

# Distant Dreams Of Peace After The US Exit: What's Next For Afghanistan?

Posted on October 4, 2021

**SUMMARY:** *It would be easy to draw the wrong conclusions from the ugly spectacle of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent celebration by the Taliban of their return to power. The history of Afghanistan before and during the US involvement is a complicated affair, as no doubt will be the future. Former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan Rakesh Sood takes a look at the issues and what is at stake.*

Historians like dates because these serve as convenient bookends to define beginnings and endings. Sometimes, there is a definitive date like Sept. 11, 2001 that gripped the world as it watched, stunned at the sight of airplanes flying into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Clearly, a new age had begun. Four days later, US President George W. Bush described 9/11 as “an attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world” and announced “a war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them.” A “global war on terror” was under way and military operations began on Oct. 7, 2001, under the name Operation Enduring Freedom.

But sometimes, historians look for a date to mark a closure, and Aug. 31, 2021, with the last US flight taking off from Kabul carrying Ambassador Ross Wilson and Maj. Gen. Chris Donahue, is a suitable candidate. Ironically, the same Taliban that the US ousted in 2001 were now back. The US took credit for having carried out the largest airlift evacuation in history, but the Taliban celebrated their victory, together with other jihadi groups.

## In search of a 'grand strategy'

Major Powers like to adopt “grand strategies” because they have unlimited aspirations, and in the past, these often related to wars. The reason was because all-out wars demanded collective all-out efforts with a sole objective – victory. After the Second World War, the victorious European Allied powers were left with shattered economies and the Axis powers were destroyed, leaving the United States as the only major power with its economy intact and accounting for nearly half of global GDP.

Soon after the war's end, the US found itself leading another war, one without open combat. The Cold War aimed at defending the Western free world against Soviet Communist expansionism; the grand strategy adopted was “containment.” It was a wonderfully undefined term and George F. Kennan, the diplomat and father of containment, wrote many articles later elaborating how his idea had been distorted. Successive US presidents – Harry Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan – each coined their own doctrines while claiming to pursue containment.

Containment helped spawn the science and technology revolution in the US, build a national highway system and put a man on the moon. It also helped nurture stable democracies in Germany, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, justified the Vietnam debacle and the opening to China that has created a strategic rival, Containment drove the McCarthy era anti-communist witch hunt in the US and permitted cozy relations with right-wing military dictators in many cases. Containment lasted for nearly five decades because the Cold War did not envisage victory as a war based on combat does. The fact that the USSR imploded in 1991 without a shot being fired testified to its success.

As the sole superpower, the US was now searching for a new grand strategy. In 1998, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had famously described America as “the indispensable nation.” Explaining why the US used military power, she said, “We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us.”

With 9/11, the new grand strategy was clear – a global war on terror. In an address to Congress on Sept. 20, 2001, President Bush held Al Qaeda responsible, declared war on the Taliban and called on every nation in the region to make a decision – “either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.”

### **Re-evaluating the ‘global war on terror’**

US Gen. Wesley Clark, in his book *Winning Modern Wars: Iraq, Terrorism and the American Empire* (2004), recalls how in November 2001 the US was already updating its invasion plans for Iraq. Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz saw Iraq not as a direct threat but as part of a grand strategy to exhibit overwhelming military power, to destroy America’s enemies and secure US hegemony into the foreseeable future.<sup>[1]</sup> Henry Kissinger, the doyen of the US strategic community credited with the US opening to China that he has continued to justify, claimed in 2003, “Iraq is justified because Afghanistan isn’t enough. America’s enemies had aspired to its humiliation and we need to humiliate them.”

The problem is that a “global war on terror” involves combat but does not lend itself to simple outcomes of victory or defeat. A longstanding US ally, Israel, which has battled terrorism for decades could have explained this, but then Israel is not a global superpower. Secondly, Israel would hardly be averse to the idea that some of its adversaries in the region would be cut down to size.

The outcome of the global war on terror has been questionable. It is true that there have been no spectacular terrorist attacks on US soil in the last two decades and Osama bin Laden was killed a decade ago. Yet, the US exit from Afghanistan does not smell of victory. The 20-year military intervention has spawned new terrorist organizations and franchises of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Iran’s influence in Iraq and the region has grown. Syria is an open wound. In West Asia, Russia has been able to reassert itself successfully. Beijing, meanwhile, has benefited from Washington’s preoccupation with the global war on terror by emerging as a strategic rival and challenging US supremacy in economic, technological and ideological dimensions in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Most significant, however, is the loss of US credibility that President Joe Biden has sought to restore by assuring allies and partners that “America is back.” Many claim that they were not consulted about the timing of the Afghanistan withdrawal although the writing had been on the wall. In the region, concerns have grown as the US announced it is withdrawing its missile defense batteries from Prince Sultan airbase outside Riyadh.<sup>[2]</sup> In July, the Biden administration announced that it will also withdraw all combat forces from Iraq by the end of 2021,<sup>[3]</sup> although some troops will stay on for training purposes. For Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan, all of whom had been calling for a US exit from the region, the messy exit from Afghanistan was an opportunity to paint the US as an exhausted and incompetent superpower and a sign that the US was unlikely to return to the region, at least not under a Biden presidency.

