



Afghan Withdrawal Enhances Long-Term US Credibility

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September 20, 2021

The failure of America's expensive Potemkin regime in Afghanistan triggered predictable wailing and caterwauling by members of Washington's War Party. In their view the U.S. can never leave any conflict anywhere at any time lest no one ever again believe that America will defend even itself in the future. Abandon Kabul today and the Russians might be invading New York City tomorrow!

It is a profoundly stupid argument. Indeed, proponents, a toxic mix of neoconservatives, liberal interventionists, and endless hawks who dominate US foreign policy, almost certainly don't believe their own claims. Rather, they are seeking to raise the price for any administration to leave any forever war. The more bile and venom they spew, the less likely President Joe Biden and his successors will be to pull US forces from Iraq, Syria, or some other foolish conflict.

For equally self-serving reasons the foreign beneficiaries of American intervention offer similar inanities. In varying degrees officials in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East – representing more than a score members of Washington's vast defense dole – asked if they can continue to rely on the US. Seemingly intelligent people, they nevertheless pretend not to recognize the difference between Germany or Japan and Afghanistan.

However, they hope to manipulate an administration under siege, wringing even more subsidies, concessions, and promises from credulous officials ever willing to sacrifice the American public's interest. There is no foreign cause too unimportant for Washington to promiscuously sacrifice US lives and wealth. America's nominal allies will employ any excuse to keep the benefits flowing: even Afghanistan will do.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was long overdue. Central Asia is about as far from America as any place on earth and of largely theoretical geopolitical interest. An American presence in Afghanistan would be utterly indefensible in a great power conflict, surrounded by several global and regional powers: China, Russia, India, Iran, and Pakistan.

Who ruled Kabul has mattered to the US for only a few brief moments. After the 1979 Soviet invasion the US treated Afghanistan as a means to wound America's Cold War antagonist. There was no interest in the welfare of the Afghan people. Complaints that Washington did not stick around after Moscow withdrew a decade later were senseless: the US cared not at all about

"stability" then and the victorious Mujahedeen would have treated any interference by Washington the same way they treated Soviet intervention.

Afghanistan also was important in 2001 after 9/11. The US sought to destroy or incapacitate al-Qaeda for conducting the attack and the Taliban for hosting al-Qaeda. As the location of both, Afghanistan became the locus of US military action. However, Afghanistan offered no special advantage for the conduct of terrorism: 9/11 was planned, manned, funded, and conducted elsewhere. Within two months the George W. Bush administration had wrecked al-Qaeda and ousted the Taliban, with the latter willing to negotiate an end to the conflict.

The US could have withdrawn its forces, leaving Afghanistan's future to be determined by its own people. Although Washington thoughtlessly fueled the rise of Islamic extremism and violent jihadism while targeting the Soviet Union, the threat would have remained far different than what developed after invading Iraq and turning both conflicts into endless wars. Administration hubris and ignorance combined to devastating effect, ultimately sacrificing thousands of American and allied lives and hundreds of thousands of civilian lives, displacing tens of millions of people, ravaging entire countries, and wasting trillions of dollars.

Withdrawing from Afghanistan long ago would have helped staunch these losses. Withdrawing last month was better than waiting even longer. The administration botched the job, but blame is widely shared. Despite years of complaints about the how bureaucratic incompetence blocked issuance of visas to interpreters and others who had aided America, nothing changed, creating a huge backlog. Bureaucratic opponents of leaving even one endless war apparently were convinced that the new president would follow his predecessors in kicking the can down the road and did little to prepare.

Most important, two decades of costly effort under three different administrations sought to create an Afghan government and military in the image of Americans, not Afghans. The result was a faux state, corrupt, incompetent, self-serving, unpopular, faithless, and distrusted. After it failed to pay, supply, and reinforce the security forces, they failed to fight for it. The regime's collapse even before America's departure highlights the correctness of the administration's withdrawal decision. Only an endless occupation could sustain the regime, and that was no sure thing. Ultimately, the Kabul government was not worth an endless occupation.

Which left credibility as the last argument of the scoundrel for a war which should have ended long ago.

There are two branches of this claim. The first is that America's allies will no longer believe they can rely on the US, and will surrender at the first hostile shot. The second is that adversaries will believe they can run wild, taking over the world. Both arguments are silly. Leaving Afghanistan was small ball compared to many embarrassing incidents in American history. Consider the post-World War II record.

