

The Silver Lining of the Afghanistan Withdrawal: Afghanistan is No Longer Simply a US Problem

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Washington's tragic misadventure in Afghanistan is over. Despite the botched ending, America's withdrawal was long overdue. Central Asia never warranted so much U.S. attention.

Afghanistan first drew Washington in after the Soviets invaded. Few Americans knew where the country was. None expressed an interest in building a modern nation there. The idea was simple: arm Afghans to kill Moscow's soldiers, thereby weakening what President Ronald Reagan accurately called the Evil Empire. Spread democracy and equal rights for women? Not so much.

A decade later the U.S.S.R.'s legions fled back into the Soviet Union. A couple years after that the Soviet-supported state collapsed, which was followed by a civil war among the victorious Mujahedeen. Washington had poured torrents of cash into Afghanistan, but foolishly allowed Pakistan to dole it out. This empowered radical jihadists, including Osama bin Laden, founder of al-Qaeda, Jalaluddin Haqqani, founder of the anti-Western Haqqani Network, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, founder of the radical Islamist Hezb-e-Islami, the Party of Islam. Some Americans complained that Washington didn't stick around to "help" the Afghans. Had it done so, Americans would have been treated like Russians—shot at on their way out.

In 1994 a group called the Taliban arose. It enforced a 7th century fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. By 1996, it won control of most of the country by suppressing the Mujahedeen, and ending the chaotic violence which enveloped the country. The Taliban looked inward.

Taking advantage of his hosts' hospitality, bin Laden orchestrated 9/11. Afghanistan as a country was irrelevant to the plot—which was planned, funded, and manned elsewhere. The chief organizer, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, lived almost everywhere except Afghanistan, to which he refused to relocate. In the future, transnational terrorists, in contrast to garden variety Islamist fighters, are more likely to operate outside Afghanistan than within it. However, the U.S. had to smash al-Qaeda and punish the Kabul government for hosting the terrorist group. These missions were completed within two months, and Washington could have left.

The result would have been messy, probably a fractured country with power shared by squabbling ethnic groups and warlords, but it was much that way even with the U.S.-backed Kabul government nominally atop it all. It turns out the U.S. created a political system and

security force for allied governments, not the Afghan people, and the regime collapsed as soon as Western troops headed for the exits. Urban residents enjoyed the chief benefits of America's presence. Rural dwellers, in contrast, paid most of the price of the war—especially in human life—and were tired of fighting. A village elder told the *Wall Street Journal*: “Now, there is peace. And when someone doesn't feel danger, doesn't fear war, and can walk with a peace of mind, he is happy even if he is hungry.”

Today Afghanistan's future is out of Washington's hands, which, contra received wisdom, is all to the good. Americans were paying, in blood and money, in the attempt to stabilize a distant nation. Afghanistan was and is of little geopolitical importance to the U.S, and is surrounded by major foreign powers, several hostile to America. Now all of Afghanistan's potential problems—civil war, terrorism, implosion, mass refugees, humanitarian crisis, jihadist magnet—*belong to other nations*.

In theory the future is up to the Afghan people, but not really. Playing an important role will be Afghanistan's neighbors, which should have been doing so all along. The country borders six nations and is greatly impacted by two others nearby. Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan share lengthy boundaries. The Afghan border with China is quite short, but militants also can enter the People's Republic of China from Afghanistan through Tajikistan. Russia and India are more distant, but as major powers have much at stake in Afghanistan.

Russia's experience is substantial and painful, highlighted by some 15,000 Soviet military personnel killed and another 35,000 wounded. Many of those casualties came courtesy of the United States, which funded and armed the resistance. Stinger missiles were particularly effective at downing Soviet aircraft and helicopters, limiting Moscow's advantage in the air.

Nevertheless, Vladimir Putin was the first foreign leader to express solidarity with the U.S. after the 9/11 attacks and in the early years provided logistical support for American forces. However, as Washington responded to Russian action against Ukraine, with military support for Kiev and sanctions on Moscow, the Putin government established ties with the Taliban. Although the claim of Russian payments to kill U.S. personnel lacked foundation, Moscow reportedly has strongly urged “the Stans,” the five countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union, to deny America any base rights.

Now, however, Moscow, which has suffered both terrorism and insurgency resulting from violent Islamic radicalism tied to Chechnya, must deal with its old Afghan enemy, fundamentalist Islam. Russia already has moved troops into Tajikistan, which borders Afghanistan. Although the Putin government does not want to get reinolved militarily, it will respond to any export of Islamic radicalism and violence.

