



**SPECIAL ISSUE: The Return of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Day After**

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**CYPRUS CENTER FOR EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**  
University of Nicosia

1993-2021 TWENTY EIGHT YEARS OF POLICY FORMULATION AND ANALYSIS

## Editor's Note



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This issue of In Depth aims to analyze developments in Afghanistan, mainly the military withdrawal of the United States and the return of the Taliban in power. There are several interrelated issues that require attention:

-Afghanistan has historically been called as the “graveyard of the empires”. Indeed, empires of the past, like the Mongol and the British, have suffered severe military losses in this mountainous country with its tribal society. More recently, the Soviet Union also paid a very high price after its invasion of Afghanistan which, according to many historians and analysts, was one of the founding causes of its future collapse.

-According to liberal democratic theorists, liberal democracies do not fight each other. Therefore, a normative approach of this kind would suggest that more liberal democracies would entail a more peaceful world. On the other hand, realists have dismissed these arguments as “liberal illusions” and point (among other cases) on Afghanistan, as a characteristic example of this fallacy. State-building efforts in Middle Eastern societies, based on western government models, have suffered vast criticism in the last few years. The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan provides this critique with one more verification case.

-The new structure of the international system is one more issue of broader concern among International Relations experts. This new military humiliation of the United States, which came ten years after the withdrawal from Iraq and brought an inglorious end to Washington’s controversial Middle Eastern adventures of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, has boosted the debate on the future status of the “once only remaining superpower”. Furthermore, it raises the issue of the new balance of power in the Middle East, the concerns of US allies (who watch their traditional security provider essentially abandoning the region) and the role of other great powers.

-In Europe, the possibility of a new refugee and migrant crisis that would exacerbate already existing social and political concerns terrifies political leaders. EU officials have already undertaken diplomatic initiatives to this direction, while the role of Turkey as a migration transit is once more under

the microscope. Furthermore, the return of Afghanistan-based terrorist groups is also a matter of concern for Europe and the West in general.

The broader Middle East has repeatedly provided analysts and international relations' experts with foot for thought and case studies that put IR theories to the test, while provoking or nurturing social, political and economic crises of global scale. At the same time, debates on great powers, the distribution of their capabilities and-above all- their policies have also been among the favorite themes of journals, magazines and news bulletins. In Cyprus (and broadly in the Eastern Mediterranean) our experience dictates that you should never defy such developments just because they take place far away from you, particularly in the context of the contemporary globalized system. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far seems to be a century of successive global crises, shedding light on Afghanistan helps understand related developments as a part of a broader picture. Furthermore, it reminds us of the organized international community's duty to urgently regroup and act in order safeguard international order, peace and stability, in times of widespread global uncertainty.

## ON THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN



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The development of the situation in Afghanistan, after the hasty withdrawal, if not the flight of the US troops and their NATO allies from this country, remains in the spotlight of international politics and world media. Many politicians and analysts are trying to comprehend the events taking place in this country, their consequences and the lessons of the inglorious campaign to restore it.

Russia is closely following the development of the situation in Afghanistan. For us, the main task is to prevent the terrorists who settled there from taking advantage of the chaos in this country, preventing them from arriving to neighboring countries, possibly under the guise of refugees, to ensure the security of our southern borders and our allies in Central Asia. We consider it fundamentally important to combine efforts in this area, primarily within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, to ensure security and stability in the Eurasian space. The Americans and their allies left behind an open 'Pandora's box', full of problems related to terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime and unfortunately religious extremism. The country found itself in a state of complete economic and social devastation. At the same time, when leaving, the Western community abandoned a whole arsenal of modern weapons, military equipment and ammunition.

It is certainly in our common interest to help Afghanistan finally find peace and stability. Of particular importance is the establishment of an effective inter-Afghan dialogue, with the participation of all ethnic religious and political groups. Russia is interested in preserving the integrity of this country and in preventing its disintegration.

The Taliban control almost all of Afghanistan. These are realities from which we have to proceed. At this stage, we believe it is premature to discuss the issue of initiating by Russia a UN Security Council meeting to exclude the Taliban from the international sanctions lists. For the purposes of the current work with Taliban, this is not required. We see that the reaction of the international community to the first steps of the Taliban Movement in power,

in particular on the formation of an interim government, is restrained, to put it mildly. Similar approaches are noted with regard to the official recognition of the new Kabul authorities.

However, in the future, we do not exclude a revision of the sanctions against the Taliban. Developing the position of the Russian side on this issue, we will evaluate the practical steps of the Taliban authorities and the implementation of their promises to form an inclusive power structure that reflects the interests of the main ethnic and political forces of the country, to respect the rights of women, as well as to effectively counter threats emanating from the territory of Afghanistan, especially terrorism and drug trafficking.

The international community and the UN Security Council must oversee this process, and if not, then to demand at least to raise the question that within the framework of these civilized relations, certain civilized rules must be observed. The start of an inclusive inter-Afghan peace process must be promoted in every possible way.

