

China Beware: The Afghanistan Debacle Makes America More Dangerous

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The U.S. has had a bad military run recently. Rather than fight traditional wars and defeat conventional opponents, Washington attempted nation-building at gunpoint. That is a daunting task anywhere and at any point in time. Especially problematic was America's effort to transform Afghanistan, long heralded as the Graveyard of Empires.

Washington's two-decade campaign to do so collapsed ignominiously in mid-August. The Biden administration desperately hoped to avoid a "Saigon moment," characterized by last minute helicopter evacuations from the American embassy. Alas, the situation turned out much worse.

This triggered serious criticism of U.S. policy from Beijing and fears expressed about American credibility—some private, some public—by Washington's allies. Complaints have been particularly loud in Europe and the Middle East. America's Asian treaty allies, Japan and South Korea, also feel some angst, as well as Taiwan, where the government relies on the U.S. military for its defense, rather than invest in its own armed forces.

Unsurprisingly, the People's Republic of China sought to exacerbate Taipei's doubts, suggesting that the Afghan imbroglio demonstrates Washington's unreliability. However, the PRC should not believe its own propaganda. America is increasingly likely to eschew combat missions with little strategic importance. However, its willingness to drop failed commitments will make it stronger, and thus a more dangerous rival in the future.

Objectively, Central Asia matters little to America. It is as remote from the U.S. as any spot on earth. The area is crowded, including three great powers, India, Russia, and China, and two regional powers, Pakistan and Iran. Ironically, the primary international impact of America's recent presence was to relieve Afghanistan's neighbors of responsibility for its stability.

Washington was drawn in only because of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and al-Qaeda's location there. The U.S. sought to degrade the capabilities of al-Qaeda, which could operate anywhere, and punish the Taliban, sending a broader message to governments not to host terrorist organizations. These objectives were accomplished within two months and were important achievements.

However, the Bush administration, ignorant of the Middle East, convinced of its own righteousness, determined to remake the Islamic world, and filled with hubris, invaded Iraq and shifted to nation-building in Afghanistan. Later came Washington's involvement in Libya and Syria's civil wars and support for Saudi Arabia's aggressive war against Yemen. The consequences of these "endless wars" were catastrophic and continue to live on two decades later.

Without question Washington's overreach, incompetence, and arrogance cost America dearly: thousands of dead, tens of thousands of wounded, hundreds of thousands of foreign citizens killed, millions more displaced, trillions of dollars wasted, several nations ravaged by war, and a shattered reputation. Yet Washington's most hawkish political factions in both major political parties insisted that the U.S. continue these campaigns. All the while also preparing to confront the PRC in Asia.

Ironically, then, though America's departure from Afghanistan hurt Washington's reputation, it greatly improved the U.S. geopolitical position. First, Washington no longer will waste troops and money in Central Asia, an area America never could dominate. At the same time, Beijing will have to look to its own interests, including countering terrorism threats.

Second, Washington likely will continue to reduce intervention in Muslim nations which previously stoked hatred of and encouraged terrorism against America. As China long ago recognized by avoiding the multiple military misadventures which have consumed so many American lives and so much American wealth, staying out of other nations' fights is the best way to husband resources for more important challenges.

Third, President Joe Biden, having made a strong campaign pitch to repair America's alliances, will be sensitive to the concerns of friendly nations, especially Japan, Australia, and South Korea, about Washington's commitment. These states are much more important to the U.S. than Afghanistan; moreover, the relationships are much deeper and go back much further. The administration likely will look for public ways to demonstrate both connection and resolve. Taiwan also could receive similar attention, given its support among Republican legislators and the Biden administration's attempt to appear tough toward the PRC.

Fourth, countries made nervous by Washington's Afghan exit might feel pressure to invest more in their own militaries and work more closely together to respond to perceived security threats. Tokyo already features an ongoing debate about cooperating with Taiwan. Several governments might take further action against what they perceive to be challenges by Beijing.

Finally, and perhaps most important, are the political implications of the Afghan controversy. Although a majority of Americans still support the administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan, they are less convinced that the president handled it well. He is likely to be extremely sensitive to any hint of international weakness, especially involving China.

Republican Party attacks will only increase as America moves toward next year's congressional elections. Regarding international affairs, Biden is more likely to take hardline negotiating positions and back them with military threats. Certainly, the administration does not want war, but might accept increased risks of confrontation.

Indeed, the greatest danger might come from both sides taking intransigent stances in an attempt to improve negotiating leverage. That tactic seems most likely for less settled relationships, most notably Taiwan. In such an environment, extraordinary care should be taken to avoid conflict.

Beijing initially greeted Washington's Afghan debacle with satisfaction. Especially when added to America's disastrous performance in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion, Afghanistan's collapse appeared to weaken the U.S. However, eliminating an unnecessary military commitment actually eases Washington's global task. And Washington politics will put a premium on demonstrations of strength and steadfastness.

Thus, China and the U.S. must continue working to resolve disputes and minimize chances of conflict. The benefits of continued peace overwhelm any possible gains through war. This fact should be the most important lesson learned from the tragedy called Afghanistan.

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