

Sad collapse in Afghanistan: Political miscalculations overshadow military success.

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US soldier on UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter after an air assault mission in the Zabol province of Afghanistan, Oct. 15, 2009 (Photo: Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

By Raphael Benaroya

As I write this, the Taliban have completed their swift takeover of Afghanistan. They have occupied the President's palace in Kabul and are exercising full control over the land. The images are appalling, humiliating, heartbreaking, and haunting. From the ragtag Taliban fighters in robes and sandals brandishing their weapons triumphantly around the former Afghan president's desk, to the mob scene of Afghans clinging desperately to a giant U.S. military transport as they tried to flee the country, the chaos of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan will be seared into the world's collective memory for years

to come. These defeatist images are disastrous for the U.S.'s standing in the world, undermining trust and confidence in American leadership.

Some twenty years ago, in the wake of 9/11, our military was called upon to attack Afghanistan, Al Qaeda's main base. Its mission was clear: deny Al Qaeda a safe haven, keep America safe from further terror attacks, and bring the 9/11 terrorists' leadership to justice.

Our military clearly delivered all three objectives.

They also built and trained an Afghan army, 300,000 soldiers strong, which, with U.S. help, kept insurgency at bay while opening unprecedented opportunities for millions of Afghans. The U.S. gradually reduced this support, with recent military personnel levels down to a few thousand troops (mostly for air and intelligence support) and civilians (mainly for aircraft maintenance and personal security). This minimal support was sufficient for the Afghans to resist insurgency. They did so with the sacrifice of tens of thousands of their own personnel.

Most importantly, Afghanistan was no longer a breeding ground for Islamic extremists, no longer a launching pad terrorism to the U.S. and the world. Our twenty years of blood, sweat, and treasure were not in vain. And thankfully the U.S. has not had a combat fatality in Afghanistan for nearly two years.

The Afghanistan debacle that has unfolded before our eyes in a matter of days—and the hasty U.S. retreat in the dark of night—is not the military's failing. It reflects a failure of political policy, against the advice of the U.S. military and intelligence agencies. The directives leading to the unilateral withdrawal, and its execution, are certain to become subjects of congressional inquiries, military hotwash, and historical analysis for years to come. But in the immediate aftermath of the disgraceful collapse of the Afghan security forces and the lightning-fast Taliban takeover, I see seven failures in the U.S. president's political approach to the military's withdrawal.

1. While the Doha agreement negotiated by the previous U.S. administration was “condition-based,” it depended on U.S. political continuity and adherence to its core tenants. With the change of administration and its new policies, the Doha agreement became useless. And without the will to enforce the agreement's conditions, the Taliban's deep-rooted ideology (and determination to fight for it) gained the upper hand.

A student of Islamic history would have expected this result. The Taliban clearly drew inspiration from the Hudaibiyya Treaty of 628 AD, between Mohammed and his Mecca enemies, which to this day remains fundamental to negotiations in extremist Islamic society. That treaty was perceived by Mecca as a permanent peace, but Mohammed considered it a delaying tactic, merely a temporary truce, to help him achieve Islamic expansion. Mohammed breached the treaty and attacked his unsuspecting rival with overwhelming force.

The Biden administration should have been wise to the Taliban's tactics, which echoed the same approach used by extremist Muslim leaders for generations (particularly in dealing with “infidels”). Instead, the U.S. assumed that the Taliban were negotiating in good faith. But the Taliban have always been committed to reestablishing Islamic fundamentalist rule, no matter how long that might take them, not reaching a compromise with a U.S.-supported government. The idea of a “peace agreement” with the Taliban is illusory. As they said themselves: “you [the U.S.] have the clocks, we have the time.”

1. That ties to the second major issue: Why was the U.S. pullout not phased, based on conditions relating to the Taliban's reciprocal actions? Why not conduct a partial withdrawal, on a provincial basis, and wait to see what happened? To use a standard business practice as an analogy: a good CEO would have tested in increments before rolling out a comprehensive plan that risked the entire company. The U.S.'s total, unilateral commitment to leave Afghanistan played into the Taliban's hands, giving them the power. Once President Biden cemented the timeframe for U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban immediately stepped up their offensives across the country.
2. The U.S. also seems to have failed to accurately assess the Taliban's ideologically-driven military resolve, as well as their psychological power over the populace—anchored by fear. Afghans remember well the Taliban's first ascent to power in 1996, when they tortured former president Mohammad Najibullah, dragged his body through the streets of Kabul, and hung his corpse from a pole. They remember the public brutality of the Taliban's application of sharia law, including flogging, dismemberment, and death-by-stoning. They even remember back to the brutal Afghan civil war of the 1920s, when King Amanullah attempted to bring modernity to the country by allowing women to remove their veils. He was deposed and followed by barbarians and severe oppression.