The first step with the formation of a transitional governmental structure does not reflect the entire Afghan society from an ethno-confessional and political point of view. We will continue contacts with the Taliban as we have been implementing for many years now. The UN Security Council sanctions, as they are formulated in the relevant resolutions, do not prohibit such contacts. On the contrary, the UN Security Council resolutions urge to advance the political process, which cannot be done without working with the Taliban. We presume that the sooner the Taliban joins the family of civilized people, the easier it will be to contact, communicate, somehow influence and ask them questions.

We are doing this in the framework of the expanded 'troika' - Russia, the United States, China, Pakistan. Recently, Russian, Chinese and Pakistani representatives went to Doha, then visited Kabul, where they communicated with the Taliban and with representatives of the secular authorities, including the former President Hamid Karzai. The main issue of the discussions was the necessity to ensure the formation of a government structure that will be truly representative. The Taliban say they are moving towards this, but the current option is temporary.

Of course, the United States and its allies are responsible for what happened in Afghanistan over the past two decades. The scale of the war crimes committed during this time has yet to be estimated. In the foreseeable future, we do not rule out the possibility of initiating the convening of a UN Security Council meeting, to hear a report by the representatives of the Western coalition on activities in Afghanistan. During the entire period while the coalition remained in Afghanistan, we have not heard a single meaningful and comprehensive report on the fulfillment of the UN Security Council mandate

for the International Security Assistance Force and the Resolute Support mission.

At the same time, we believe that the United States and their allies have a good chance to mitigate the consequences of their presence in Afghanistan, taking on the bulk of the costs of humanitarian assistance to the country and its post-conflict reconstruction.

At the same time, the main conclusion can already be formulated. It is time to end the irresponsible policy of forcibly imposing "democratic values" tailored according to foreign patterns from the outside, supported from time to time "liberal bombing", without taking into account the historical, religious and national characteristics. Such experiments will only lead to the destruction of states and numerous victims. Only in Afghanistan, according to some sources, around fifty thousand civilians were killed.

This obvious result, unfortunately, is characteristic not only in Afghanistan. The entire Greater Middle East has become the scene of a dangerous project to reformat countries along similar lines. The forcible implantation of alien values and orders cost millions of human lives in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. The result of this experiment is chaos, poverty and the growth of extremist sentiments. Millions of citizens were displaced and as a consequence, the waves of the migration crisis swept the Old World and neighboring states.

## HOW TO FAIL IN STATE-BUILDING: A DOZEN LESSONS FROM THE US-AFGHANISTAN CASE



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Following the end of the 10-year Soviet presence in Afghanistan (1979-1989) Mullah Mohammed Omar, an Islamic one-eyed Cleric and former mujahadeen commander founded The Taliban – or students in Pashto language – in Southern Afghanistan in 1994. The original Taliban ‘force’ was comprised of no more than 50 followers of Omar. Trained mostly in Pakistan and funded primarily with Saudi money, the Islamic Fundamentalist organization managed to achieve an astonishing growth and eventually controlled 90% of Afghanistan. The Taliban ruled the country for five years (1996-2001) until they were toppled in December 2001 following the US and allied military intervention. At the time the local population were positively predisposed towards they Taliban as the latter promised stability and the end of corruption driven by the Mujahideen regime.

In the West the Taliban became widely known after the 9/11 terrorist attacks as they provided refuge to al-Qaeda and its leader Osama Bin-Laden: the terrorist organization and the leader behind the 9/11 attacks. This led to the rather inevitable US (and others’) military attack in Afghanistan, which had an immediate impact as the Taliban regime collapsed within two months.

The swift and relatively easy US-led military victory was followed by two decades of American presence in Afghanistan and numerous attempts of what we can now acknowledge as failed state-building. Ultimately, in February 2019 the US and the Taliban negotiated in Doha an agreement that would theoretically contribute to the development of a new stable Afghan state – with the presence of Taliban – as well as the withdrawal of the American troops. The agreement was signed in February 2020 and in April 2021 President Biden announced that the US troops would completely withdraw by September 2021. The Afghan government and forces were completely unable to handle the American withdrawal and the Taliban pressure, and in less than ten days after the US departure the Afghan government collapsed. The Taliban were back in power.

Twenty years and trillions of dollars later the US evidently did not manage to succeed in its nation and state-building efforts. Why was this the case? This article explores in brief twelve reasons that contributed to this failure. What follows is just a brief and admittedly under-developed overview of numerous potential reasons, aiming at highlighting the breadth of the potential factors that led to an unsuccessful outcome, rather than the depth of each of those factors, as each one of them deserves a profound analysis. Some of those factors are very closely linked and could, indeed, be treated as a single factor, but they are separated on purpose in an attempt to underline the differences irrespective of how small they may be.

