

America's war in Afghanistan is ending in crushing defeat

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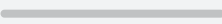
The longest war

The consequences of the conflict for Afghans, already catastrophic, are likely to get worse



“I WANT TO talk about happy things, man!” protested President Joe Biden in early July, when reporters asked him about the imminent withdrawal of the last American forces from Afghanistan, expected some time in the next few weeks. No wonder he wants to change the subject: America has been fighting in Afghanistan for 20 years. It has spent more than \$2trn on the war. It has lost thousands of its own troops and seen the death of tens of thousands of Afghans—soldiers and civilians alike. Now America is calling an end to the whole sorry adventure, with almost nothing to show for it.

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True, al-Qaeda, which sparked the war by planning the 9/11 attacks from Afghanistan, is no longer much of a force in the country, although it has not been eliminated entirely. But that is about as far as it goes. Other anti-American terror groups, including a branch of Islamic State, continue to operate in Afghanistan. The zealots of the Taliban, who harboured Osama bin Laden and were overthrown by American-backed forces after 9/11, have made a horrifying comeback. They are in complete control of about half the country and threaten to conquer the rest. The democratic, pro-Western government fostered by so much American blood and money is corrupt, widely reviled and in steady retreat.

In theory, the Taliban and the American-backed government are negotiating a peace accord, whereby the insurgents lay down their arms and participate instead in a redesigned political system. In the best-case scenario, strong American support for the government, both financial and military (in the form of continuing air strikes on the Taliban), coupled with immense pressure on the insurgents' friends, such as Pakistan, might succeed in producing some form of power-sharing agreement. But even if that were to happen—and the chances are low—it would be a depressing spectacle. The Taliban would insist on moving backwards in the direction of the brutal theocracy they imposed during their previous stint in power, when they confined women to their homes, stopped girls from going to school and meted out harsh punishments for sins such as wearing the wrong clothes or listening to the wrong music.

More likely than any deal, however, is that the Taliban try to use their victories on the battlefield to topple the government by force. They have already overrun much of the countryside, with government units mostly restricted to cities and towns. Demoralised government troops are abandoning their posts. This week over 1,000 of them fled from the north-eastern province of Badakhshan to neighbouring Tajikistan. The Taliban have not yet managed to capture and hold any cities, and may lack the manpower to do so in lots of places at once. They may prefer to throttle the government slowly rather than attack it head on. But the momentum is clearly on their side.



At the very least, the civil war is likely to intensify, as the Taliban press their advantage and the government fights for its life. Other countries—China, India, Iran, Russia and Pakistan—will seek to fill the vacuum left by America. Some will funnel money and weapons to friendly warlords. The result will be yet more bloodshed and destruction, in a country that has suffered constant warfare for more than 40 years. Those who worry about possible reprisals against the locals who worked as translators for the Americans are missing the big picture: America is abandoning an entire country of almost 40m people to a grisly fate.

It did not have to be this way. For the past six years fewer than 10,000 American troops, plus a similar number from other NATO countries, have propped up the Afghan army enough to maintain the status quo. American casualties had dropped to almost nothing. The war, which used to rile voters, had become a political irrelevance in America. Since becoming president, Mr Biden has focused, rightly, on the threats posed by China and Russia. But the American deployment in Afghanistan had grown so small that it did not really interfere with that. The new American administration views the long stalemate as proof that there is no point remaining in Afghanistan. But for the Afghans whom it protected from the Taliban, the stalemate was precious.

There will be a long debate about how much the withdrawal saps America's credibility and prestige. For all its wealth and military might, America failed not only to create a strong, self-sufficient Afghan state, but also to defeat a determined insurgency. What is more, America is no longer prepared to put its weight behind its supposed ally, the Afghan government, to the surprise and dismay of many Afghan officials. Hostile regimes in places like China and Russia will have taken note—as will America's friends.

That does not make Afghanistan a second Vietnam. For one thing, the Afghan war was never really the Pentagon's or the nation's focus. American troops were on the ground far longer in Afghanistan than they were in Vietnam, but far fewer of them died. Other events, from the war in Iraq to the global financial crisis, always seemed more important than what was happening in Kandahar. And American politicians and pundits have agonised over whether to stay or go for so long that, now the withdrawal has finally arrived, it has lost its power to shock. To the extent that outsiders see it as a sign of American weakness, that weakness has been evident for a long time.

Unhappy things

Shocking or not, though, the withdrawal is nonetheless a calamity for the people of Afghanistan. In 2001 many hoped that America might end their 20-year-old civil war and free them from a stifling, doctrinaire theocracy. For a time, it looked as though that might happen. But today the lives of ordinary Afghans are more insecure than ever: civilian casualties were almost 30% higher last year than in 2001, when the American deployment began, according to estimates from the UN and academics. The economy is no bigger than it was a decade ago. And the mullahs are not only at the gates of Kabul; their assassins are inside, targeting Shias, secularists, women with important jobs—

anyone who offends their blinkered worldview. America was never going to solve all Afghanistan's problems, but to leave the country back at square one is a sobering failure.

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