

10
2021

America's "Forever War" and the End of the Washington-led Unipolar World

By Darren Spinck

Introduction

America's retreat from Afghanistan culminated in the country falling back into control of the Taliban, the very group that provided safe-haven for al-Qaeda prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks. America suffered immeasurable pain and costs from this jihadist attack on US soil, made possible by intelligence failures, which did not recognize the emerging Islamist threat towards America. Al-Qaeda's September 11 tactical victory begat a series of foreign policy blunders in Afghanistan as strategies

evolved for the "Global War on Terror." Twenty years later, Washington still has not learned from pre-9/11 mistakes. Prior to America's complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, US intelligence was unable to convince the White House of the Afghan government's fragility and the Taliban's intentions. Radical Islamists in Afghanistan capitalized on policymaking missteps again, celebrating another victory over America when the Taliban flag rose over the Afghan presidential palace on September 11, 2021.

America's entry into Afghanistan was just: to capture and kill terrorists responsible for the 2001 attacks. However, throughout the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, mission creep led to hubris-filled misadventure. America's military fought a counterinsurgency and Washington sought to establish a western-style democracy. As Americans tired of the "forever war" by the end of Obama's second term, Donald Trump's anti-interventionist foreign policy pivoted away from nation building. During the Trump presidency, America was not dragged into any new wars and Washington planned an orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan. Global tumult and domestic US crises during the transition to the Joe Biden administration led the current White House to overlap domestic and foreign policy objectives, resulting in the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan.

As America's reliability as a security partner is questioned by US partners, there are sure to be geopolitical consequences. Warnings of the American Century ending are not new. A pivot toward a multi-polar world has begun, due to Washington's failure to coordinate an orderly withdrawal with its allies and other foreign policy miscues. Washington's European partners feel marginalized. The loss of lives and economic burden of two decades at war were not the only costs that America sustained

following al-Qaeda's strike. The September 11 attacks also resulted in America's bureaucracy expanding and a rollback of civil liberties. The lack of coordination amongst US intelligence agencies before September 11 led to the Department of Homeland Security in 2002, the third-largest US government agency with an annual budget of \$25.5 billion. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence followed in 2005, controlling a \$50 billion national intelligence budget. The USA PATRIOT Act became law in October 2001, which, the American Civil Liberties Union warns, makes it "easier for the government to spy on ordinary Americans by expanding the authority to monitor communications, collect bank records, and track the activity of innocent Americans on the Internet."

The September 11 attacks and America's response led to the Taliban's collapse, al-Qaeda's destruction, and Osama bin-Laden's death. America succeeded in its short-term objectives, has not experienced another major terrorist attack in the United States, and re-built Lower Manhattan and the US economy. But, America has changed. Political division in the US has worsened since the unity following September 11, when President Bush enjoyed a 92 percent favorable rating. A recent poll showed 46 percent of Americans oppose increased surveillance capabilities, while 60 percent of

those surveyed felt the Afghanistan and Iraq wars were not worth fighting. America's pivot toward anti-interventionism has concerned US partners, particularly those in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which depend on the US as a bulwark against perceived Kremlin aggression. France and Germany, eager for their own global influence, have also questioned America's reliability.

As the unipolar world draws to an end, the US will struggle to regain its credibility as the key security guarantor for Europe. Lessons learned from its Afghanistan misadventures can help Washington repair ruptured ties with its European partners and jostle for advantage in a rapidly forming multi-polar world with China, Russia, and other competitors. Washington can begin rebuilding trust with its European and Asian partners by not politicizing intelligence for domestic political purposes and conducting military operations with what former Secretary of State Colin Powell's Pottery Barn rule: "you break it, you own it."

"The Forever War"

Military operations in Afghanistan began as retribution for the al-Qaeda attacks which killed 2,977 in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. The world firmly stood behind America following September 11, as

Washington dislodged the Taliban, destroyed remaining terrorists in Afghanistan, and sought to capture or kill Osama bin Laden. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) invoked Article 5, the collective agreement to defend any member under attack and UN Security Council Resolution 1368 called on all states to work together to hold accountable "those responsible for aiding, supporting, or harboring the perpetrators."

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Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants were routed in less than six weeks, and Washington's strategy shifted. In December 2001, US forces pinned down Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders, including bin Laden, in Tora Bora, a complex of mountainous caves. Inexplicably, the Pentagon opted to not launch a ground assault to capture or kill the jihadists. US military leaders also rejected calls to block escape routes from Tora Bora into Pakistan, allowing bin Laden's and other terrorists' escape. The war was needlessly prolonged by these decisions. Killing bin Laden was delayed for nearly a decade until the May 2011 raid in Pakistan, which then Vice President Biden opposed. Despite promises by President

Bush to avoid “nation building,” Washington did following the initial success of the US invasion, with the Pentagon planning another adventure in Iraq, followed by counterterror operations in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The long slog in Afghanistan should not have surprised anyone. With excessive hubris during a November 2001 speech at the Virginia Military Institute, President Bush referenced the fate of the British and Soviets in Afghanistan, stating, “it’s been one of initial success, followed by long years of floundering and ultimate failure. We’re not going to repeat that mistake.” Five days after September 11, US Vice President Dick Cheney said combatting terrorism would take “years,” then later warned the battle could be generational.

