

A Half Century Of Conflict Is Enough

Washington should not promote another Afghan civil war.

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Afghanistan has enjoyed little more than a month of peace and U.S. policymakers are proposing to plunge that nation back into civil war. Thousands or tens of thousands more Afghans might die in a conflict that began before most of them were born.

Of course, that is just fine with denizens of the nation's capital. After all, being a member of the Washington war party means getting to decide that "the price is worth it" and never having to say you are sorry no matter how many people die. You can start multiple wars that kill hundreds of thousands and displace millions of civilians and never pay a professional price. You can advocate bombing, invading, occupying, and ravaging country after country, and you will still be treated as a respected member of the Washington community, invited to the most influential capital salons.

You can fail again and again, and you will still be asked for policy proposals and political assessments. No matter how much harm you caused when others followed your advice, you will still be a valued guest for TV interviews, webinars, and think tank panels. Irrespective of the total casualty count on your retirement, sage political veterans and newly minted policy analysts alike will still seek your opinion on the crises you created.

Some members of the war forever crowd are now trying to revive conflict in Afghanistan. While safe, secure, and satiated in the nation's capital, they are pushing the Biden administration to aid and arm a new set of insurgents against the victorious Taliban.

Unsurprisingly, at the forefront is Sen. Lindsey Graham, who has supported every recent war and a few that thankfully didn't occur. He infamously demanded attacks against Libya's Muammar Gaddafi shortly after supping with the latter in Tripoli and discussing the provision of U.S. assistance to reward Libya's efforts against terrorism. Even worse was Graham's endorsement of nuclear war on the Korean peninsula, since it would not be "over here."

Now he has jumped on the Afghan war bandwagon. Along with Rep. Mike Waltz, he issued a statement of support for the tattered remains of the U.S.-created Potemkin Afghan state: "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.” Moreover, the solons called “on President Biden to designate the Afghan Taliban as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, and we urge him to publicly support Congressional efforts to stand with our friends in the Panjshir Valley who will serve as a bulwark against regional terror.”

However, Massoud isn’t wasting time standing on the Afghan constitution. Rather, he adopted the ways of Washington and hired a lobbyist. Massoud also is pressing other countries for support. And it is all about Massoud, the son of a famous mujahideen commander assassinated by Osama bin Laden. Even though Massoud lacks position or authority, his American representative, Ali Nazary, insisted: “No entity could receive legitimacy without the support, endorsement of his excellency Ahmad Massoud, because he is the source of legitimacy today.” There is as yet no evidence that the majority of, or even many, Afghans feel the same way.

It would be good to sweep away the Taliban. But who would replace them? How likely is that to happen? And what do the heretofore largely ignored Afghan people want? The answers are not reassuring for the advocates of endless war.

First, who would take over from the Taliban? In theory, almost anyone would be better. That approach, however, hasn’t worked out so well since 2001.

Saleh, the vice president of a regime that dissolved after almost its entire military defected? Massoud, the previously unheralded son of a military commander killed two decades ago in a different era? Unlamented past political figures, such as former president Hamid Karzai and twice losing presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah? The corrupt, murderous warlords with whom Washington long allied?

Afghanistan needs someone competent and honest, intelligent and capable, and ready to lead that troubled nation into the future. Simply tagging whoever happens to be available and hoping everything works out is more likely to entrench than oust the Taliban. Afghans are unlikely to rally around yet another warlord backed by the same outside power that just failed so disastrously.

Second, how to overthrow the Taliban? It is well-armed, courtesy the Afghan security forces, which surrendered, sold out, fled, or otherwise left their American-supplied arsenal to the conquerors. Only the Panjshir Valley did not immediately fall to the Taliban and has since been occupied. At the moment there is no serious organized resistance to the new regime. Nor is rural Afghanistan fertile ground for more fighting.

Of course, the country’s relative calm is not likely to last. The Taliban itself is more a collection of traditionalists and Islamists of various hues than a unified movement, with many fighters more radical than their leaders. What held the Taliban together was opposition to the collection of incompetent thieves in the pay of foreigners who together were running the country. There apparently has already been one violent altercation between different factions at the presidential

palace. The more cosmopolitan Taliban elements, which negotiated with the U.S. in Doha, appear to have been relegated to secondary roles. Promises of more liberal rule, even if sincerely made by some, have been ignored by those in charge.

Panjshir residents who previously resisted the Soviets and Taliban are unlikely to prove docile subjects of the new regime. Much of the Taliban's success elsewhere came through deals with disaffected members of the previous government's army. Their discontent will grow and stoke resistance as the new rulers attempt to micromanage Afghans' lives. Although the Taliban fighters now patrolling cities believe they represent Allah, residents disagree and have been unruly, protesting their intolerant new overlords. Major cities such as Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif have been occupied by largely Pashtun insurgents but remain home to ethnic minorities such as the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, who constituted the Northern Alliance and battled the Taliban before America's arrival. Over time antagonism to the new regime is likely to build and spread.

Nevertheless, Washington should resist the temptation to intervene again, despite the natural desire to "do something" to redress the humiliation of failure. Even analysts who consider covert action a serious option counsel caution. The potential problems are many.

The first questions are, support who and to what end? The Carter and Reagan administrations understandably focused on the basic objective of winning the Cold War by backing the mujahideen. But the unintended result was to enrich vile and violent warlords, who oppressed and mulcted those around them, and empower the most intolerant, hostile, and threatening Islamists, who eventually imposed their terrible vision on others and staged 9/11.