**Lesson 1: *Geography still matters.*** This should not be particularly surprising. Yet, the technological advances and the massive military superiority of the great powers in both warfare and logistical support structures frequently create the misperception that distance and location are no longer particularly important variables in determining the success of a mission. Advanced technology can unquestionably contribute to relatively quick military victories, but distance and location can pose serious obstacles in achieving complete dominance and post-conflict success. The case of Afghanistan is witness to these challenges. The distance and the fact the country is surrounded by non-friendly and relatively powerful states became a very important post-conflict factor. The only viable path for the Americans was Pakistan, which is not the friendliest of states (for the US at least). The questionable Pakistani relationship with the Taliban only exacerbated the complexities and minimized the chances for a long-term US success beyond the (given) military victories.

**Lesson 2: *Military victories do not guarantee post-military success.*** The second lesson from Afghanistan is that an easy and quick military victory does *not* guarantee overall success; or to be more specific, conflict-reconstruction and nation-building success. Indeed, the US forces managed to topple the Taliban regime in just two months and forced the Taliban leadership to retreat and hide in remote places in Afghanistan and Pakistan. At that point many believed that the state-building and nation-building operations would be equally easy and successful. Evidently, it is neither easy nor guaranteed irrespective of the military superiority, for reasons we explore below.

**Lesson 3: *Hard power is not a panacea.*** In line with the previous point, one of the most prominent observations from the last two decades is that hard power will not lead to successful state-building. While hard power may be efficient in reducing terrorists' and authoritarian regimes' power and control, it is insufficient to create societies and governments that can be resilient enough to withstand the pressure of the power gap created after the toppling of the regimes. Without such resilience the 'liberated' regions will fall either to the groups that previously controlled the territories (in this case the

Taliban), or the country will suffer from civil conflict, as is the case for instance in Libya.

**Lesson 4: *Stabilization investment.*** It is estimated that the US cost for the war in Afghanistan was over 2 trillion USD. (That is a lot of money.) Yet, the vast majority of that was spent on military assets, weapons, PMCs, logistics, etc. and not on the post-conflict stabilization of the country. In simple terms, much more was spent on destroying than on rebuilding. This shortcoming is in line with the number of troops sent to Afghanistan and the targeted goals (see Lesson 5), which was not intended to provide peace keeping and reconstruction support. Just to put things in perspective, in Bosnia, after the war the US (and others) spent 1,600USD for each inhabitant in some form of economic assistance, as opposed to just 50USD per inhabitant spent in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Stabilization and solid state-building in an essentially destroyed country cannot really be achieved with such small investments on post-conflict activities.

**Lesson 5: *Soldier-local population ratio.*** It is not surprising that post-conflict reconstruction and sustainable socio-political changes require a significant investment; not just in material terms, but also in human resources. By 2002 the US had approximately 8,000 troops in Afghanistan, a country of 21.5 million which did not even have its own army or police. The ratio was 1 troop for every 2,700 Afghans. In comparison, in 1999 the NATO-led KFOR (Kosovo Force) in Kosovo – a country with a population of less than 1.9 million people at the time – was comprised of approximately 50,000 people, or a ratio of 38 troops for every Kosovar. Granted the original goal in Afghanistan was different, namely, to hunt down Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, but ultimately that goal transformed in the two decades that followed. Evidently the ratio was extremely low to achieve the state-building goals that followed the original military activities. They might have been enough to keep the opposition suppressed, but they were not sufficient to weaken them to the point that they could not easily return.

**Lesson 6: *Timing matters.*** Delaying the development and/or training of local military and police force – especially in countries where such forces are either non-existent or of sub-standard level – can have a very negative impact in the ability of the (new) state to exercise effective control and to stop the emergence or re-emergence of internal or external destabilizing forces. In the case of Afghanistan, the lack of timely training forced the state to depend on the local warlords to control numerous regions in the country, which in turn proved to be detrimental in the efforts to stop the Taliban. Those regional leaders without sufficient central government or external support were in no position to oppose the Taliban forces and very quickly we observed a domino situation where one region after another fell to the Taliban forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Dobbins J. (2021). Afghanistan was Lost Long Ago. *Foreign Affairs*.

**Lesson 7: *The kind of military forces matter.*** The effort to create armies based on western standards can be very problematic in some regions, as was the case of Afghanistan. “Western armies” have some very important and distinct characteristics: (i) they rely on high tech weapons (including air force, drones, cyber capabilities, etc.), (ii) they enjoy *constant* logistical support, and (iii) the level of intelligence is simply unmatched. Despite the training and the numerous weapons the Afghans received, they could not possibly enjoy those characteristics. In the absence of such high standards, the development of the local armed forces was essentially on paper, but not in reality. The Afghan army should have been built with the specific culture and societal structure in mind and in a way that would be less susceptible to corruption. Furthermore, the training emphasis was too much on tactical skills – infantry skills mostly – and much less on higher level expertise that would allow for ongoing logistics, planning, command and control, etc.; in other words, the trainers neglected to focus the training on issues that would allow the Afghan army to remain operational and efficient after the US departure. The fact that most of the Afghan armed forces were uneducated only exacerbated the problem of trying to implement a western-like military culture and operating procedures.