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Major combat operations in Afghanistan ended in 2003, coinciding with Bush’s infamous speech on the USS Abraham Lincoln, during which he proclaimed victory in Iraq. NATO assumed control of international security forces in Afghanistan in August 2003, and years of democratization efforts followed including the formation of an Afghan constitution in

January 2004, the election of Hamid Karzai as president, and parliamentary elections in 2005. But, America’s partners began voicing concern with US policymaking. British General David Richards, commander of NATO forces from 2006-2007 stated, “there was no coherent long-term strategy...instead we got a lot of tactics.” A European Union official remarked “in hindsight, [forming a centralized government was] the worst decision.” America’s “Forever War” had no end in sight. American voters began to tire of decision making by Washington’s “Blob,” the neoliberal Washington establishment favoring US-led interventionism. Enter Donald Trump.

Trump’s Withdrawal

Throughout his presidential campaign, Trump criticized America’s involvement in Afghanistan, calling for withdrawal. But once elected, his intentions to end US involvement were constrained by Pentagon officials and the “Blob.” In April 2017, Trump ordered the military to bombard the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Nangarhar province with the 21,000 pound “Mother of All Bombs.” It seemed the Trump Administration intended to decimate enemy forces, then negotiate a withdrawal. But Trump reversed his “original instinct to pull out” in August 2017, warning “a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum for terrorists.”

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The Trump Administration began negotiations with the Taliban in February 2019, but abruptly cancelled a planned Camp David meeting scheduled for September. A comprehensive peace agreement was struck between the White House and Taliban in February 2020, followed by peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban in September 2020. Conditions in the peace agreement included a Taliban pledge to not attack US troops and allied forces. A formal agreement to draw down US forces to 2,500 was announced by Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller in November 2020. Just as America's initial Afghanistan operations were well-intentioned, so was Trump's withdrawal rationale. Aside from a decade-long delay in killing bin Laden, Washington's key military objectives ended in December 2001. Subsequent nation building resulted in a corrupt, unstable government, which eventually collapsed. It was a wasted, quixotic effort, costing taxpayers trillions of dollars.

Trump's agreement with the Taliban was imperfect. It was a mistake to acquiesce to the

Taliban and pressure Afghanistan's government to release jihadists. It was also naive for Washington policymakers to believe Intra-Afghan negotiations between Kabul and the Taliban would lead to a suitable power sharing agreement. Pentagon officials were also overly optimistic about the ability of the Afghan security forces to repel Taliban advances.

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The messy withdrawal commenced with Biden's election in 2020. Biden said in April 2021 it is "time to end the forever war" and announced a full troop withdrawal by September 11, the twentieth anniversary of al-Qaeda's attacks. However, by providing a timeline for withdrawal during the "fighting season," the Taliban advance as US military forces withdrew. Biden's withdrawal fiasco began on July 6, when US forces abandoned Bagram Airbase. A month later, the Taliban captured the airbase and freed an estimated 5,000 prisoners held there, including senior al-Qaeda operatives.

Biden's Retreat

Experts often describe Biden's Afghanistan withdrawal as a continuation of Trump's "America First" doctrine. This is logical, as

Biden followed through with Trump's 2020 withdrawal agreement. However, there is a key difference, as Trump has long been linked to isolationist Republicans. Biden's foreign policy team favors liberal internationalism. While Biden's advisers continue to blame the Trump Administration for initiating the negotiations with the Taliban which forced withdrawal, the timing for pulling all troops from Afghanistan should be viewed as a "Biden First" policy. There was no Senate ratified agreement that forced Biden to withdraw. If Biden's national security team felt Afghanistan's security forces were incapable of repelling a resurgent Taliban, the White House should have delayed.

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President Biden stated on August 14, "when I came to office, I inherited a deal cut by my predecessor... therefore, I faced a choice – follow through on the deal... or ramp up our presence and send more American troops to fight once again in another country's civil conflict." But Biden reversed Trump's policies before, rejoining the Paris Agreement, and waiving sanctions against Tehran in hopes of restarting the nuclear deal. As commander-in-chief, President Biden bears full responsibility for withdrawing when the Taliban was reclaiming territory.

