



Why US Foreign Clients Collapse – and Collapse Fast

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Americans who watched the collapse of South Vietnam's government during the early months of 1975 are experiencing déjà vu in response to the Taliban offensive in Afghanistan. In a matter of weeks after the United States began withdrawing its troops from the country, Afghan government forces have disintegrated with bewildering speed. Indeed, South Vietnam's army managed an orderly retreat compared to the rout in Afghanistan. President Ashraf Ghani, has fled to Tajikistan, effectively confirming the Taliban's definitive triumph. Days earlier, U.S. leaders were reduced to begging Taliban fighters to spare the US embassy as Washington anticipated the fall of the capital, Kabul.

In America, the blame game about "who lost Afghanistan" is well underway, with many of the usual hawkish suspects accusing President Biden and anyone else who didn't want the United States to stay in the country until the end of time of having caused the current debacle. A more searching, honest assessment is essential. Washington has a long history of supporting foreign clients who lack staying power (to put it mildly). Many of the same recriminations now being directed against the Biden administration were leveled against Harry Truman's administration for "losing" China to the communist revolution in 1949.

But China was never ours to lose, and neither was Afghanistan. Those unpleasant outcomes took place because the clients Washington chose to back were disorganized, corrupt, and frequently inept. That certainly was the case with Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang regime in China, and virtually no serious historian now disputes the point. The situation in Afghanistan was distressingly similar, as the domestic "leaders" Washington backed spent more time engaged in highly profitable drug trafficking and the pocketing of US aid money than they did trying to create and fortify institutions that could attract widespread public support and keep the Taliban at bay.

Those two episodes are hardly the only cases in which the United States has tried to prop-up foreign clients who lacked meaningful domestic support. The collapse of the Shah of Iran's hold on power in 1979 was nearly as fast as the demise of the regimes in China and Afghanistan, and US policymakers were similarly caught by surprise. Although CIA analysts in the field had identified some very worrisome trends in Iran, the official analysis barely a year previously was that the Shah's status was secure.

Washington's attempts to back pro-U.S. foreign movements against incumbent regimes have amassed a similar dismal track record. Under the so-called Reagan Doctrine in the 1980s, the United States funded and equipped a number of anti-communist rebel organizations that were trying to oust left-wing regimes in the Third World. The most prominent cases included the Contras in Nicaragua and Jonas Savimbi's UNITA faction in Angola. Both of those insurgencies ultimately failed to take power. In only one case was Washington's support for an insurgency successful during that era – backing the mujahidin against the Soviet Union's occupation forces in Afghanistan. However, that outcome was especially ironic, since many of the mujahidin alumni later showed up in the Taliban. Moreover, the collapse of Moscow's client regime in Afghanistan foreshadowed what would happen to America's client in that country. In both cases, a government that a foreign power helped install and prop-up eventually collapsed because of a lack of meaningful domestic roots.

Perhaps the most pathetic case was the Obama administration's attempt to create a secular, democratic rebel faction to fight against Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. The apparent motive was uneasiness among some U.S. officials about continuing to back anti-Assad factions that were disturbingly Islamist in their orientation. The administration formally embraced the strategy to identify, train and equip an entirely new force in June 2014, asking Congress to authorize \$500 million. Officials would spend all of those funds over the next 14 months.

Contrary to administration expectations that the Pentagon's new train and equip venture would produce thousands of loyal fighters for a democratic Syria, only 54 graduates emerged to create a moderate bulwark within the anti-Assad rebellion. By September 2015, administration officials had to inform the Senate that only "four or five" fighters remained actively in the field. The Syria train and equip effort proved to be even more wasteful and ineffectual than most government programs.

Such multiple, disappointing experiences should create an indelible lesson for future US policymakers. The United States usually cannot successfully identify and install capable governments in foreign countries. That point is especially true in societies that are vastly different from American culture in nearly every aspect. We can't fully comprehend such key factors as their unique histories, religions, economics, and politics. In short, we don't understand such alien cultures and cannot even begin to shape them effectively to serve Washington's foreign policy objectives. US leaders keep choosing clients who make statements that echo American values. Even in the rare cases when such clients are sincere, they typically have little domestic support and even less ability to organize their faction effectively. The Afghanistan fiasco is just the latest confirmation of that reality.

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