Cynically stated, American “wokeness” and “cancel history” did not make it to Afghanistan in time to enable the Afghans to erase their history. They remember it all too well, and as a result are justifiably fearful of what may be in store next with the Taliban.

1. In underestimating how deeply the Afghan people fear the Taliban, the U.S. also overestimated the fighting spirit and capabilities of the Afghan security forces. The Afghan military did well with U.S. air and intelligence support, but seeing that support vanish, literally in the dead of night, demoralized them and diminished their fighting spirit. Consequently, Afghan soldiers became more fearful of resisting the Taliban than of accepting their return to rule.
2. The U.S. withdrawal was neither fully thought out nor well-timed. There was no effective plan for continued support of the Afghan military, particularly with intelligence and air power. Such a supporting force, though small in number, was still capable of delivering a heavy punch. A few thousand U.S. military personnel supporting 300,000 Afghani soldiers could have continued to deny terrorist organizations the hope of using Afghanistan as a host country. This time of year was also ill-chosen to push ahead with the withdrawal. Spring and summer are the “fighting season” in Afghanistan, when the opium poppies have been cultivated, the ranks of Taliban fighters swell with madrasas in recess, and military mobility is not limited by winter. The U.S. military and intelligence community reportedly forewarned President Biden about these issues, but to no avail. This failure of political policy contributed directly to the abrupt and disorderly “rush for the exit.”
3. There was seemingly no U.S. contingency plan for the Taliban's rapid advance. And if there was, it was an abysmal failure. This is reflected in President Biden's own words. He thought the Taliban taking over the entire country was “highly unlikely” and he touted the strength of the Afghan military. He said, “There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of a [U.S.] embassy” [as in Vietnam]. That miscalculation could prove fatal for many U.S. nationals and tens of thousands of Afghans who cooperated with or worked for the U.S. who are now trapped in the chaos of the American departure. Shouldn't they have been evacuated before the last soldier left?

It is a tragedy that the U.S. has not done a better job to get the Afghans who supported us safely out of the country. The procedures these Afghans have to go through to secure passage to the U.S., overseen by the Department of State (recently joined by a Department of Defense task force) are reportedly a bureaucratic entanglement. This is shameful treatment, bordering on betrayal of U.S. supporters.

1. Lastly, it is unfortunate that the U.S. adopted a political mandate of *total* withdrawal from Afghanistan. This was an emotional response, evoking the “forever war” narrative that emphasizes our 20-year presence in the country. But do we not maintain tens of thousands of soldiers around the world, including in South Korea to deter North Korea and in Europe to deter Russia? Why don’t we call the Korean conflict a “70-year war” or World War II an “80-year war”?!

The American people were presented a false binary option for our troops in Afghanistan. We were told that we had to either leave hastily (as we did, shamefully) or slug it out with tens of thousands of troops in active battle. But the objective truth is that sustaining even a small force in Afghanistan (as we have in many other countries where we have fought) could have made a difference—not only for Afghanistan but the U.S. and the free world. We could have stepped away partially, without allowing the Taliban to ride roughshod over us.

Under the Taliban, it seems highly likely that Afghanistan will return to being a safe haven for Al Qaeda and its likes, as well as a bastion of harsh sharia law, oppressive human rights, and unabated opium exports. This would have broad implications for emboldening extreme Islamic actors, both state and non-state, further metastasizing terrorism around the world. And it would erode trust in the U.S. among our allies (and would-be allies).

A final thought about yet another misguided U.S. political policy—our so-called “nation building.” Despite the noble goals of the U.S. government, we cannot replicate our post-World War II success in rebuilding Germany and Japan, or clone our democracy and values to local cultures in a one-size-fits-all blueprint. It did not work in Iran in the 1950s, Vietnam in the 1960s, or Iraq in the 2000s.

Nor, in spite of our great hopes and support, did the mistakenly termed “Arab Spring” turn out to be such. The U.S. has a tendency to apply our own values and culture in addressing foreign challenges, at times to the detriment of our own national interests. We repeatedly make this mistake in the Middle East, an intricate quilt of cultures not always suited to American-style democracy and values. This is a systemic and costly misunderstanding (even failure) across our political, diplomatic, national security, and, at times, military institutions.

In conclusion, there is ample cause to fear a return to the dark days of the first Taliban era in Afghanistan, where extreme Islamist ideology rules and terrorism is abetted and exported. To make matters worse, the amount of sophisticated U.S. military equipment left behind, at a cost of over \$80 billion to American taxpayers, makes the Taliban the best-equipped terrorists in the world. And to President Biden, that was simply part of the cost factored into the decision to withdraw.

I worry that the Taliban will welcome extremists from across the Middle East, including Iran, and foment rising Islamist extremism throughout the region, including nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Let us hope that the U.S. will not have to return to Afghanistan again to quell new threats. Our men and women in uniform, gold star families who made the ultimate sacrifice in the war on terror, and the local Afghans who helped the U.S., deserve better.

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