**Lesson 8: *Who is the security provider?*** This issue is related to the previous one. The Afghan army was not just ill-trained for the specific circumstances and culture; it was also unsuitable to act as the security provider for many of the domestic threats. The training emphasis was more on the army and much less on police forces, which subsequently means that many of the *domestic* insecurity problems could not be tackled efficiently or effectively by the army forces.

**Lesson 9: *Morale is still important.*** Being an external security provider of any state or region has benefits, but also may come at a significant cost for the one being protected when the provider leaves. This is especially the case if the provider did not sufficiently prepare the local security providers, not only technically, but also psychologically. For twenty years the Afghan forces were fighting under the guidance and ultimately the cover and protection of the American forces. When the Americans left it was obvious that the local forces did not just lack the aforementioned capabilities, but also the morale to fight on their own. Once the ‘training wheels’ were taken off, the psychological and practical shortcomings were too obvious and too significant to stop the Taliban forces from re-taking control.

**Lesson 10: *Treat the locals as equals.*** This too goes hand in hand with the previous ‘lesson’. If you treat the locals as inferior while you act as their security provider, they will not have the confidence, morale, and psychology to deal with the problems on their own. The Afghans were never really treated as *equal partners*. Frequently, even those who worked closely with the Americans were treated as second-rate partners.

**Lesson 11: Solid foundations for the new institutions:** State building requires solid foundations and importantly resilient institutions. In Afghanistan the state, including the armed forces, was being re-created based on kleptocracy and corruption. Among other things approximately 30% of the military forces did not even exist; they were 'ghost forces' that could not be confirmed by the government. Thus, there was a false perception that there existed a significant enough army to support the government for at least some reasonable time after the US withdrawal. Indicatively, on July 8, President Biden argued that the Afghan government was unlikely to fall; at least not for a couple of years. It fell in just a few days. To be fair, some of the US intelligence service reports warned that the Afghan government would not withstand the Taliban pressure, but even this can act as an additional lesson: listen to those raising concerns and doubts and be ready to acknowledge that those in charge of 'creating' the 'new' state may have failed in their mission.

**Lesson 12: Lack of faith in the ones you expect to take over.** As mentioned in the introduction the Americans were negotiating with the Taliban for the post-US withdrawal period. While this may have been necessary given the importance of the Taliban in Afghanistan, such actions also send very clear signals to the Afghan government that there is no faith in their abilities to remain in power and run the country. In simple words, the US essentially admitted that it was just a question of time until the Afghan government would collapse under the Taliban pressure. The lack of faith can only exacerbate the lack of morale and the feeling of inferiority.

**Concluding remarks: Conversion of military victories is an art the US has not yet mastered.** The US – and the Western militaries in general – are very good in developing and using military technology; there is little doubt about that. Indeed, they can inflict significant, almost total, damage on most armies and/or non-state military forces in the world in a matter of days. However, the US has proved unable to convert the military victories into complete strategic victories that would lead to stability and real state building. The inability to convert the military victories into resilient and stable environments can be attributed to numerous reasons, some of which were discussed above. Some of them are certainly very similar and closely linked, but each one deserves attention and much more in-depth research. What they all have in common is that they are relevant for the post-'entry' period and even more so right before 'exit' date, where the 'new' state must be able to exist on its own without significant external help. The case of Afghanistan, but also those of Libya and Iraq, demonstrate that as opposed to 'entry-strategies', 'exit strategies' are very under-analyzed, if analyzed at all.

## HISTORY WILL TEACH US NOTHING: LESSONS FROM AFGHANISTAN



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Scratch the surface of America's greatest debacle since Vietnam and hubris is what you find first and a lingering sense of Orientalism second. As Michael Howard, one of the greatest military historians of all time, would argue: *'the history of war is more than the operational history of armed forces. It is the study of entire societies. Only by studying their cultures can one come to understand what it was that (societies) fought about and why they fought in the way that they did.'*

The case of Afghanistan can be telling about American society, as the unthinkable of the 9/11 attack comes full circle with the unthinkable of this year's August retreat. A retreat described by the Slovenian prime minister, Janez Jansa (who was at the time presiding over the EU), as 'the greatest defeat for NATO in history'. In reality though, NATO itself, or the EU members participating in it for that matter, had little to do with this fiasco. In fact, Henry Kissinger, among many others, wondered why the United States appeared to exit the country "without much warning or consultation with allies or the people most directly involved in 20 years of sacrifice."

It seems that American troops withdrawal, which set the *en granaze* process of everything that ensued, had begun without any kind of plan first being disclosed to allies, who matter-of-factly assumed that such a plan was already in place. Events proved otherwise. The desperate scramble to get out of Afghanistan not only made a spectacle out of Washington on world stage, but it also alienated America's allies, who could now bear witness to how easily partners were thrown under the bus by the new administration once they had outlived their usefulness. The AUKUS agreement with Australia and Britain which followed, unexpectedly leaving France in the cold, only served to confirm such fears. Where that leaves Washington's credibility and how well such obvious high-handedness serves American hegemonic interests remains to be seen.

