

End of the Longest War

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Although the deadline for US military forces to leave Afghanistan had been set for 11 September, the rapid pull out of remaining forces and in particular, the abandoning of Bagram air base in July led to a rapid Taliban reconquest of provincial capitals until last week, when Kabul itself fell. The country's former president, Ashraf Ghani, fled Afghanistan and later resurfaced in the United Arab Emirates. For the United States, this is the end of its longest, most expensive, and arguably most fruitless war. Shocking scenes of civilians fleeing the Taliban and attempting to cling to the landing gears of an American C17 transport plane as it took off from Kabul airport led to anger even among many Americans who supported the idea of withdrawal. The question of rescuing thousands of Afghans who worked for the US and NATO forces, and thus may be in danger of Taliban reprisals, is now being discussed.

Current President Joe Biden can be blamed for the disorderly retreat, it's true, but in a way, each US president going back to George W. Bush (who is arguably most responsible), made their own unique contributions to this colossal failure. Problems could be traced back even further, to the days of the Soviet occupation of the country. Contrary to a common belief, even among Americans, the CIA did not "fund" or "arm" what later became Al Qa'ida, nor the Taliban. Al Qa'ida has its roots in what was called the Arab-Afghan movement, a small part of the larger mujahideen movement which had some ideological conflicts with the local rebels. As for the Taliban, the name refers to religious students and while individuals who could be called Taliban did fight in the ranks of various mujahideen groups, there was no Taliban as a political/fighting faction until their foundation in 1994, well after the US had all but abandoned Afghanistan.

Therein lies the roots of the problem- it wasn't so much US intervention, but rather US apathy that became widespread almost from the moment the last Soviet soldiers rolled back across the bridge at Termez. The struggle against the Communist regime in Kabul continued, of course, but now the various rebel groups knew the regime's days were numbered and they began to plot against each other. Eventually it would come down to a clash between Pakistan's champion, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the charismatic Ahmad Shah Massoud over who would reign in Kabul. Massoud's forces took the capital, Hekmatyar shelled and rocketed it into rubble, but the new government of Burhanuddin Rabbani managed to hold, and Hekmatyar was even invited to become Prime Minister in the new government. By this time, however, the Taliban was forming in Kandahar, and the fanatically religious movement found its support among Afghans tired of endless war and the impunity exercised by local warlords or bandits.

There is a good lesson to be learned when looking both at the early rise of the Taliban and their success in the 90's civil war, as well as during the 21st century insurgency as they began to claw back territory from the Afghan government. That lesson is that people will often embrace any faction that can provide some semblance of rule of law and predictability if the alternative appears to be chaos and corruption. The most libertarian social movement, if it cannot guarantee people's personal safety and property, is likely to fail in any kind of revolutionary scenario where multiple factions are almost inevitable.

Getting back to the US, the country mostly ignored what was going on in Afghanistan throughout the 1990's, until it was far too late to do anything to drastically change the situation on the ground. Ahmad Shah Massoud, leading the anti-Taliban resistance in the north of the country, would be assassinated by Al Qaeda operatives in September 2001, and two days later, the attacks of 11 September took place in the US. Suddenly, Afghanistan was very important again.

Opposition to the war in Afghanistan in the US was, understandably enough, almost non-existent and mostly limited to hardcore opponents of the government or ideological pacifists. It was in the beginning of the war, however, that the seeds of disaster were first planted. With very little up-to-date intelligence or expertise in the country, the administration of George W. Bush attempted to win a victory with few "boots on the ground." This strategy entailed using various special operations troops and CIA operatives to assist militias affiliated with the anti-Taliban United Islamic Front (better known as the Northern Alliance) along with the US military's overpowering air support. Results were achieved very quickly, although Bin Laden and other key Al Qaeda leaders managed to escape across the border due to the poor coordination and lack of understanding with the militia forces employed to take Bin Laden's hideout in Tora Bora in December 2001.

