

Opinion – The Fate and the Folly of the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, AUG 22 2021

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban's swift takeover of the country has produced searing and devastating images, with regional and global ripple effects likely to be felt for decades. The decision to end the war in Afghanistan is not a controversial one, as a majority of Americans across the political spectrum support what Biden is doing. Biden's message from the White House on 16 August recognized these strong poll numbers and was targeted solely for an American audience, including those in the swing states that he managed to wrestle back from Trump in the 2020 election. Biden did not speak to the Afghan people and placed much of the blame on the corrupt Afghan governments of the past 20 years, as well as his predecessor Donald Trump.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg concurred with Biden's assessment and also blamed Afghan leaders for the collapse of the Afghan military. Only at the end of the week did Biden begin to address the looming humanitarian crisis and the plight of ordinary Afghans struggling to leave the country.

In 2016, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) found that the number of Afghan forces willing and able to fight for their country was highly exaggerated, and that many 'ghost soldiers' existed as a byproduct of Afghan corruption. The lack of morale and willingness to fight on the part of the Afghan army when compared to the messianic drive of the Taliban was well-documented but not fully acknowledged by US policymakers, including Biden. While Biden stated confidently in July that the Taliban was unlikely to take control of Afghanistan, intelligence reports painted a more dire picture. The Taliban were gaining ground rapidly, and Kabul's security, as well as the safe passage of American citizens and Afghan partners could have been more thoughtfully organized.

For Biden, the scenes playing out in Kabul are a tragic side effect of what he perceives to be a necessary, and popular, political decision. This decision is solely for a domestic audience that has grown weary of 20 years of war and desires increased nation-building at home rather than abroad. In so doing, Biden is building on Trump's theme of placing 'America First', albeit with a significant twist. For Biden, this introspection and strengthening of American democracy, institutions, and even infrastructure cannot come at the expense of losing America's allies. However, in asserting this new policy, America's traditional NATO allies have been rankled by the events of the past week and the lack of an orderly exit.

The chaotic exit is a disruptive event for America's allies and adversaries, and it marks a critical juncture in the transfer and dispersal of power around the globe. When the dust finally settles on Kabul, 2021 is likely to mark the start of America's first true post-9/11 foreign policy. The nebulous and at times jingoistic framework of the 'War on Terror' is no longer destined to be the organizing principle for future U.S. military engagement.

Biden's unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan also places pressure on NATO allies and raises fundamental questions about the alliance's aims and legitimacy in the post-Cold War era. Czech President Milos Zeman believes NATO's legitimacy has been questioned by its failure in Afghanistan, and the head of the Christian Democratic Union party in Germany, and possible successor to Chancellor Merkel, Armin Laschet, has called the Afghanistan withdrawal the 'biggest debacle' in NATO history. For a presidency built on repairing and strengthening the

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transatlantic alliance after Trump, Biden is now faced with European allies who view the recent history of NATO's actions, and the U.S. withdrawal, as fundamentally divisive and against their national interests.

As Biden pivots to other threats and a focus on countering China, the era of unbridled US-led missions within NATO may be finally coming to an end. Calls for European strategic autonomy are also likely to increase, as Washington's foreign policy objectives are increasingly questioned. Washington's oldest NATO allies have witnessed the United States move from an era of bipolarity during the Cold War to one of unmatched primacy, and now great power competition once again with China. In contrast, Washington's newest NATO allies in Central and Eastern Europe have witnessed American power primarily in the context of its engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. These conflicts have produced the ripple effects of failed states, Islamist terror, and mass migration, leading to a resurgence of populist and nativist forces that have destabilized European politics.

Now out of the EU but still a principal player in NATO, the UK was one of America's strongest allies in the War on Terror at a time when both France and Germany had serious doubts about US-led missions. The dismay of Biden's actions from prominent defence and foreign policy figures in the UK like Tom Tugendhat and Rory Stewart is notable in the sense of betrayal, personal grief, and humiliation it has brought to them personally, and to their country. Both Tugendhat and Stewart have called the withdrawal from Afghanistan the UK's biggest foreign policy disaster since the Suez crisis of 1956. For them, it is a brutal sign of the UK's inability to successfully extricate itself from American-led military interventions that have had tragic and destabilizing consequences.

In delivering on one of his most deeply felt beliefs and campaign promises, Biden risks unraveling an already fraught alliance and damaging the credibility he rightly instills in so many American allies. There is still time to regain control, however it requires Biden to tap into the two traits that have so endeared him with voters over the years: humility and empathy. Humility after the hubris of a 20-year war is an important remedy to help raise a nation back to its humble origins. 20 years after 9/11, the Taliban are once again in control with a range of U.S. military equipment at their disposal, and the terror risk emanating from Afghanistan is likely to increase.

This is a propaganda coup for America's adversaries, but for Biden, it is also an opportunity. In 'building back better' at home, a more solid foundation of American power, defined by the power of example, can at last be permitted to emerge abroad. In the immediate aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal, this power is not yet visible. However, Biden is betting on the inevitability of American power over the long-term. Whether or not America's allies are willing to go along with him and bet on America's enlightened return is the critical question in the wake of Afghanistan's fall.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for Global Risk Insights and Foreign Brief, two political risk publications, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

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