

It's Time For Diplomacy With Afghanistan

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There is a new government in Kabul. The U.S. should acknowledge reality and talk to Afghanistan's rulers. The Taliban will never be a friend of America, but the movement need not remain at war with the U.S.

After a decade of fighting in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union left behind a regime that survived for three years, falling only after the Soviet collapse ended financial and fuel shipments. In contrast, Washington devoted two decades, thousands of lives, and trillions of dollars to create a corrupt, incompetent Potemkin government that didn't even survive America's departure. Such was the end of the neocon nation-building project in Central Asia. The U.S. made a government that the American establishment, not the Afghan people, wanted, and it suffered the consequences.

The new government in Kabul looks a lot like the old Taliban regime, which American-backed forces ousted after 9/11. Although the Taliban leadership learned the importance of propaganda and the existence of modern technology, the movement's promise of moderation went aglimmering. Unreconstructed Islamic warriors from the seventh century won the war and, unsurprisingly, plan to rule.

Naturally the militaristic right, led by Sen. Lindsey Graham, who backed conventional war against Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, and nuclear war against North Korea, wants to revive the civil war in Afghanistan. For Washington's war lobby, Afghans are but a means to a policy end, relevant only in designing U.S. strategy. However, this effort appears doomed, at least in the near-term. Armed opposition to the Taliban today is minimal. The Afghan people, who have suffered through more than four decades of war, are less enthused than Washington elites about keeping the conflict alive. Especially Afghans living in rural areas, who suffered most from endless combat.

Wrote Anand Gopal in the *New Yorker*: “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.” Unless Graham and other wannabe warriors suit up and head to Central Asia, Afghans are likely to insist on maintaining the peace. The U.S. should indicate its desire to return diplomatic personnel to Kabul and negotiate security arrangements with the Taliban. Washington should start small with minimal staff and few expectations but establish regular communication with the new regime. The Taliban’s treatment of America’s representatives would be a good test of its interest in joining the larger international order.

Over time, the U.S. should pursue a broader agenda, if practicable. An official presence might help Americans and friendly Afghans who missed the recent airlift to leave. A dialogue might reinforce pressure from other nations, such as China, to eschew support for terrorist groups. Engagement would help assess the possibility of providing humanitarian assistance to a population in such great need.

A diplomatic presence also would enhance intelligence efforts. Washington lost its eyes on the ground and contact with friendly sources. Simple observations about the regime’s behavior in Kabul would be useful. Depending on security, U.S. personnel could venture outside of the capital and, hopefully, cooperate with a larger allied contingent over time.

Most important, however, would be having an established channel for discussing important issues in an emergency. It is a sign of American arrogance that the U.S. routinely treats recognition as a reward. This view is belied by history.

During the Cold War, the U.S. and Soviet Union maintained embassies in each other’s capitals and engaged in constant negotiations on issues ranging from security to commerce to human rights. Bilateral communication was vital in resolving the Cuban Missile Crisis, during which President John F. Kennedy considered invading the island, which likely would have triggered war, and possibly nuclear conflict.

In contrast, the lack of diplomatic relations with China around the same time cost America dearly. In fall 1950, U.S.-led United Nations forces pursued remnants of the North Korean army after intervening to halt Kim Il-sung’s June invasion. Victory seemed in sight as allied troops approached the Yalu River, the border with the recently established People’s Republic of China.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur ignored growing signs of Chinese involvement and insisted that American soldiers would be home by Christmas. Then PRC troops struck, leading him to proclaim that “we face an entirely new war.” The conflict continued for another two and a half years.

China’s decision to enter the war was complicated and reflected misperceptions on both sides. The confusion was amplified by the lack of official contacts between the

U.S. and Chinese governments. Beijing unsuccessfully attempted to warn Washington against the latter's move toward the Yalu through India. No direct communication channels were open.

Of course, diplomatic relations would not necessarily have prevented the ensuing conflict. However, consider the might-have-beens: Washington and Beijing agree to return to Korea's status quo ante. Millions of Korean lives are saved. The U.S. and China do not intensify mutual hostility through years of conflict. Moscow fails in its attempt to prevent an American-Chinese rapprochement. Bilateral relations shift from nonexistent to lukewarm years before the 1971 breakthrough.

Ironically, diplomatic relations are most vital when countries are most at odds. American embassies for the United Kingdom, Germany, and France are useful, but government officials from these nations are in frequent contact. Problems can be dealt with directly. Even if misunderstandings occur, nothing much typically happens. There won't be a war, terrorist attack, cyber break-in, or humanitarian crisis.

Of course, establishing anything from a liaison office to an embassy should only be the start. Other questions would naturally follow. For instance, should the U.S. provide humanitarian assistance? Permit NGOs to continue aid programs? End sanctions on Taliban leaders? Allow or even encourage commercial relations? Promote person-to-person contacts, especially in education and culture?

A yes to all these questions probably would be best over the long-term. However, their feasibility—the Taliban government's receptivity to Western influences and Washington's ability to achieve its desired ends—would depend on the results of negotiation, which would be facilitated by reestablishing diplomatic ties of some sort. Again, official recognition would be for mutual benefit.

There are many examples of the advantages of moving past war wounds to engage, if not immediately embrace, former enemies. Post-World War II Germany, Italy, and Japan all have become important U.S. allies and collaborators. The Soviet and Chinese threats sped these nations' reintegration in the West. Imagine if Washington instead had kept them and constrained for years or decades.

More recent is the Vietnam experience. In 1975, the U.S.-backed government fell. Twenty years later, embassies were opened. Today, the two countries are close, as Hanoi looks to America to help balance against China. Vietnam also has established security ties with other nations, including India and Japan, out of fear of Beijing. The process took time, but ties have steadily expanded.

Afghanistan is a great tragedy, especially for its own people. Nearly a half century of conflict has left a devastated land. Today's peace is of the grave rather than of justice, with uncertain longevity. Commercial life and social order are at risk as the economy faces collapse. The Taliban leadership again is attempting to impose an extreme and unpopular religious vision on the nation. The end is unlikely to be pleasant.

In the meantime, Washington should engage its onetime foes. Isolation is only likely to degrade the Taliban's behavior, while making the regime more dependent on China and Iran. The U.S. should take the lead in proposing regular contacts and some form of relations between the two governments, and make the most of the bad hand it dealt itself by wasting two decades attempting to impose a political model for which even Afghans would not fight.

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