### **Did Biden have a choice?**

There is a sign common in American stores – “If you break it, you own it.” Since the Afghan intervention ended on Biden’s watch, he owns it but cumulative mistakes by each of his three predecessors – Presidents Trump, Obama and Bush – contributed to this outcome. Yet, Biden had choices, although these were politically difficult, given the kind of polarization that US domestic politics has undergone.

Biden claimed that the Doha Agreement signed on Feb. 29, 2020 when Trump was in the White House, left him with a “choice between leaving or escalating.” However, Biden had reversed many of Trump’s decisions – returning to the Paris Agreement on climate change, resuming talks with Iran and re-joining the WHO. Second, the “forever war” was a myth because the US war had ended with the conclusion of Operation Enduring Freedom on Dec. 31, 2014. Since 2015, Operation Resolute Support has restricted the US and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) role to “training, advising and assisting” the Afghan forces that took the lead in combat. (There was a limited counter-terrorism mission, Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, carried out by a small number of US Special Forces). US troop strength came down to 8,500 and since 2015, less than a hundred US and NATO troops have been killed in action. The costs of the military operation had come down from \$100 billion a year to less than \$40 billion. The problem was the narrative about the longest war that seemed directionless. What was unsustainable were the losses borne by the Afghan security forces during this period – over 50,000. But the reasons for that lay further back in the past. When Biden retained Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the architect of the fundamentally flawed February 2020 Doha Agreement that he had criticized as a “bad deal,” the die was cast.

### **Legacies of Bush, Obama and Trump**

The problem is that as vice president from 2009 until 2016, Biden had been complicit in the gradual legitimization of the Taliban. What had begun as a counter-terrorism mission in 2001 had already morphed into a counter-insurgency operation, as the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld team led the US into Iraq. The American nation-building initiative in Afghanistan intended to ensure that it never hosted terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda again, lost favor in Washington.

The Taliban was neither disarmed nor defeated, they had merely melted away into safe havens and sanctuaries across the Durand Line in Pakistan that enabled them to regroup and re-establish their financing mechanisms. Pakistan’s Inter-Services-Intelligence (ISI) resumed its old game with the US, running with the hares and hunting with the hounds, emerging as the front-line state partnering with the US in Afghanistan while subverting US efforts by aiding and abetting the Taliban and the Haqqani network as they unleashed a spate of IED attacks and suicide bombings in Afghanistan aimed at undermining the Afghan government. US generals knew it was impossible to defeat an insurgency that enjoys safe-havens but it was an inconvenient truth.

Having distinguished the Afghanistan war as a “necessary war” from the “bad war” in Iraq, Obama accepted the demands from the generals for a surge in the US troop presence with the assurance that things would turn around in 18 months. He raised US troop levels to over 100,000 but also announced the drawdown, ending combat operations at the end of 2014. This may have been politically satisfying for Obama, but strategically speaking, it was disastrous.

However, there was a more fundamental change of policy under way. It was signalled by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech at the Asia Society on Feb. 18, 2011, where she recast the preconditions for talks with the Taliban – “insurgents to lay down arms and renounce violence, accept the framework of the Afghan constitution, and separate from Al Qaeda” – as outcomes of negotiations.<sup>[4]</sup> This was followed in the UN Security Council with Resolution 1988 on June 17, 2011 that separated the Taliban sanctions list from the Al Qaeda sanctions list, established under Resolution 1267 in 1999. Next came Security Council Resolution 2082 on Dec. 17, 2012 that eased travel restrictions on Taliban members to enable them to travel and participate in peace and reconciliation talks. The result was the opening of the Taliban office in Doha, marking the second stage of legitimization from an insurgent force into a political actor.

All this continued in tandem with public testimony by US Admiral Mike Mullen calling the Haqqani network “a veritable arm” of Pakistan's ISI.<sup>[5]</sup> Clinton, on a visit to Islamabad, warned her hosts, “You can't keep snakes in your backyard and expect them only to bite your neighbors.”<sup>[6]</sup> But the Taliban and the ISI were awaiting the next opening.