Not only was the withdrawal inadequately coordinated with America's NATO partners, but Bagram Airbase was abandoned, making evacuating remaining US citizens and permanent residents needlessly dangerous. As the Taliban controlled checkpoints leading to Hamid Karzai International Airport, maintaining options for evacuation through Bagram may have lessened dangers to evacuees and US personnel. The image of Afghans clinging to a US Air Force plane during the evacuation should haunt US policymakers, as Washington spent trillions of dollars in Afghanistan, yet could not secure a single runway during the initial withdrawal. In addition, as much as \$80 billion in US military equipment was seized by the Taliban during the withdrawal and surrender of Afghan security forces. Perhaps Biden's political advisers were overly cautious during the withdrawal to avoid another Benghazi controversy before next November's Congressional elections. But, if President Biden is being pressured into national security decisions based on domestic political considerations, despite his claim that the "buck stops with me," who is making decisions at the White House? Domestically, the White House faces an immense credibility gap with American voters. Before the humiliating retreat, Biden's favorable rating in a Reuters/Ipsos poll was 53 percent, with just 43 percent holding a negative opinion. In just a month, those numbers nearly flipped, with 50 percent

of Americans surveyed having an unfavorable opinion of Biden and just 44 percent approving. Biden faces criticism from within his own party, with SFRC Chairman, Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ), calling the withdrawal a “flawed plan.”

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Americans questioning the judgement of elected officials, the intelligence community, and military leadership is understandable following two immense intelligence failures. First, faulty intelligence led to the 9/11 attacks, followed by false claims of Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction and the subsequent, unnecessary war. Adding to public concerns about intelligence missteps, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, expressed surprise at chaos engulfing post-withdrawal Afghanistan, stating, “there was nothing that I or anyone else saw that indicated a collapse of this army or the government in 11 days.”

Blowback

Washington’s two decades in Afghanistan resulted in an anti-American Taliban government including Ghani Baradar, a close associate of the

Islamist group’s founder Mullah Omar. Omar’s son, Mullah Yakoob, is acting defense minister. There is a \$10 million FBI bounty for the arrest of Afghanistan’s interim interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani. Acting Prime Minister Mohammad Hassan Akhund is on a UN sanctions list. Despite this rogues’ gallery of international terrorists leading Afghanistan, Secretary of State Blinken criticized the Taliban for not being “inclusive” enough, as no women were selected to the provisional Afghan cabinet.

The Taliban government’s inclusivity is the least worry for women remaining in Afghanistan, as the Taliban’s vice ministry will enforce restrictions on clothing, ban freedom of movement, force marriages, and limit work force and educational opportunities. Despite the Biden Administration calling the Taliban “businesslike and professional,” Afghanistan’s Islamist rulers recently hung four bodies from a crane and announced amputations for Islamic law violations will be reinstated.

US intelligence will face increasing challenges when assessing risks in Afghanistan with no “boots on the ground,” and the US and its European partners face an uncertain future with NATO security cooperation. Tom Tugendhat, chair of the British Parliament’s foreign affairs committee called the Afghanistan withdrawal the worst foreign policy disaster since Suez, while Norbert Rottgen, head of the German

parliament's foreign relations committee stated the withdrawal "does fundamental damage to the West's political and moral credibility."

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If the withdrawal had been a standalone blunder, America's European partners may have viewed it as an anomaly. However, as the withdrawal was preceded by the Nord Stream 2 compromise, which threatens energy security throughout CEE, and followed by the AUKUS security pact, which sidelined France's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, America's reliability is now questioned throughout Europe. AUKUS scuttled a Paris/Canberra submarine deal and prompted EU internal markets commissioner Thierry Breton to remark "there is of course in Europe a growing feeling that something is broken in our transatlantic relations." The growing consensus questioning America's reliability is leading European leaders to reassess the transatlantic partnership and accelerate "strategic autonomy," including developing a "first reaction force."

Conclusion

America's failures in Afghanistan signal the end of the unipolar world, in which the US was the unchallenged superpower. With the void left by America's Afghanistan withdrawal, China and Russia will aim to remake the existing balance of power into a multipolar world. Biden has stated "there's nothing China or Russia would rather have, would want more in this competition than the US to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan." Incorrect. Beijing and Moscow are thrilled with America's exit from their backyards. Russia and China can now strengthen their regional influence with limited US interference. Beijing establishing "friendly cooperation" with the Taliban will hinder America's regional counterterrorism capabilities and provide China an opportunity to secure approximately \$1 trillion in rare earth minerals in Afghanistan. Beijing will likely negotiate a "status of forces agreement" with Kabul to base military at Bagram, allowing China to maintain a quick response force in Afghanistan and better secure the 47-mile border shared with its Xinjiang region. Maintaining a Chinese security force in Afghanistan should ease concerns with Belt and Road Initiative partners in Pakistan and Central Asia which are concerned with Afghanistan's instability impacting regional infrastructure projects.

The US withdrawal allows for a sharp critique of US reliability. When referencing Afghanistan during his UN General Assembly address, Xi Jinping stated, “military intervention from the outside and so-called democratic transformation entail nothing but harm.” Moscow will point to the Afghanistan fiasco as evidence of America’s inability to adequately provide security guarantees. Most damaging to US interests is Moscow’s and Beijing’s ability to exploit the twenty-year Afghanistan misadventure as a sign the Washington-led unipolar world is ending. Until America fixes its own problems, it is difficult for the world to view the US as a “shining city on the hill.” With domestic strife worsening, regular intelligence failures, and an uneven foreign policy strategy, America’s reputation as a reliable security

partner will worsen and the pivot toward a multipolar world comprised of the US, China, Russia, and one or more European powers will only accelerate.

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