, Kabul's writ has never reached much beyond major cities in a country traditionally governed at the village and valley level. As international backing shrinks, the regime's prognosis inevitably worsens. A recent intelligence assessment warned that the Afghan government could fall within months.

After the US began withdrawing its forces, reports of defections, surrenders, and defeats multiplied. Ignatius noted that since the president's announcement "The Afghan army is buckling in many areas. And in the vacuum, ethnic militias and criminal gangs are becoming the only security for a terrified population." Scores of districts have been captured since the withdrawal was announced; at least one analysis figures that the Taliban controls more districts than the government. Concern over the safety of major provincial capitals has mounted. Mazar-e Sharif, a major northern city long regarded as safe from the Taliban – which I visited without fear a decade ago – recently came under attack.

Still, the endgame is not foreordained. Major urban areas may prove to be tough targets. After the 1989 Soviet withdrawal the mujahedeen discovered that a switch to conventional warfare against well defended cities was more difficult than expected. The Moscow-backed Afghan president, Mohammed Najibullah, possessed ample firepower left by the retreating Soviets and

survived for three years, yielding power only after the Soviet Union's collapse ended financial support and fuel shipments for his government. Moreover, other client regimes have lasted some time before collapse. For instance, the government of South Vietnam survived roughly two years before the capture of Saigon and ignominious helicopter airlift from the US embassy.

Moreover, other opponents of the Taliban are organizing. Afghanistan always has suffered from a surplus of militias reflecting various regional, religious, and ethnic loyalties. Reported the *New York Times*: "As US and NATO forces withdraw from Afghanistan, and talks falter between the Taliban and the American-backed government, ethnic groups across the country have formed militias or say they plan to arm themselves." Among the forces stirring are Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, who were active in the civil war before the Taliban's triumph. A 24-year-old Hazara told the *Times*: "If this situation continues, I'll pick up a gun and kill whoever kills us."

Indeed, with its own forces unable to hold back the Taliban, the government is encouraging revival of what amount to private militaries with promises of arms and other support. Last week President Ashraf Ghani met with "influential former anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban militia leaders," reported the *Washington Post*, and urged creation of a "united front" to "safeguard the republic system."

This effort will further divide the country. The militias believe in themselves, not "the republic system," and are apt to go rogue whenever it suits them. They could take Afghanistan back into something like the chaotic civil war which followed the Soviet withdrawal – and encouraged the Taliban's rise. Nevertheless, fearful Afghans increasingly view such groups as the lesser evil.

Irrespective of the battle's exact trajectory, what Ignatius called "a summer of tears" likely awaits Afghanistan. Secretary of State Antony Blinken acknowledged "a real danger" that "we'll see a renewal of a war or possibly worse." There will be more fighting, greater Taliban advances, and increased reliance on less disciplined, more brutal militias. Hope for a unified liberal state will further dissipate. And the specter of collapse will haunt Kabul, even if the Taliban advance is at least temporarily halted.

None of this should surprise anyone, least of all Republican critics who are demanding that the administration reverse its decision and make America's presence essentially permanent. After all, it was GOP president George W. Bush who turned a limited mission focused on responding to 9/11 into an open-ended nation-building campaign that was never worth the cost and destined to go badly.

The problem is not that the US is leaving. The problem is that American personnel stayed too long attempting to do the impossible. In the process they created a dependent state unable to stand on its own. NBC News last week reported: "The Taliban are advancing at lightning speed across Afghanistan as US troops withdraw. They now control a third of the country, are fighting for control of 42 percent more – and may even be slowing their advance on purpose." This after *two decades* of allied commitment and investment of blood and treasure!?

The US has no interests at stake sufficient to remain months, years, or decades longer in Afghanistan. The US should not waste more lives and wealth in pursuing the fantasies which have animated the "endless war" lobby. The American people understand the futility of staying even if so many denizens of Washington do not.

Observed Sen. Chris Murphy: "We've all been very clear that there's going to be bad news out of Afghanistan. But, you know what? There's been tons of bad news out of Afghanistan while we've been there. Every single year the Taliban has gained more territory. Every single year the government remains completely inept and corrupt My constituents are not persuaded that holding off the Taliban is a wise expenditure of US taxpayer money, if we believe there are other ways to protect the nation against a terrorist attack."

Afghanistan is a tragedy, but one that goes back 40 years, well before the US intervened. With a median age of 18.4 years, most Afghans have known nothing but war. Half of them know nothing but war involving the US. Americans did not create the Afghan imbroglio. But they are incapable of ending it.

Washington's failure cannot be redeemed absent a forever commitment of lives and money. It is time to return the Afghans' nation to them.

The Taliban is a malign force, but its resiliency reflects the determination of Afghans to rule themselves, even at extraordinarily high cost. Responsibility for what appears to be a looming debacle belongs not with President Biden, who recognized the need to leave, but a bipartisan policy elite which treated peripheral interests as vital and insisted on wasting more lives and resources while attempting the impossible. America must finish its withdrawal from Afghanistan, despite the tragedy and tears likely to occur.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.