

The End of an Era? The Fall of Afghanistan: foreign policy implications for the United States

by Phillip W. Weiss

The fall of Afghanistan is a seminal defeat for the United States. After spending one trillion dollars and incurring the deaths and injuries of thousands of its troops, the United States has lost the war. The Taliban has won. The president of Afghanistan has fled the country. The war is over.

Twenty years ago, the United States invaded Afghanistan. That invasion occurred ostensibly because the Taliban refused US demands to turn over to the US Al-Qaeda groups that the US claimed were operating out of Afghanistan. At that time, the US mission seemed limited to rooting out Al-Qaeda from Afghanistan. Then at some point the goal of the mission expanded to include nation-building, that is, to convert Afghanistan into a Western-style democracy. That shift in mission practically guaranteed that the US would get bogged down in what became a civil war. The US military drove the Taliban from power but was unable to follow up with a decisive military victory. Instead, the US embarked on a massive program to create and build up an Afghan military and national government that would take over the fighting. That program proved to be a colossal and expensive failure, as recent events have shown.

To provide an ideological foundation for its continued and prolonged presence in the Afghanistan, the US government, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, but much more so under the Democrats, explained

that the goal of the US was to liberate the Afghan people from the tyranny of the Taliban and to protect the rights of women. The US greatly emphasized that last point. Under the supervision of and protection by US forces, the Afghan people held what was depicted as democratic elections and passed laws providing women full equality. The US also demanded that the Taliban cease its resistance and join the government, all under US auspices. The Taliban refused and the war went on and the US continued to pour in money and troops, resulting in the deaths and serious injury to thousands of American soldiers and civilians, without achieving a decisive victory.

President Donald Trump announced that he would withdraw US forces from Afghanistan, but at the last moment postponed that order. During the 2020 presidential campaign candidate Joe Biden said he would bring the war in Afghanistan to an end, and after his election as president, proved true to his words. He ordered a complete withdrawal of all US forces. The decision was final and there would be no turning back. President Biden said that the Afghan government has a fine army and that it is time for the Afghan government to fight for itself. However, instead of fighting, the Afghan army collapsed, the American-backed Afghan government fled, and the Taliban moved into Kabul, taking over the presidential palace and renaming Afghanistan the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The people who the US accused twenty years ago of harboring the terrorists who launched the attacks on September 11, 2001 are the same people who again are in power. By any standard of measure, this development constitutes a massive and perhaps even unprecedented defeat for the United States.

The ramifications of this defeat are much more profound than what resulted from the US defeat in South Vietnam in 1975. This is because as serious as the defeat was in Vietnam, whatever happened in southeast Asia did not pose a direct threat to the security of the United States while whatever happens in the middle east does. The US cannot afford to lose face and lose power and influence in that region. Such a development will place the security of the US at risk, and possibly in peril.

There are many nations and groups in the Middle East who are hostile to the United States. They are hostile for a variety of reasons, political, cultural, historical, religious, military. Much of that hostility stems from the US continued support for the state of Israel. That the US imports massive amounts of oil from the region further complicated relations with the nations in the region, almost all of which reject Western style government and at least three of which, Iran, Saudi Arabia and now Afghanistan, are openly theocratic. In addition, there are two nations, Russia and China, that want to replace the US as the major broker of influence in the region. If that happens, and the entire region comes under the influence of either country, the US will be in deep trouble. This could lead to an erosion of US support for Israel and for the emergence of Iran as the regional dominating power, which would also mean an Iran that possesses nuclear weapons, something that the US has vowed it would never permit to happen. However, that vow may be ringing hollow.

The US defeat in Afghanistan now raises serious doubts over the US capability to back its words with action. And that is the crux of the US dilemma.

Will other nations continue to take the US seriously as a major player and power broker in the region and the world, or will they look to other nations to meet their own security and foreign policy needs? Or to put it another way, will other nations start to marginalize the US? These questions have serious implications for US foreign policy and survival. For instance, how will North Korea react to the US defeat in Afghanistan? Will North Korea take the US defeat as a signal and opportunity to behave more brazenly on the Korean peninsula where the US still stations troops? Will OPEC take the US defeat as an opportunity to brazenly jack up the price of oil as means to extort political concessions from the US? Will Russia increase its pressure on the Ukraine to shift its allegiances eastward? Will Hamas renew its rocket attacks on Israel? Will China become more brazen in its efforts to impose its control over Taiwan and the South China Sea? In short, does the US still have the capability and willingness to defend its interests and keep its commitments?

In February 1942 the fall of Singapore marked the end of British influence and power in south and southeast Asia and arguably marked the start of Britain's decline as a world power. Can the same be said for the US defeat in Afghanistan? Is this the end of an era?