Before securing Afghanistan, by 2002 the Bush administration was already plotting for its war in Iraq, which would take place the following year in the spring of 2003. A number of rationales were given as to why Iraq was invaded, most commonly cited being oil, however these are entirely wrong. By the own admission of Bush's advisers and cabinet members such as the late Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, the reason was simply that the United States had to prove to the world it was still strong and capable of defeating enemies. Defeating the Taliban, who had never even managed to control all of Afghanistan and who barely possessed a functioning state, was judged insufficient to prove American military might. Thus huge amounts of resources were redirected to the upcoming Iraq invasion, and even more would be spent there over the years until 2011, when US forces initially withdrew from the country.

Amid all of this, the task of building a stable, democratic, functioning Afghan government was always, at best, secondary. After the killing of Usama bin Laden in 2011, the war became a forgotten one. With fewer and fewer casualties among US military personnel and a shrinking military footprint, the American public moved on.

What It Means For Ukraine

Since the rapid abandonment of Afghanistan there have been some odd takes on social media about what message this sends to US allies like Taiwan or Ukraine. These are very different situations, however. Admittedly, the Biden administration's record on Ukraine and Russia has been a huge disappointment, at least from what can be seen in public. Whereas Trump clearly believed he could make deals with Putin based on personal affinity, the Biden admin appears to be surrounded by people very much of the Obama school of foreign policy. Basically- suckers who

believe they can get bloodthirsty regimes to behave via reason and negotiations for supposedly mutually beneficial agreements.

But as disappointing as the Biden admin has been on Ukraine so far, there are few parallels between Afghanistan and Ukraine, apart from the plague of Russian occupation and national association with the poppy flower. Ukraine never depended on US or other NATO troops to defend its territory. It clearly could not do so. Ukrainians and sympathetic foreigners of all kinds defend Ukrainian territory with the help of volunteers, fundraisers, and donors.

Moreover, NATO's helpful but otherwise cold relationship with Ukraine can be a blessing as well. If Ukraine were in NATO, if it were closer integrated with the alliance, it would certainly secure the country against further Russian incursion, but it would also limit Ukraine's ability to fight back in ways it sees fit, and more importantly, it would almost certainly prevent Ukraine from recovering any lost occupied territory. Germany and France have largely abandoned Ukraine and signaled their willingness to work with Vladimir Putin, but this may suit Ukraine's needs in the future. After all, since they failed to come to Ukraine's aid, they also forfeit any right to question or criticize Ukraine's use of unconventional tactics in response to Russian aggression.

Lastly, there is a lesson to be learned about the problem of nationalism versus internationalism. Personally I have seen a lot of Ukrainian criticism aimed at the so-called "left" in the US when it comes to things like Biden's weak foreign policy or the abandonment of Afghanistan. This is woefully ignorant- American isolationism is extremely popular across the political spectrum and has been for decades. Isolationism is promoted by the far-right just as much as the far-left, and it was Donald Trump who campaigned on ending the war in Afghanistan. It was the Trump administration that negotiated a withdraw with the Taliban, without the participation of the national government, and the Trump admin had planned on leaving much earlier, on 1 May 2021 (made impossible by losing the election).

For those in Ukraine who direct anger at the American "left" but loudly proclaim *Ukraina ponad use!*, understand that what we see here with American foreign policy is simply *Америка понад yce!*, or as the right-wing historical slogan revived by Trump goes, "America First!" The Ronald Reagan myth of American conservatives being tough on dictators and international bullies is just that- a myth not supported by history.

All in all, as infuriating as it might seem in the moment, Ukraine could benefit from standing on its own feet for a while, free of greater powers' own agendas. Certainly this is better than the shameful groveling toward countries like Turkey and China, both of which value their relations with Moscow much more. Ukraine has had a long history of trying to find a patron in hopes of achieving independence or protection, and that long history has been marked by betrayal, subjugation, and genocide. With its own forces, Ukraine is more than capable of holding the line while its advocates abroad remind their leaders of their obligations to democracy and, in the case of Ukraine, the Budapest Memorandum.

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