

RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

So where's all of the 'diplomacy' we've been talking about?

The heavy lifting — opening channels with adversaries — doesn't yet seem to be happening in the new era of Biden foreign policy.

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A few weeks have passed since the dramatic collapse of America's two-decade long war in Afghanistan, and the painful failure already is in Washington's rear-view mirror. The Biden administration wants to forget its messy withdrawal; Republicans are focused on scoring political points. The American people largely forgot the war years ago.

However, America's interest in Central Asia has changed, not disappeared. Perhaps the most important question facing the U.S. now is how to deal with the Taliban going forward. Reports indicate that the first real talks between Washington and the former insurgents took place over the weekend. The U.S. confirmed that the two sides discussed "the United States' provision of robust humanitarian assistance, directly to the Afghan people." That's good. The Taliban rules Afghanistan. That may change in the future: the movement might fracture, opposition might burgeon, neighboring states might intervene. But today any American operations there will require the Taliban's approval or acquiescence — or risk triggering renewed conflict.

Hence the need for diplomatic relations with the new government. For some inveterate hawks, the idea is anathema. For instance, Rep. Mike Waltz and Sen. Lindsey Graham advocated supporting the (since vanquished) resistance centered in the Panjshir Valley: "After speaking with Afghan Vice President Amrullah Saleh and representatives of Ahmad Massoud, we are calling on the Biden Administration to recognize these leaders as the legitimate government

representatives of Afghanistan. We ask the Biden Administration to recognize that the Afghan Constitution is still intact, and the Afghan Taliban takeover is illegal.”

That may be true. Just as Hanoi’s takeover of the Republic of Vietnam was illegal. And Fidel Castro’s overthrow of the Republic of Cuba was illegal. And the Chinese Communist Party takeover of the Republic of China was illegal. And the Bolshevik takeover of the Russian Provisional Government was illegal. And the overthrow of the Kingdom of France by an amalgam of revolutionaries was illegal. Alas, legality often has little to do with legitimacy or reality.

A better reasoned argument would be to set conditions for recognition. In the case of Afghanistan, that could include opposing terrorism, respecting human rights, treating women equally, and more. However, any demand would have to be realistic. The Taliban won and is not going to act like it lost. The movement is not going to abandon members’ deeply held religious beliefs. Moreover, other governments, including Pakistan and China, almost certainly will recognize the new authorities in Kabul. For the Taliban, Washington’s acceptance is valuable, not essential.

Moreover, diplomatic relations would benefit America. The U.S. is better off talking even to the unreconstructed Taliban than not, just as Washington dealt with the Soviets and other discreditable regimes during the Cold War. Refusing to recognize the Taliban would punish the U.S. government as much as the new Afghan authorities.

A better bargaining chip would be the old government’s frozen financial assets as well as the prospect of humanitarian and economic assistance. Such programs are purely discretionary and offer no intrinsic benefit to Washington. Better to offer to pay the Taliban for good behavior than threaten to refuse to negotiate with it.

The same principle applies to other countries. The U.S. long did not have official relations with Cuba and currently has no formal diplomatic ties with Iran, Syria, and North Korea.

For instance, the U.S. broke relations with Cuba in 1961 after the communist revolution. Washington long maintained an “interests section,” which was upgraded to an embassy by President Barack Obama in 2015. (Much of the staff was later removed in the controversy over possible sonic attacks, though whatever their nature, which remains disputed, they almost

certainly did not originate with the Cuban government, which negotiated reestablishment of diplomatic relations.)

That is, for 54 years the United States had no normal diplomatic ties with an island nation about 100 miles off its coast. During that time Washington bitterly criticized property expropriation, domestic repression, and emigration restrictions. There were more mundane disputes over issues such as harboring U.S. fugitives. Havana was a major foreign policy foe, promoting subversion in Latin America, intervening militarily in Africa, and aligning with the Soviet Union. Indeed, Washington went through a full-blown nuclear crisis with Moscow over Cuba. Yet America and Cuba largely refused to talk with one another. This unproductive policy was profoundly stupid.

In the case of Iran, Washington severed diplomatic relations with Tehran in 1980. That made sense in the aftermath of the embassy takeover, which could be interpreted as the new revolutionary regime ostentatiously ending contact. However, that Iran disappeared long ago. The current regime is a tyranny, but not stupid or reckless. In recent years Tehran and Washington have clashed over many important issues—dubious detention of Americans, support for so-called proxy forces, involvement in Syria and Yemen, attack on Saudi oil facilities, conflict with Israel, and, of course, nuclear program. (Iran has its own concerns, starting with Washington’s “maximum pressure” campaign.) In none of these cases were the two governments able to talk routinely and regularly. Although the anti-Iran lobby in Washington treats isolating Tehran as an end in itself, doing so does not serve American interests.

U.S.-Syria relations came to an end in 2012 when the U.S. sent Syrian diplomats home. Then Washington recognized the Syrian opposition as the legitimate government. That was not true then and certainly is not now. Although Bashar al-Assad’s rule is odious, nothing is served by the failure of Washington and Damascus to talk. The U.S. is dedicated to regime change, applying bone-crushing sanctions on the impoverished population to prevent reconstruction, effectively occupying upwards of a third of the country’s territory, and supporting jihadist insurgents formerly affiliated with al-Qaeda. It is an incoherent, inconsistent, ineffective, even idiotic policy that could only be improved by opening a communication channel—if nothing else over Americans imprisoned in Syria.

Finally, there is North Korea. The Biden administration is desperate to restart nuclear negotiations with Pyongyang. Washington has had plenty of issues to discuss with the North over the years, including a cold war occasionally turned hot—highlighted by the seizure of the USS Pueblo, nuclear and missile development, conventional military threats, sanctions violations, and

detention of American citizens. Although there is good reason to doubt the North's willingness to yield its entire nuclear arsenal, Ki Jong-un seems more determined to negotiate, interested in economic development, and inclined toward international engagement than his father and grandfather.

Diplomatic relations would offer other benefits, including an eye into a highly isolated society and opportunity to develop more regular diplomatic relationships, as well as press heretofore difficult subjects, such as human rights. There would be no practical downside, since the North Korean government will continue to exist whether or not there are embassies in the two capitals.

Diplomacy is no panacea. Negotiation guarantees no result. However, international communication is more important between antagonistic powers than friendly ones. Imagine if the Soviet Union and U.S. did not have relations and diplomats ready to negotiate during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the alternative, imagine if the U.S. and People's Republic of China had relations and diplomats ready to negotiate in the lead up to the PRC's intervention in the Korean War.

Washington should move forward, not backward, and establish diplomatic relations with the new government in Kabul. Doing so would not legitimize the new regime. Rather, it would reflect a commitment to communicate and negotiate, an attempt to mitigate the ill consequences of the Taliban takeover.

Then the Biden administration could restore relations with other adversarial powers. Talking with Iran, Syria, and North Korea would reduce the likelihood of ending up in a conflict with any of them. And that would be reason alone to act.

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