Yet such American high-handedness is nothing new and certainly did not come about with Trump or Biden. It is the same high-handedness underpinning notions of Orientalism<sup>1</sup> which made the West feel confident enough that forcing Afghanistan to be 'free' was a desirable outcome for all involved. Still, 'freeing' the Afghans from their history, their culture, their traditions, while juxtaposing western notions of democracy and liberal values as Holy Grail, perhaps seemed to be the right thing to do, back in 2001, but it is certainly not the right thing to do now.

One can recall that back then America was still riding high on the euphoria of its 'end of history' paradigm. Communism had collapsed, while Washington was still standing and standing triumphant one might add. The world seemed to be moving in a linear teleological direction towards the western values of liberal democracy and free market. The 9/11 attack may have been a shock where it hurt most, in the very heart of the American dream, but it had made Washington all the more adamant to make those responsible pay, in much a public way as possible, while at the same time forcing project democracy down their throats. Both in Afghanistan and Iraq, an otherwise multi-billion military project was duly labelled 'nation-building'- that is a nation built under a foreigner's superior cultural and political terms.

What we saw unravelling this summer was nothing but the failure of such policy in open view. While some Afghans (a lot of them women) were desperately protesting against the return of the Taliban in a few urban centres, others were silently welcoming the break with Ghani's foreign-sponsored and highly corrupted government. At the same time, American intelligence failed to see the Taliban for what it was – a grassroots movement gaining strength as Afghanistan's official government was losing ground. They failed to see that the Taliban were in fact the people and a lot of the people were the Taliban.

Enter Orientalism again. Then, Hubris followed by Theodicy. Enter the lessons of history; the lessons of war. Or perhaps not.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of Orientalism was first propagated by Edward Said in the late '70s; it can generally be translated to mean that westerners (be it politicians, academics, analysts) are too 'contaminated' by their westernised furniture of mind that fail to see situations in the Orient (be in Asia or the Arab world, for example) for what they are. Thus, they have a tendency of painting non-westerners and their way of life as uncivilised, backward and inferior to westerners.

## US WITHDRAWAL FROM THE MIDDLE EAST: POLICY FAILURE OR DESTINY?



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US military withdrawal from Afghanistan was not a surprise, at least not to US foreign policy observers. The thunderous return of the Taliban caused harsh criticism against President Joe Biden's decision for full withdrawal, but the endgame was visible a long time ago. It was pretty much known since 2011 that the United States would sooner or later abandon Middle Eastern battle fields. Of course there is plenty of room for discussion regarding whether the nation-building policies implemented in Afghanistan and the resources committed to this purpose could ultimately contribute to the establishment of a resilient and viable government system. We could even continue discussing (either theoretically or practically) liberal democratic practices and their applicability in "non-Western" societies. Like in most cases in political history, every development of such proportions has a significant degree of uniqueness stemming from its own special characteristics which are formed by (inherently unique) complex human interactions. This makes prediction in political science almost inevitable at the levels of human and state decision-making. Given this, policy makers often make decisions driven either from their own vanity or from evidence-based field assessments with promising outcomes. In my view though, in the case of US withdrawal from Afghanistan there is one profound historical lesson that can hardly be disputed, and which had to be taken into account when the decisions to engage in state-building enterprises were made: great powers tend to overstretch and, fatally, pay a painful price, despite noble intentions, leadership skills or evidence analysis capacity. In the case of the United States this historically solid theoretical hypothesis can be even more narrowed-down: great powers with unilateral hegemonic aspirations tend to overstretch and pay a painful price.

As regards US involvement in the Middle East, military withdrawal from Afghanistan was the fourth big sign of a broader strategic retreat: first, it was the military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and the "leading-from-behind" style of US participation in NATO's intervention in Libya, the same year. Then came the failure to respond with military means to the use of chemical weapons in Syria (allegedly) by the Assad regime in September 2013, despite the "red

line” that President Barack Obama had set. After that it was President Donald Trump’s green light to Turkey’s invasion of northern Syria against the Kurdish YPG forces in October 2019, despite their prominent role in fighting ISIS since 2015 and US support to this end. The fact that this tendency spans three consecutive presidencies leaves no room for alternative interpretations regarding US strategic retreat from the broader Middle East. This region is no more a foreign policy priority for Washington.

Historically, it was energy and security-related perceptions and interests that drew the United States into the Middle Eastern balancing game, at the first stages of the Cold War. This involvement would take place via both military and non-military means, usually driven by realpolitik considerations. During the Cold War there was a mixed record, with both success (i.e. the successful overthrow of Mohammed Mossadeq by the CIA in 1953 and the US-guided breakthrough of Camp David in 1978) as well as failure (i.e. the 1973-74 OPEC oil embargo and the lost of Iran following the Islamic revolution in 1979) stories. However, throughout this period, US mild interventionism contributed to the preservation of a manageable regional balance of power, broadly favorable for US strategic interests. Practically, this balancing approach was part of the successful containment of Soviet expansionism (even in times of escalation, like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979), while perilous regional flashpoints (like the Arab-Israeli wars, the Palestinian question and the war between Iran and Iraq) were not allowed to play out in a disruptive way for US interests.

