Why U.S. Policy in Afghanistan Post-Withdrawal Needs a Rethink

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Twenty years and an estimated $2,261,000,000,000 later, U.S. President Joe Biden has ended America's longest war in Afghanistan as the Taliban has taken swift control of the country. The final act in this war was a U.S. drone strike in Kabul that allegedly killed 10 civilians, accidentally targeting an anti-hunger aid worker who was mistaken as an "imminent threat" and "ISIS facilitator" because his water bottles were misidentified as bombs. The death of Zemari Ahmadi, who worked for a U.S.-based NGO called Nutrition and Education International, Ahmad Naser, who was a former U.S. military contractor with a pending Special Interest Visa (SIV) application, and eight other civilians including seven children, is a vivid exemplification of the war's chaotic crescendo.

With U.S. credibility in flux and policy post-withdrawal ambiguous at best, questions about future U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and the wider region are looming. While credibility may be the wrong measure and perhaps poorly assessed in this debate, the U.S.-led withdrawal has created a large change in the operating environment that shakes up America's ability to achieve strategic objectives. To address American national interests in Afghanistan going forward and to achieve long-term objectives in the region, the U.S. government must revise the ways and means used to influence security affairs in Afghanistan away from the ones relied upon for the last two decades.

President Biden announced that the sole U.S. national interest in Afghanistan is preventing the resurgence of terrorism threatening the American homeland in that country. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin have joined him in making it clear that, in the short term, this means that the U.S. will rely on "over-the-horizon" military capabilities to prosecute an ongoing counter-terrorism (CT) fight in Afghanistan. Expected targets are Al Qaeda, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant–Khorasan Province (ISKP), and the Taliban if it returns to external terrorist operations again. Questions remain about the U.S. government's ability to maintain such a CT campaign without stationing certain intelligence capabilities within, or at least nearby, the landlocked territory of Afghanistan to enable the current highly technical American approach to remote warfare.

Meanwhile, the U.S. national defense establishment appears committed to implementing a security strategy pivot away from the geography and objectives of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) legacy. This policy necessitates economic use of force, parsimonious approaches to objectives unrelated to countering strategic competitors, and shifting away from GWOT-optimized capabilities to those less suited to Afghanistan in particular. These strategic tensions interact with the Biden-Harris administration's stated preferences for a new approach to American foreign policy that centers human rights and prioritizes diplomacy as a necessary corrective to mistakes the president perceives from the GWOT era.

This modernization of U.S. foreign policy presents an opportunity for a fresh approach to post-withdrawal challenges. Afghanistan could have met a better fate than its disastrous fall to the Taliban. The U.S. could have better prioritized Afghan civil society activists and human rights operators well ahead of time in addition to obviously prioritizing U.S. citizens and other foreign nationals. Doing so would have sent a better message: while U.S. national security objectives have changed and the American people want our troops home, we will not leave those who worked hard and very publicly for a better future for their country and let them die at the hands of their new leaders.

As the United States grapples with the fallout of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, an ugly reality that exists across the rest of the Middle East and North Africa once again resurfaces. This is a reality that has seen some of the

most egregious human rights violations not just take place, but flourish, across this part of the world over the past decade since the start of the Arab Spring. Mass atrocities and crimes against humanity committed by the Assad regime in Syria, where thousands have been gassed to death and tens of thousands hung in state-run execution facilities, coupled with war crimes committed in Yemen along with arrests of political dissidents in Egypt and Saudi Arabia reveal a dark reality that has now become the norm.

The question should not be solely focused on whether the U.S. should or should not withdraw from a foreign engagement, but rather, what sort of policy does the United States want to have going forward that ensures human rights are part of the equation when engaging in military action, whether they be drone strikes or full-on withdrawals, or coercive economic measures like sanctions and understanding the consequences of U.S. action or inaction. For example, there is a robust conversation occurring amongst the human rights community as the new U.S. administration has yet to publish the findings of its sanctions policy review. The restoration of the humanitarian exemption allowed by the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, especially in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, would be an important step to rectifying negative externalities caused by current U.S. sanctions policy on humanitarian trade.

The hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan sent a poor message to human rights defenders in the region by essentially saying "your future does not matter" despite two decades of supporting civil society as Afghans worked to rebuild their country. These fearless activists for a more just and inclusive region are now prey to the Taliban, just as the fearless Iraqi protesters demanding better human rights have suffered a similar fate, dying by the hundreds as they are felled by Iranian-backed militia sniping them from rooftops or by U.S.-trained military units of the Iraqi armed forces. What about the tens of thousands of innocent Egyptians rounded up by Egyptian security services, also a country that receives generous amounts of U.S. support?

The pattern here is quite clear: the new U.S. administration has pushed aside human rights for broader short-term national security concerns, at the expense of long-term national security priorities. If the U.S. wants to curb China's behavior, or curtail Russia's malign influence along NATO borders, it should have held Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman responsible for the killing of *Washington Post* journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi, heaped criticism on President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's atrocious human rights abuses in Egypt, and demanded accountability for the killing of over 600 Iraqi protesters over the past year alone. Now with Afghanistan, the U.S. could, at a minimum, assist in the fleeing of Afghan activists, interpreters, and others who are now being targeted by the Taliban using all the tools that we have available that are non-violent and do not involve another, even limited, military incursion.

The U.S. must recalibrate how it engages in foreign conflicts going forward, but also strategize how it withdraws from such conflict zones, regardless of the size of the footprint of U.S. military forces. The current approach which is rooted in the traditional view of national security priorities first and everything else second has failed the U.S. more often than it has succeeded. Asking what the "vital national interest" is requires a more comprehensive response, one that incorporates disengaging from an unpopular and ineffective military intervention with protecting what gains were made, not just by the U.S. military, but also by ordinary Afghans. If we as a country were looking out for our long-term interests, leaving an Afghanistan that is falling to the Taliban should not have equated to abandoning its bravest and brightest to fend for themselves. Doing so is negligence and undermines America's standing in the region and across the world.

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