



## **Afghanistan Is Going To Be a Mess: Let China, Russia, Iran, and Others Handle It**

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The U.S. is leaving Afghanistan – finally, after two decades. The result is not likely to be pretty. Government soldiers are surrendering. Taliban forces are advancing. Kabul officials are panicking. The Biden administration is desperately trying to slow the regime’s incipient collapse with resumed airstrikes.

It is a tragic situation, but, looking back, at least, appears inevitable. The Afghan civil war is in its 40<sup>th</sup> year. The US has been involved for almost 20 years. The US quickly achieved its initial objectives, disrupting al-Qaeda for conducting the 9/11 terrorist attacks and punishing the Taliban for hosting a-Qaeda.

However, expanding the mission to nation-building proved to be a bust. Despite the expenditure of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars, the result was essentially a Potemkin state. The Kabul authorities always were less than ideal: when I visited Afghanistan, I found no Afghan with anything good to say about his or her government who did not work for it.

Even the regime’s decidedly limited authority began evaporating the moment President Joe Biden announced his intention to withdraw. America’s effort had neither created a real country nor convinced the Afghan people to fight for their government. Although the special forces, along with some regular units, continue to fight bravely, there likely are too few loyalists to sustain government control of major urban areas, let alone the entire country.

No doubt, the specter of a resurgent Taliban is terrible in human terms. Yet that is no reason for America to stay. If Washington is going to wage war for humanitarian purposes, there are plenty of other targets. Support for the Afghan mission primarily reflects devotion to the status quo.

Since we are there and have wasted so much – the fabled fallacy of sunk costs – we must stay until we succeed, irrespective of the cost. Yet absent our current presence, no one would advocate that the US invade Afghanistan to establish a liberal democratic centralized state.

Concern over a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan becoming a fount of terrorism also is unconvincing. Al-Qaeda was in Afghanistan because Osama bin Laden originally located there to fight the Soviet Union – just as the US provided support for numerous radical jihadist groups that opposed Moscow. The 9/11 plot had little to do with Afghanistan: indeed, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, labeled "the principal architect of the 9/11 attacks" by the 9/11 Commission, refused bin Laden's entreaties to locate in Afghanistan.

Although the Taliban has no love for America, it is not a terrorist group. The former's partnership with al-Qaeda to oust the US is realpolitik at its finest: remember Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt toasting Joseph Stalin for their alliance against Nazi Germany during World War II. Anyway, al-Qaeda, like the Taliban, grew stronger in Afghanistan despite America's continued presence. The Afghan government has been losing *even with US support*.

More important, a triumphant Taliban would not want to host active terrorists whose activities could bring back the wrath of the US government on the group. The point is not moral transformation but self-preservation, to which the Taliban is committed. Moreover, the world has plenty of ungoverned and ill-governed spaces within which terrorists can operate, irrespective of the status of Afghanistan.

The least serious, let alone persuasive, argument for Washington sticking around is that Afghanistan's neighbors want America to do so. In this view Afghanistan is somehow vital, a source of instability in such an important region and providing the US with advanced bases for use against potential adversaries. However, Central Asia is about as far from the US as possible. It has other sources of instability and any facilities there would be difficult if not impossible to sustain in war. The Stimson Center's Sameer P. Lalwani cited a previous administration official who compared bases there to France's infamous Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, which proved indefensible, at great cost to Paris.

Moreover, Afghanistan's distance, and the multiplicity of states surrounding it, provide an even more important lesson: there are several important actors with greater interests at stake, and thus much greater incentive to act to prevent geopolitical calamity. China, Pakistan, and Iran are direct neighbors; Russia and India are nearby. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan also share borders with Afghanistan. None of these countries want Afghanistan to become a crisis, with state institutions to collapse, conflict to overflow boundaries, and terrorism to reach around the world.

Although there has been regional grumbling about America's imminent departure, there also is increasing effort to reach out to the Taliban and plan for a potentially more hostile and less stable Afghanistan. Bloomberg proclaimed: "The Taliban's lightning-fast advance to control more territory in Afghanistan is raising alarms from Russia to China, as US President Joe Biden's move to withdraw troops disrupts a balance of power in South Asia that has held steady for about

two decades." China, Iran, and Russia all have begun to contemplate a world in which they no longer can rely on the US to manage their neighborhood. Which is long overdue.

Rather than engage in handwringing at the unsurprising though unfortunate loss of U.S.-backed state authority in Afghanistan, the Biden administration should promote regional discussions about the issue. How can Kabul's neighbors contain problems and develop solutions for the new Afghanistan? In doing so all parties need to be involved: both India and Pakistan despite their antagonism, China and Russia despite America's antagonism, and Iran despite Washington's and Israel's enmity, as well as the "stans."

Turkmenistan has moved military forces closer to the border and hosted a Taliban delegation. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are interested in ethnic populations that constitute substantial minorities in Afghanistan. The former moved 20,000 military personnel along its border with Afghanistan to tighten border control. Ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks provided much of the manpower for the Northern Alliance upon which the US military relied when it intervened to oust the Taliban in 2001. Despite their mutual antagonisms these two peoples and the largely Pashtun Taliban might be able to negotiate accommodations to reduce the potential for continuing, and unpredictable, conflict.