Even as Beijing publicly celebrated America's shambolic ouster from Afghanistan, Chinese Communist Party officials were contemplating a more dangerous future. The PRC generally values stability above all else in its neighbors, and has suffered from Islamic terrorist attacks in the western province of Xinjiang, adjoining Afghanistan, sparking the imprisonment of much of its Uyghur population in reeducation camps.

After Kabul's fall there was much official kvetching how the U.S. now had an obligation to continue pouring aid into Afghanistan to fix what was broken, an obvious nonstarter. In fact, Taliban officials made a pilgrimage to China even before they had won control of Kabul. They

publicly promised to ignore the plight of Afghanistan's Islamic brethren and prevent foreign fighters from targeting the PRC while Beijing offered reconstruction aid.

Indeed, mineral development and infrastructure projects, through the Belt and Road Initiative, might beckon. Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman, expressed the new Afghan government's desire for Chinese investment and trade. However, China is not known for its charitable activities and will press the new regime in Kabul to fulfill its promises. Despite its current antagonism toward the U.S., Beijing does not want Afghanistan to become a locus of terrorist attacks on the West, which would spark retaliation and put at risk any BRI or other commercial projects.

Although India does not share a border with Afghanistan, it long has suffered from terrorism fostered by the Pakistani military and intelligence service, if not government. Indeed, one reason Islamabad used American money to subsidize the most radical Mujahedeen groups was to build strategic depth against India. New Delhi had good relations with the U.S.-backed government, and now faces a more difficult situation with the Taliban, which it long viewed as Pakistan's "terrorist proxy." India particularly worries about increased terrorist threats in its majority-Muslim province of Kashmir. Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, a former Indian ambassador to Afghanistan, observed that the latter "may be poised to become a bottomless hole for all shades of radical, extremist and jihadi outfits somewhat similar to Iraq and Syria, only closer to India." India is likely to devote significant effort to containing any terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan.

Iran, a majority Shia country, also fears the ascension of the Sunni Taliban. Tehran initially supported the U.S. intervention, changing its position only after suffering from Washington's lengthy economic war. Now, however, Iran is like the dog which catches the car and isn't sure what to do. Iran's lengthy border with Afghanistan has potentially turned hostile.

The Taliban might crack down on cross border economic ties and be less vigilant in preventing Sunni militants from entering Iran. Observed [Kevin Lim](#) of IHS Markit, "As much as Iran has supported the Taliban in recent years, worrisome scenarios for Tehran include the Taliban turning against Iran or Afghanistan's Shiite minority as well as the specter of Sunni jihadism metastasizing westward." Islamic State-Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K, could prove particularly problematic, since its parent group has prodigiously killed Shiites as well as non-Muslims.

Although Pakistan is the neighbor that seems most likely to profit from the Taliban victory, it also has concerns. Indeed, Faiz Hameed, head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency, or ISI, which essentially backed the Taliban against the Afghan government and U.S., led a delegation to Kabul earlier this month. With the Taliban now in power and possessing a large arsenal generously provided by America, Islamabad has lost most of its leverage over the former insurgents.

Despite past cooperation, the Taliban has never accepted the so-called [Durand Line](#), which separates the two nations, and has objected to Pakistani plans to erect a fence along the border. Moreover, Pakistan suffers from continuing conflict with the radical Pakistani Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP, which is headquartered in Afghanistan. The Wilson Center's [Michael Kugelman](#) warned, "The TTP, like most Islamist militants in the region, was galvanized by the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. It will be inspired to step up attacks in Pakistan." Islamabad now will have to contain terrorism emanating from its supposed friend next door.

Finally, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan border Afghanistan. There are many ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks in Afghanistan. As part of the so-called Northern Alliance, these groups led the resistance to the Taliban before the U.S. intervened, and they were mainstays of U.S.-backed government and security forces. The Stans, uniformly authoritarian regimes wary of the slightest increase in militant activity, likely will be vigilant in attempting to quarantine Afghanistan if they see an influx of foreign fighters.

None of this eliminates American concerns over the consequences of Afghanistan's fall. However, the Taliban is no longer just Washington's problem. Now a bevy of other governments will have to do their part to contain any threats, in contrast to relying on America to do their job for them.

Afghanistan will remain a tragedy, especially for the people living there. However, the U.S. cannot fix the world. Washington should leave Central Asia's problems to surrounding states. And Americans should focus on reviving their country.

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