For instance, failing to free Poland from Soviet control in 1945, failing to bust the Soviet blockade of Berlin in 1948, failing to save the Chinese Nationalists in 1949, failing to rescue Hungarian revolutionaries against the Soviet Union in 1956, undercutting British and French allies in the Suez crisis the same year, failing to preserve Cuba's Batista government in 1959 and oust Fidel Castro thereafter, failing to support Czechoslovakia's liberal communist Dubcek government in 1968, withdrawing from Vietnam in 1973, failing to save the Cambodian

government in 1975, cutting off aid to the South Vietnamese government in 1975, failing to save Iran's shah in 1979, failing to preserve Nicaragua's Somoza dictatorship the same year, withdrawing from Lebanon's civil war in 1984, failing to go to Baghdad in 1991, failing to build on the 1993 Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestinians, failing to stop the 1994 Rwanda genocide, failing to halt killings and ethnic cleansing by and of Balkan Serbs, Croats, and Muslims in the mid-1990s, withdrawing US troops from Iraq in 2011, failing to enforce the Obama administration's 2012 "red line" against chemical attacks by Syria, failing to back up Kurdistan after its 2017 independence referendum, failing to defend Saudi Arabia in 2019 after the Iranian attack on Saudi oil facilities, and breaking any number of other official commitments and promises as well as informal undertakings and obligations.

In all, or at least most all, of these cases Washington made the right decision. The cost of fulfilling the presumed duty was too great. And the benefits of acting were too few. US policymakers correctly put the interests of Americans who would be dying or paying first.

Moreover, despite the exaggerated wailing and gnashing of teeth that typically accompanied such refusals to fulfill what some saw as Uncle Sam's word, nothing much happened. In general, America's relationships remained unchanged despite such incidents over the years. Allies still cooperated with Washington. Friendly combatants still cooperated with US troops. Friends still complained while doing nothing when America failed to fulfill imaginary obligations. Indeed, one could argue that the impact on other states was *too small*, since populous and prosperous Asian and European governments still leached off the American military rather than build up their own defenses. *None of these episodes* appeared to deter rampant cheap riding on US service members and taxpayers. Uncle Sam was still uniformly treated as Uncle Sucker.

Nor did adversaries take advantage of such incidents to launch blitzkriegs and amass empires. The U.S.S.R. did not overrun Europe. North Korea did not attack the South. Vietnam did not seize Thailand. China did not bombard, blockade, or invade Japan and the Philippines. Iran did not occupy Saudi Arabia. Russia did not capture Ukraine. There have been plenty of confrontations, firefights, and attacks around the world, but which resulted from lost American "credibility"? The problem was that the US went to war far too often, creating more problems than it solved, despite its many previous failures.

Indeed, the endless claims about credibility ignore the fact that allies and adversaries alike are able to judge differences in commitment, relationship, and interest. The US fought two wars over Europe, with which Americans have strong ties. A willingness to go another decade in Afghanistan, which is essentially a geopolitical irrelevancy to the US, matters not at all. Similarly, the status of South Korea and Japan matter much more to Washington than stability in Central Asia.

The credibility argument went from the sublime to the ridiculous when applied to Syria's Kurds, with whom America worked against the Islamic State. When President Donald Trump proposed bringing home US troops Washington's War Party erupted into cacophonous shock and outrage. America was over as a global power! Americans forevermore would have to hang their heads in shame! The American experiment was coming to a desultory end!

Yet from what stemmed this alleged sacred and vital commitment? The Kurds, not Americans, were directly threatened by ISIS, which was attempting to create a caliphate, or quasi-nation

state, which would have consumed what is called Rojava or Syrian Kurdistan. Washington *aided the Kurds*, who were not fighting as an act of charity, but to defend themselves.

The relationship was transactional, since the US – neither the president nor Congress – made any long-term defense commitment, and certainly not against neighboring Turkey, an American treaty ally. In fact, Washington's departure would have prioritized official ties, in this case formalized by the NATO treaty, which was ratified by Congress. The furor over Trump's proposal to leave Syria after fulfilling America's security objectives was purely political, reflecting attacks by Democratic partisans, who hoped to damage the president even when he did the right thing, and Republican uber-hawks, who supported every endless war, irrespective of the cost to America. If US credibility was at stake, it was only because Trump's critics claimed that it was.

Where credibility is genuinely at issue, promises and commitments should not be lightly made. The interests involved should be serious and the guarantees should be in America's interest. If these conditions are not met, theoretical concerns about credibility cannot justify sticking with a failed policy. Sacrificing wealth and, more important, lives in the name of the credibility chimera is not just bad policy. It is immoral policy.

Afghanistan ended tragically, but that was inevitable once Washington shifted from responding to 9/11 to imposing a Western-style government. If future policymakers are concerned about the impact on credibility, they should take that risk into account before making foolish, counterproductive commitments. Although America's credibility is likely to survive another bad exit, their own might not.

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