Russia, though long the enemy of Islamist and fundamentalist forces, established contacts with the Taliban years ago. Iran is attempting to do the same as a matter of necessity. Indian journalist Bobby Ghosh argued that the Taliban "poses a grave danger at an especially inconvenient moment" and risks sending "fresh waves of refugees flooding across the 900-kilometer (560-mile) border between the countries, accompanied by a spike in drug and human trafficking, as well as increased terrorist activity."

Particularly notable has been Beijing's increasing role. The Chinese are "certainly feeling nervous," argued Barnett R. Rubin of the New York University's Center on International Cooperation. That nation's expectations, publicly expressed, anyway, are as fantastic as the claims routinely made by American military commanders about their progress in Afghanistan. Foreign Minister Wang Yi explained: "China's expectations for the future of Afghanistan: a country that has a broad-based and inclusive political arrangement, pursues a sound Muslim policy, resolutely strikes down on all forms of terrorism and extremist ideologies, and commits to friendly relations with all neighboring countries." That's all?! Of course, he said, Beijing would promote achievement of these objectives.

Alas, Afghanistan appears to be moving in a very different direction. Wang traveled to the region after proclaiming the necessity "to maintain stability and prevent war and chaos." He complained that America's withdrawal was "hasty" – no doubt, the People's Republic of China along with Washington's "Blob" would have preferred the US to stay another two decades – and it was Washington's obligation to "prevent Afghanistan becoming once again a haven for terrorists." Indeed, he contended, the US "should be responsible for making sure the transition in the country will be stable. The US cannot evade responsibility, and cannot cause instability or war by withdrawing troops."

One can imagine the funereal atmosphere at the politburo meeting after Biden announced his intention to leave Afghanistan, and an intense discussion of how to keep the US entangled in the costly yet fruitless endless war. Beijing's pleasure at Washington's tendency to engage in such self-destructive behavior joined with the former's gratitude at the US attempting to stabilize a nation close and important to China. The Biden administration's decision to leave Afghanistan is obviously a blow to Beijing.

A Taliban representative in Qatar sought to assuage the PRC's concerns, explaining: the group will not allow "anyone or any group to use Afghan soil against China or any other countries." Beijing will have to hold the Taliban to account. The Chinese hope to do so short of war, of course. Fan Hongda of Shanghai International Studies University, observed: "China does not want to take over the US role, but hopes to facilitate regional peace and stability because it has interests in the region."

US officials worry about the kind of influence that other nations might wield. David Helvey, an acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs, told Congress "That China's influence could be used to undermine stability, instead of reinforce stability or support stability." He added: "Iran will likely seek to exercise influence in negative ways in Afghanistan."

More concretely, Mark Green of CSIS and Gabriel Scheinmann of the Alexander Hamilton Society posited that "a People's Liberation Army Air Force presence will supplant the US and NATO presence at Bagram as a desperate Afghan government seeks help to fill the vacuum left by the United States." Yet increased Chinese influence in Central Asia would come as no surprise and pose little threat to America, which cannot plausibly dominate everywhere on earth forever.

Nor is such lodgment certain or even likely: the Taliban, isn't inclined to invite in foreign military forces, and the Kabul government, which today can't field a force made up of its own people willing to fight for it, needs another country to provide security, not fill Bagram for use elsewhere. And it is difficult to imagine Beijing wanting to get more deeply involved commercially in a country at war with the government in risk of defeat. The People's Republic of China recently evacuated 210 nationals involved in mining and other projects, thought to be at risk in Taliban advances. A permanent military presence would also create tension with Russia, which looks at the area as its own sphere of influence. Notably, Beijing's reaction to the US decision has been disappointment, not glee at the opportunity to expand its influence at American expense.

The Taliban described China as a "welcome friend" and advocated talks on reconstruction "as soon as possible." Indeed, rumors abound of secret PRC discussions with the Taliban and Pakistan about funding the latter to help the former. Beijing reportedly demanded that the Taliban separate itself from terrorist groups, while the Taliban indicated a willingness to overlook Chinese brutality toward Muslim Uighurs. Despite the seeming coincidence of interests, a Chinese partnership with the Taliban looks like a partnership made in hell. The internal tensions will race skyward if fighting continues in Afghanistan. Chinese critic Gordon Chang opined: "I would love to see China get mired into Afghanistan. This is going to be fun to watch."

Obviously, the potentially disastrous denouement of America's two-decade long commitment will be neither pretty nor fun. However, watching Washington's critics, such as Beijing, being forced to deal with problems that the US had unnecessarily taken on will be fun. Indeed, returning the problems of Central Asia to the residents of Central Asia is the only strategy which makes sense.

America has no substantial interests in the region. Unique circumstances two decades ago required a response, but the nation's most important security objectives were quickly met. The US withdrawal was long overdue. Now America's friends and adversaries in Central Asia together can confront the serious security issues which remain. And Americans can retire at least one of their endless wars.

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