The next breakthrough for the Taliban (and Pakistan) came in 2018 when the Trump administration announced the appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation, who began direct talks with the Taliban. It was a step forward in the legitimization process. Khalilzad began by setting out four objectives – a ceasefire, cutting links with Al Qaeda, Islamic State and other terrorist groups, intra-Afghan peace talks and withdrawal of foreign forces, underlining that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Eventually, he dropped the conditions and acquiesced to the Taliban stand – a time bound unconditional US withdrawal in return for safe passage. The other three issues were relegated to the sidelines without any timeframe. Even with regard to Al Qaeda, the Taliban commitment is not to cut all ties but only “to prevent any group or individual, including Al Qaeda, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the US and its allies.” The document bore a strange title – “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the US as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America.”<sup>[8]</sup> This rather clunky phrase was repeated more than a dozen times in the text of the Agreement, a clear indication that the days of the Islamic Republic established after the Taliban were ousted in 2001, were numbered.

The last favour the US did for the Taliban was to “persuade” the Afghan government to release over 5,000 Taliban prisoners, adding to its further marginalization. In fact, Al Qaeda complimented the Taliban following the conclusion of the Doha Agreement for having secured the US withdrawal.

This was the policy maze that Biden found himself trapped in. He had the option to change the flawed narrative of forever wars or take action against the safe havens but he chose to cut the Gordian knot by redefining the objective, declaring that the mission had been accomplished by killing Osama bin Laden and decimating Al Qaeda, and assuring the American people that their security could be ensured by over-the-horizon kinetic options like drones.

### **What comes next for Afghanistan and beyond?**

There is an old saying – wars get more interesting when the fighting stops. The First World War led to the Treaty of Versailles and the Second World War gave birth to the United Nations and the Cold War. The end of the Cold War provided a display of American hubris and the world still awaits what the end of the global war on terror will produce.

The process of legitimization of the Taliban was predicated on the hypothesis that it had changed and there is a Taliban 2.0. So far, there is little evidence for this. One thing is clear though – unlike the Taliban of the 1990s, today’s Taliban is more divided internally. Taliban negotiators in Doha, led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a Taliban co-founder, presented a more moderate face but have been relegated to second-rung positions in the new dispensation. The commanders doing the actual fighting in the south and the west do not seem to have found positions yet in the new government. Instead, there is a large presence of Taliban leaders from the Quetta Shura (council of leaders), especially those who also held positions in the 1990s Taliban regime. Four of the ministers have spent over a decade in Guantanamo and were released in 2014 as part of a prisoner swap. More than half of the 33 appointments announced in the Interim Government are on the UN sanctions list.

The clear winners are the Haqqanis who are known for their close ties to the ISI. Stories abound that their takeover of Kabul was the revenge for 2001 when the Northern Alliance were quick to enter Kabul after the ouster of the Taliban even as Pakistan was pleading with the US to ensure some form of a transition. Today, not only does Sirajuddin Haqqani control the all-powerful Interior Ministry, his family and friends control the key portfolios of refugees, border management, communications and intelligence. More important, the Haqqanis will control the appointment of governors to seven eastern provinces that border Pakistan.

None of this points to the creation of an inclusive government that will share power with other ethnic groups who don’t necessarily subscribe to the Taliban ideology. In fact, the over representation of the Haqqanis (belonging to the Zadran tribe) is likely to create resentment among other Pashtuns from among the Ghilzais and the Zirk Durranis. Traditionally, it is the Durranis, Mohammedzais and Barakzais who have controlled Afghanistan. The current set up gives more clout to Ghilzais, Zadrans and Kochis who come lower down in the pecking order. Even if the reader is not familiar with these clans, the point is that the tribal divisions in Afghanistan will continue under the Taliban.

Signs of friction are already apparent as rumors have swirled in Kabul since mid-September about a bruising showdown (and perhaps even violence) between Mullah Baradar and Khaleel Haqqani, after which Mullah Baradar has not been seen. There are reports that he left for Kandahar.<sup>[9]</sup>

Pakistan has always found it preferable to deal with Islamist Pashtuns rather than the traditional ruling tribes that were more nationalist in their outlook. During the 1980s, the Islamist banner was necessary to rally the tribals to the cause of the jihad against the Soviet communist infidels, and then again, against the American occupiers and their puppet regime in Kabul over the last 15 years.

However, once the Pashtun returns to his homeland, he takes on a more nationalist color, as the Pakistanis found even in the 1990s. Pakistan suggested to Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader and founder who died of natural causes in 2013, that the Durand Line created by the British in 1893 between British India and Afghanistan, become a recognized boundary, but he rejected it as an unnecessary wall between Pashtun Islamic brothers. Pakistani Pashtun leader Khan Abdul Wali Khan (son of the legendary Bacha Khan, also known as Frontier Gandhi) famously said in the 1980s – I have been a Pakistani for 40 years, a Muslim for 1,200 years and a Pashtun for thousands of years. Already facing criticism from a new Pashtun group, the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement, the Pakistan establishment may find that

linkages between Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) are closer than they bargained for.