This changed right after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. US interventionism became more direct and less discreet, beginning with the war in the Persian Gulf in 1991 and the permanent stationing of US forces in the region ever since. This escalation of US engagement in the greater Middle East grew further after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, with the initiation of the “forever war” in Afghanistan in 2001 and, especially, with the unilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003. The later significantly curtailed international legitimacy of US offshore activity and caused counter-balancing tendencies even among traditional US allies. This shift from indirect to direct engagement constituted an obvious bi-product of the global shift of power distribution that took place following the end of the Cold War, as well as of the unipolar illusions that dominated among foreign policy makers in Washington DC. In a unipolar world, where US power was unmatched, deciding to “go it alone” was much easier rather than under the Cold-War security dilemmas. However, this is exactly where the ball was lost and the tide started to turn: overspending military adventures, shaken alliances, new enemies and new non-state threats reversed the cost-effectiveness of US involvement in the Middle East. While at the initial stages of this turn the option of a policy reversal would be rejected by Washington as a sign of weakness, further advancement under negative cost-effectiveness was making things worse, simply intensifying the future impact of the upcoming

collapse. Thus the condemnatory headlines about the “lost war” in Afghanistan and the “end of the American era” in the Middle East.

Following these developments, the right question is not whether US post-Cold War strategy in the Middle East has failed, but whether this failure could have been avoided. To make assumptions about the probability to have avoided a failure essentially means to suggest a different course of policy action *ex post facto*. Indeed, more efficient decisions and actions on small-scale issues could transform the big picture and increase success potential. However, at the macro-level, the big picture contains some self-reinforcing attributes that cannot be reversed by delicate and highly sophisticated individual management: misperceptions, over-blown power estimations and group-thinking effects (usually unseen by decision makers) tend to create a destiny that hegemonic great powers can hardly escape from.

**EUROPE IN THE MIRROR OF THE TALIBAN RISE**

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It has been roughly two months since Taliban captured Kabul and secured control over most of Afghanistan. As usual, there were no shortage of emotional reports and commentaries, which were very much influenced by the shocking scenes of chaos in the capital and the Kabul airport. And even today, as the topic of Afghanistan leaves the main stage of the media attention, and the world is gradually “getting used” to the Taliban government, *uncertainty* remains the name of the game. There are still a way more questions than answers ranging from how to interact with the movement recognized as terrorist by most of the world community, and solve the most pressing issues, such as the food/fuel/medication supplies to the impoverished country ahead of the coming winter, to the long-term strategy and consequences for the international security.

Although the degree of uncertainty on multiple issues will remain high for the foreseeable future, it is however, important to adopt the structured approach, and disseminate problems by contours (domestic, regional and global) and by time horizon. That would permit to identify risks by type and urgency, and ultimately introduce a degree of relative clarity. What is *equally important* is the proper understanding of the concept of *risk*, which is a combination of two vital elements: first, the *threat identification*, and second, the *threat-mitigation capability and preparedness*. The latter is especially important – high mitigation capability and preparedness either eliminates the threat, or at least, reduces it to manageable levels, thereby making the overall risk low. And unfortunately, this is exactly what brings Afghanistan’s problems so close to home, because by looking in the Afghan mirror one can clearly see the vulnerability and the low level of preparedness of Europe to effectively mitigate the threats, which, in turn, stem from the inability and the reluctance of the member states to find compromises, develop common approach and jointly act on it as one. The security/military-related disunity is directly linked to deep differences in Europe’s (Britain included) economic and political affairs, stemming from deferring visions of the national interest by the individual states. That puts Cyprus in especially vulnerable position, given its small size, comparative economic weakness, geographic proximity to the

Middle East/Southern Asia and ongoing conflict with Turkey, which prevents any potential cooperation on mitigation of the threats.

The broad analysis is beyond the scope of this publication. However, despite of high uncertainty and fluidity of the current situation in and around Afghanistan, there is a number of issues, which may be discussed with the relative degree of certainty.

It is safe to claim that the rise of Taliban bears a lot of symbolism, and probably, represents the new political phenomena, i.e. the rise of the ultra-conservative ethno-religious counter-revolution, which overthrows a Western-backed elected government. The fallen Afghan government cannot be fully compared to those in Eastern Europe, CIS and some other countries, which came to power on the back of the Western-supported “colour revolutions”. Nevertheless, it shares some important attributes with the “colour revolutionaries”: it declared to remake the country in the Western image, it theatrically mimicked democratic procedures while getting involved in nepotism, endemic corruption and being hated by its own population. Taliban would not have won without popular support, or at least, without popular distaste for the ruling corrupt class. Another important element is that in contrast to the previous two decades, when the monopoly to overthrow the corrupt governments and explaining people why their lives were so miserable belonged to those “pro-democratic” movements, now the baton was passed to violent religious extremists. With the rising global inequality, corruption and widespread abuse of power, governments in many countries should get worried and take a note. Now, their nightmare will be not the pro-liberal NGOs but the “new Bolsheviks”, i.e. extremists of all types willing and prepared to get to power using all means possible on the back of the popular discontent as well as the anti-Western sentiments. This concerns most of the countries in the broader Middle East and big parts of Africa. The neighbouring states of the former Soviet Central Asia, still run by the old nomenklatura, are high on the list. There are serious concerns about the destabilisation of the Central Asian region and the spread of violence beyond the Afghan borders.

