

AMERICA'S MISTAKES IN THE 'FOREVER WAR'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

President Joe Biden has set the September 11 deadline for all American troops to leave Afghanistan, winding up 20 years of the invasion by the United States. Military officials say the withdrawal would be complete about two months ahead of the schedule. The peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban that started in Doha last year have been frozen for months. The bid by the U.S. to hold a summit in Istanbul between the warring parties has been a non-starter. On the ground, the Taliban are making steady advances. Since May 1, the Taliban have seized eight districts in four different regions. At least six provisional capitals, including Kabul, Lashkar Gah (Helmand) and Kandahar, have the insurgents at their gates. As of now, about 22% of Afghanistan's 398 districts are in the Taliban's control and 24% with the government, while more than half of the country's territories are contested.

The longest war in America's history is also turning out to be one of its most disastrous. After 20 years of war, when the world's mightiest military is exiting Afghanistan, the Taliban, which it sought to perish, are at the height of their influence since they were driven out of power. Terrorist networks, which the U.S. vowed to destroy when it launched its global war on terror in Afghanistan, are now scattered across Asia and Africa, from eastern Afghanistan to the Sahel region. What went wrong for the U.S.?

The U.S. made three fundamental mistakes, which led to the superpower's humiliating exit from this clichéd 'graveyard of empires'.

First, the U.S. went into Afghanistan without learning anything from the country's history, or was blindsided by the unipolar hubris. Afghanistan was invaded by great powers in the 19th and 20th centuries as well. The British empire, which feared a Russian invasion to India via Afghanistan, sent troops to the country in 1839, ousted its ruler Dost Muhammad and established a client regime of its ally, Shah Shujah. But the British had to withdraw in the face of Afghan resistance, mostly by Pashtun warriors; while retreating in 1842, all of the British and Indian troops, except one doctor, were massacred by Afghans. In 1979, the Soviet Union sent troops to Afghanistan to salvage the country's nascent communist regime, orchestrated a coup and established a friendly regime. The Soviets, faced with a bloody Mujahideen resistance (which was bankrolled and trained by the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Pakistan), had to pull back in 1989 in ignominy. The U.S. might have thought that history would have been kinder to them when they launched the Afghan invasion in October 2001. It wasn't.

Once they invaded Afghanistan, the U.S., given the mistakes the British and the Soviets committed, could have had a strategically focused campaign, targeting its enemy, al-Qaeda, which was behind the September 11 attacks. It should have gone after the terrorists, destroyed their networks and then withdrawn. That is what a realist power would do. But the U.S., driven by the neoconservative globalism of the Bush administration, had set more ambitious goals for itself. It wanted to topple the Taliban and rebuild a centralised "democratic" state in Afghanistan. How did building democratic institutions in Afghanistan from top-down serve America's foreign policy interests? The neoconservatives in Washington might have found it fascinating, but the move made little strategic sense. And now, the U.S. is retreating, practically leaving Afghanistan to the mercy of the Taliban, in return for assurances from them that they would not assist the terrorists such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

After the Taliban regime was toppled and al-Qaeda driven back into the caves and mountains,

the U.S. still had a chance to stabilise the country with help from its different factions and leave. In December 2001, Taliban spokesperson Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef had offered to surrender. The Taliban sought modest terms — Mullah Omar, their leader, should be allowed to return home. But the Americans rejected the offer and promised to destroy the Taliban in every corner of the country. The Taliban are an indigenous militancy with deep roots in Afghanistan's Pashtun majority. Toppling them from power was easy, but defeating them in their country was not. And after vowing to defeat them, the U.S. launched the Iraq invasion to topple Saddam Hussein and export democracy there. This was the second mistake.

The U.S. took Pakistan's tactical support for its war on terror for granted, overlooking the fact that Pakistan had deep strategic ties with the Taliban. Pakistan played a double game by supporting the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan while at the same time offering refuge and support to the Taliban. For Pakistan, the Taliban have been their wild card to check India's influence in Afghanistan. When the U.S. declared victory in Afghanistan prematurely and went on to invade Iraq in 2003, it became easier for Pakistan to assist the Taliban's regrouping, at a time when the Afghan government was grappling with corruption and infighting on ethnic lines. For the ordinary Afghans living outside the provincial capitals, life did not change much under the new government. When the U.S. got stuck in the morass of the Iraq war, the Taliban were steadily making a comeback in Afghanistan's hinterlands. By the time the U.S. shifted its focus back to Afghanistan, after defeating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and amid growing calls at home to end the "endless wars", the Afghan war had already been lost.

Granted, there is a realist case for the U.S. to leave Afghanistan. It seems to have reached the conclusion long ago that the war was one that could not be turned around. The war was also becoming increasingly unpopular at home, prompting Presidents, from Barack Obama to Donald Trump and Joe Biden, to promise to wind it up. The U.S. has also been shifting its focus to East Asia where China is rising. And given the foreign policy challenges the U.S. is facing now elsewhere, continuing troops and commitments in Afghanistan makes little sense. But the U.S. could have opted for a more orderly withdrawal. Instead, it surrendered to the Taliban's terms to pull back its troops. This was the third mistake.

The Taliban have not defeated the Afghan troops yet. The Afghan government has about 200,000 battle-hardened soldiers, including the U.S.-trained elite special forces. The government still controls most of the country's population centres. The Taliban's efforts to take over provincial capitals were successfully thwarted in the recent past, with air power help from the U.S. With the U.S. being present in Afghanistan, the conflict has been in a stalemate — the government not being able to defeat the insurgents and the Taliban unable to overrun the cities. The U.S. should have used this stalemate, coupled with mounting pressure on Pakistan, to extract concessions from the Taliban. Instead, the Trump administration went for talks with the Taliban on their terms. The Afghan government was kept out of the whole process because the Taliban do not recognise them as being legitimate. And the U.S. struck a direct deal with the Taliban, without addressing any of the Afghan concerns.

The American exit would now decisively shift the balance of power in favour of the Taliban. The insurgents have always known this. They have stepped up attacks and carried out targeted killings aimed at weakening the Afghan government and terrorising society immediately after signing the agreement with the U.S. in February 2020. And ever since the remaining U.S. troops started pulling back from Afghanistan on May 1, the Taliban have started capturing more territories. The war may be winding down for the Americans. But for Afghans, it will continue in one form or another.

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