Moreover, how likely is the deeply divided and as yet de minimis opposition to win? The objective should be to institute new and better government, not trigger endless war. Yet a foreign-backed attempt to drive out the Taliban would unify that fractious movement. Fueling a new war would cause the Taliban to drop any attempt to restrain radicals, whether Al Qaeda, ISIS, or others hoping to strike the U.S. And fomenting war likely would put Washington at odds with most if not all of Afghanistan's neighbors, who today most desire stability and peace. Underwriting new insurgencies would shift blame for any ensuing violence from the Taliban to America.

Third and most important after almost a half century of war is the question: What do the Afghan people, especially those who would be most affected by a Western-supported insurgency, want? Warned Charli Carpenter of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst:

A renewed Syria-style civil war would pose a far greater danger to civilian life. The average civil war lasts 10 years and kills hundreds of thousands of civilians directly from violence and indirectly from disease, deprivation and other forms of conflict-related insecurity. Civil wars tend to spread across borders: We know from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's research on civil wars that internationalized civil wars are the fastest-growing category of violent conflict in the international system. And while civil wars kill far more civilians than terrorism, they also help terrorist groups thrive, which means those who fear escalating jihadism should also be concerned first and foremost with conflict prevention.

Not that such effects have bothered American policymakers in the past. For decades the U.S. government treated the Afghan people as disposable means to achieve larger geopolitical ends. Washington initiated covert war to defeat the Soviet Union. Then America largely averted its gaze as Afghans killed one another in the ensuing civil war.

The U.S. came back after 9/11 to again promote its security ends. Rather than leave after wrecking Al Qaeda and punishing the Taliban, however, Washington decided to create a democratic, centralized government where none before existed, supposedly for the Afghans. But the allies concocted institutions in their image, not that of the Afghan people. The resulting Potemkin state generated little loyalty—not from urban elites employed by it but who failed to fight for it, rural residents who disliked the Taliban but tired even more of endless war, and security forces hired to defend the Kabul government but whose members felt abandoned by officials busy enriching themselves. Explained Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution, “In the end, few Afghans believed in a government they never felt was theirs.”

Equally important, the 70 percent of the population who lived in the countryside and suffered nearly 100 percent of the fighting tired of the killing. Journalist Anand Gopal discussed the life of Shakira, a 40-something Afghan woman:

Entire branches of Shakira’s family, from the uncles who used to tell her stories to the cousins who played with her in the caves, vanished. In all, she lost sixteen family members. I wondered if it was the same for other families in Pan Killay. I sampled a dozen households at random in the village, and made similar inquiries in other villages, to insure that Pan Killay was not outlier. For each family, I documented the names of the dead, cross-checking cases with death certificates and eyewitness testimony. On average, I found, each family lost ten to twelve civilians in what locals call the American War.

This scale of suffering was unknown in a bustling metropolis like Kabul, where citizens enjoyed relative security. But in countryside enclaves like Sangin the ceaseless killings of civilians led many Afghans to gravitate toward the Taliban. By 2010, many households in Ishaqzai villages had sons in the Taliban, most of whom had joined simply to protect themselves or to take revenge; the movement was more thoroughly integrated into Sangin life than it had been in the nineties. Now, when Shakira and her friends discussed the Taliban, they were discussing their own friends, neighbors, and loved ones.

Baktash Ahadi, an interpreter for U.S. forces, also noted the disparity in Afghan experiences with U.S. forces: “Virtually the only contact most Afghans had with the West came via heavily armed and armored combat troops. Americans thus mistook the Afghan countryside for a mere theater of war, rather than as a place where people actually lived. U.S. forces turned villages into battlegrounds, pulverizing mud homes and destroying livelihoods. One could almost hear the Taliban laughing as any sympathy for the West evaporated in bursts of gunfire.” Ultimately, Washington’s failure reflected Ahadi’s simple yet devastating conclusion that, however “outlandish” it might seem to Americans, “When comparing the Taliban with the United States and its Western allies, the vast majority of Afghans have always viewed the Taliban as the lesser of two evils.”

In contrast, consider the picture that most Americans had of the Afghan collapse. At the time Gopal related to MSNBC:

Right now, all the coverage is in Kabul, so one would think there is complete chaos in the country. But most of that chaos is just around the airport, and most of Kabul itself is calm. And then life outside Kabul is calm, and for the first time, outside of Kabul there's no war, which, if you talk to men and women in the countryside, especially in those areas that had faced heavy fighting, that's the most significant difference that they've seen, compared to what was there before.

Similarly, wrote Wall Street Journal reporter Yaroslav Trofimov after Kabul's fall:

In Afghanistan's rural districts like Baraki Barak, where Taliban rules don't differ that much from existing conservative customs, the calculation is different, particularly in the mostly Pashtun southern and eastern provinces. To villagers here, the collapse of the Afghan republic and the U.S. withdrawal mean, above all, that the guns have fallen silent for the first time in two decades.

After years of conflict rural people could go about their lives without being afraid of arbitrary death at the hands of foreigners and their local agents. No wonder so many Afghans craved peace. John Allen and Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution emphasized that "peace is an absolute priority for some rural women, even a peace deal very much on the Taliban terms." Americans should not be surprised that the Taliban, unloved but representing the end of constant war, returned to power.

The Afghan fight has barely ended, but the Republican sirens of war are back, demanding that Washington stoke the flames of conflict again. The American people should respect the interests of the long-suffering Afghan people and say no. U.S. policymakers should treat Afghans as people, not things. Americans should leave Afghanistan to the Afghans. There is no perfect outcome, but after nearly a half century of fighting it is time to give peace a chance.

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