The risk stems from several plausible scenarios, which might be played out either separately or simultaneously: one, a Taliban-sponsored attack next spring, when the mountain passes will open. This is a relatively low-probability scenario, given the fact that Taliban has the Afghan-centric ideology and does not profess international jihadism; two, attacks launched by other terror groups based in the country and not controlled by Taliban; and three, the destabilisation will come from within and will be led by the local extremist groups. The scenarios have different probability and time horizons. However, what is certain is that Afghanistan will become the epicentre of the international illegal arms trading and the point of attraction

for the various international terror groups, which might not necessarily be welcomed by or allied with Taliban.

According to a 2017 report from the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), the US transferred around 75,898 vehicles, 599,690 weapons systems, and 208 aircrafts to the Afghanistan National Security Forces from 2003 to 2016.<sup>1</sup> And the list is not exhaustive. By some expert estimates, there are enough weapons in the country to wage a civil war for another decade. With the Afghan government foreign exchange reserves being frozen and the international aid mainly stopped, the Taliban administration will desperately need the resources to provide the basic necessities to the population under control. It is expected that the vast arms arsenal left, mainly, by the US will find its buyers from Kashmir to the East Mediterranean. The biggest potential threat is if the terror groups get their hands on the anti-aircraft missiles (although it is unclear whether such systems were among the equipment left behind) and make Afghanistan a base to launch attacks as far as Europe and North America.

Afghanistan today represents a demographic time-bomb with more than half of its population being under the age of twenty-five. The international military coalition, numerous NGOs and the Western-financed Afghan public sector were the major employment providers in the country of roughly 32 million people, 5 of which are concentrated in and around Kabul. It is important to remind that during the migratory crisis of 2014-15 the Afghans constituted the second-largest refugee group, which came to Europe. And the main trigger of the mass exodus was the partial withdrawal of the Western forces from Afghanistan, which left dozens of thousands of young people unemployed. This time, the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe is a way bigger. It is also important to remember that it is Europe which is the ultimate migration destination for the Afghans. Despite of Iran and Pakistan housing the largest Afghan refugee communities (780 000 and 1.4 million people respectively), most of the migrants during the last twenty years settled in Germany (148 000), Austria (40 000), France (32 000) and Sweden (30 000), while the US received just 2000 people.<sup>2</sup>

The inability of the Taliban government to handle the internal humanitarian crisis during the upcoming winter and beyond will inevitably lead to domestic destabilisation and mass exodus of people heading Westward (Iran and Pakistan have long changed their migration policies and do not allow the Afghans to settle). There are already reports that in order to improve its

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<sup>1</sup> Bindman P. *The US military arsenal now available to the Taliban* The New Statesman, September 13, 2021, downloaded from:

<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2021/08/the-us-military-arsenal-now-available-to-the-taliban>

<sup>2</sup> Buchholz K. *Where Afghan Refugees Are Located* Statista, August 18, 2021, downloaded from: <https://www.statista.com/chart/25559/host-countries-of-afghan-refugees/>

finances the cash-strapped new administration turned to the notorious “traditional” Afghan business, the opium/heroin exports, and is now flooding the market with the large quantities. It is to remind that up to 80%-90% of the Afghan produce is consumed by its “traditional” customer – Europe. With the street prices already on historical lows, the new abundant supplies heading to the European cities will represent a very serious threat to the continent’s social, humanitarian and political stability.

With the ongoing pandemic crisis, which further undermined the weakened European economy and aggravated the political differences within the block, the rise of Taliban and all the threats stemming from it, represent a very serious danger.

Currently, following the failure of the twenty-year presence in Afghanistan, the dominant narrative across the continent remains “never again”. However, if Europe wants to stay relevant on the global arena for decades to come, and efficiently counter multiple threats emerging from the neighboring regions, it will have no other choice but reach the internal consensus, and start building potent joint threat mitigation capabilities. Logically and inevitably, that will have to include forces for targeted military deployments in the critical regions. The emotional “never again” approach should never conquer the minds of the decision makers across the continent. On the contrary, the main lesson for Europe from the Afghan crisis should be the following: the inability to see the common challenges, and jointly address them creates serious long-term existential threats for everyone. The ongoing Afghan disaster and its inevitable dangerous consequences will be the Litmus test on the future of Europe.