After having pushed for a US withdrawal, Iran and Russia have begun to sound notes of caution. Iran issued a statement on Sept. 6 condemning the attack and “foreign” interference in Panjshir and calling it a violation of international and humanitarian law (the foreign reference was to reports about Pakistani involvement in helicopter and drone strikes in Panjshir).<sup>[10]</sup> Russia, another loud voice demanding US withdrawal, doesn’t share a border with Afghanistan but is worried about infiltration through Central Asian states; it has stepped up military exercises with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>[11]</sup> China has traditionally relied on Pakistan to address its concerns regarding the presence of the ETIM (Uighur militants) in Afghanistan and in the tribal region. The Doha Taliban have assured China that they will not allow China’s interests to be threatened but it is unclear how they will deal with ETIM and other such terrorist groups that have been fighting alongside them to get the Americans out. According to a report to the UN Security Council in June, fighters from Islamic State-Khorasan number 2,000 and other non-Afghan terrorist fighters up to 10,000, “mainly comprised of individuals from Central Asia, north Caucasus region of Russia, Pakistan, Xinjiang in China, among others. Although the majority are affiliated foremost with the Taliban, many also support Al Qaeda. Others are allied with ISIL.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two countries among the three (along with Pakistan) that had recognized the Taliban regime during the 1990s, have barely made any comments on the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Qatar is the only Gulf state that is active, partly because it hosted the Taliban Doha office since 2013 and also because the US is using Qatar as a transit point for evacuees.

For Biden, the issue was always about domestic politics. His defending the withdrawal decision could be debated but defending its implementation – that it could not have been done differently – is hardly convincing. Weeks earlier, Biden and his officials had dismissed any similarities with the 1975 exit from Saigon; yet, the images of desperate Afghans falling from a C-17 Globemaster as it took off will remain as enduring as those of the last American helicopter out of Saigon in April 1975.

For US allies, whether in Europe or Asia, issues about US credibility, commitment and competence have been revived. This is particularly relevant for Asia where China is pursuing an increasingly assertive policy. Neither the US nor its allies are likely to either return to Afghanistan in a hurry or even open up their purse strings in response to appeals for humanitarian assistance. At the UN conference on Sept. 13, pledges of \$1.1 billion were made but the road from pledges to commitment to delivery is a long one and it is likely that conditionalities will be imposed about how, and in which areas, the aid is to be administered.<sup>[13]</sup>

For the last 50 years, Afghanistan has been a political laboratory. It had inherited a monarchy and since 1973 has experimented with a socialist republic, a communist dictatorship backed by the Soviet Union, warlordism, a medieval and brutal Taliban, and a US-backed constitutional republic. Yet each of these experiments has only added to the suffering of the Afghan people.

The US may have ended its longest war, but for the Afghans, peace remains a distant dream.

*Rakesh Sood is Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, India, and former Indian ambassador to Afghanistan, France and Nepal and Special Envoy of the Prime Minister for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation.*

---

<sup>[1]</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-09-05/afghanistan-s-fall-is-9-11-s-latest-unlearned-lesson>

<sup>[2]</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/us-pulls-missile-defenses-saudi-arabia-amid-yemen-attacks>

<sup>[3]</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57970464>

<sup>[4]</sup> <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/02/156815.htm>

<sup>[5]</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/23/world/asia/mullen-asserts-pakistani-role-in-attack-on-us-embassy.html>

<sup>[6]</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna44988355>

<sup>[7]</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1459928>

<sup>[8]</sup> <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

<sup>[9]</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-deny-their-deputy-prime-minister-mullah-baradar-is-dead-2021-09-14/>

<sup>[10]</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/iran-slams-pakistans-role-in-panjshir-valley-wants-probe/articleshow/85992104.cms>

<sup>[11]</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-tajik-drills-afghanistan/31435014.html>

<sup>[12]</sup> <https://www.undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2021/486>

<sup>[13]</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-seeks-600-million-avert-afghanistan-humanitarian-crisis-2021-09-12/>

**[https://globalasia.org/v16no3/feature/distant-dreams-of-peace-after-the-us-exit-whats-next-for-afghanistan\\_rakesh-sood](https://globalasia.org/v16no3/feature/distant-dreams-of-peace-after-the-us-exit-whats-next-for-afghanistan_rakesh-sood)**