## THE RETURN OF THE TALIBAN: THE BLEAK FUTURE OF AFGHANISTAN AND INTERNATIONAL RAMIFICATIONS



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When, on February 29, 2020, the Trump Administration was signing the Peace Agreement with the Taliban<sup>1</sup>, which included the withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan, with the parallel promise of the Taliban to oppose Al-Qaeda in their zones of influence and hold talks with the official government of Afghanistan, no one predicted what would follow in September 2021.

Nevertheless, the ease with which the Taliban regained control of the country, without any resistance whatsoever, not only does not surprise international analysts, but also involves very clear and specific reasons. Reasons that are no other than the complete operational stripping of the Afghan army, since it will no longer have at its disposal the advanced American equipment, and at the same time the fact that the Taliban were methodically preparing underground for the day of their return, having against them a line of defense incapable of responding to the combat tactics they follow. In fact, not only was there no resistance, but one would say that the road to their return was seemingly wide open.

It is precisely for this reason that the reactions against the Biden administration, not for the withdrawal decision (after all, this has been negotiated by the previous US Administration), but for the way it was executed and for its consequences, still continue, despite the fact that it is a common assumption that the US has suffered significant losses in terms of both economic and of human lives losses, fighting for 20 years in a war that didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Reactions, paradoxically emanating even from those who negotiated the withdrawal of the US forces, such as former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, who recently slammed the Biden administration.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America February 29, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Mike Pompeo calls out Biden following an arbitrary deadline for Afghanistan exit, FOX News 29 September 2021.

The reality is that the next day in Afghanistan brought not only new developments for the country, but for the entire, already unstable, region, dragging into uncertainty both the neighboring countries and Europe, which sees - in the face of the Taliban - the rebirth of the terror of extremism and even more so, a new migration crisis that is expected to be caused by the need of Afghan civilians to protect themselves from the dangers brought about by the return of the hardline Sunni Islamist movement.

The restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan seems to be creating new balances not only in the Middle East and the Arab world, which is still trying reach stability after the Arab spring of 2011, but also in the West, which has been watching, stunned and seemingly incapable of reacting, what has been taking place in the country for a month.

However, with a first assessment, it is expected that we will witness a repetition of the Syrian scenario with Russia and China, on the one hand, seeming willing to discuss with the Taliban regime and on the other hand, with Turkey seeing another golden, possibly last opportunity to regain its lost control of the region, putting itself forward as the guardian of the security in the Middle East. It is certain that Ankara will try to capitalize on its role in allegedly halting any new refugee flows to Europe, and is already presenting itself as the only actor which can play the role of the link between the Taliban, Europe and the US.

Given that the Taliban will seek international legitimacy, as they have done in the past, it remains to be seen who will accept their leadership. It is expected that their rapid return will greatly promote Islamic extremists around the world, be it Al-Qaeda or other organizations, which seem more likely to accept their leadership in the country and work with them. Al-Qaeda has gained support and legitimacy in the turbulent conflict zone of the Islamic world, where it believes it has the potential to expand and overthrow local rulers. But even if Al-Qaeda does not do so, it is certain that there will be other organizations that will seek to exploit the chaotic situation created by the patchwork of American defeat, the dominance of the Taliban and the confrontational image of the Middle East with the parallel prevalence of jihadist ideology in many regions.

At the same time, however, the humanitarian crisis created by the return of the Emirate, is even more worrying. The Afghan citizens' need to protect themselves from the fury of the erstwhile powerful of the country, who, for two decades were preparing their revenge, is bound to create a new migration crisis. This crisis will affect neighboring countries, but much more so, Europe, which feels incapable at this stage, of coping, while frontline Member States such as Cyprus, Greece and Italy, which are expected to receive the largest waves of migrants, will unavoidably kneel. The smugglers' networks are already rubbing their hands with satisfaction in the

face of the new prospect of getting rich from the exploitation of the unfortunate Afghan civilians who will seek protection from the expected hardship and suffering.

Already, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, in recent months, and as soon as the US withdrawal Agreement was publicized, hundreds of thousands of Afghans are looking for a way to flee the country.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore imperative that the international community acts even now, as a deterrent both against the plans of the Taliban, who have made their intentions clear from the outset through tragic and ludicrous actions, despite their previous attempts to convince otherwise, but also against the exploitation of a people who hoped for a better future and who saw their hopes shattered overnight in the face of the stampede of Americans and other Westerners.

The next day in Afghanistan, not only does not leave any sign of optimism, but on the contrary, foreshadows a bleak future. The return of a hardline regime, with practices known around the world, the possible reintroduction of extremist organizations that have spread terror in the Middle East and the West for decades, as well as the reclassification of forces, comes to add problems to an already burdened region, which is constantly trying to breathe, but is increasingly encountering new challenges.

The question is whether the Western world is willing to allow this return, and even more so, whether the US government is prepared to withstand the shocks of an apparent failure that has cost it 20 years of significant losses, without ultimate justification.

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<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, Afghanistan Situation External Update, 20 September 2021.

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