POLICY OUTLOOK

Two Decades of the Global War on Terror:
Legacies and Futures

Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui & Michael Arnold

(Noah Riffe - Anadolu Agency)

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan comes two decades after the launch of the US 'Global War on Terror', which was declared all but over by US President Biden in a recent address marking the end of America's longest war. In the intervening two decades, the United States has used its military might to pursue an ill-defined and ultimately invisible enemy, 'terror'. With victory never clearly defined, the world's only superpower found itself fighting so-called 'forever wars', with important consequences at home and abroad. With post-mortems of the US 'War of Terror' underway, this policy outlook examines the contours of the historical legacies of the post-9/11 world with a view of developing a better understanding of the post-post 9/11 world. Special attention is paid to the roots of the policy choices taken by American decision-makers as well as the long-term geopolitical significance of the 'War on Terror'.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, on September 12th, 2001, US President George W. Bush declared, in reference to the expected US response, "this battle will take time and resolve [...] But make no mistake about it: we will win" For the next two decades the full weight of US power was focused on pursuing victory in the so-called 'War on Terror'. While the initial response to the attacks on New York and Washington DC appeared targeted, focused, and measured, the world's only superpower soon became caught up in trying to reshape the world it believed it had already inherited after the fall of the Soviet Union while chasing an ill-defined and ultimately invisible enemy, 'terror'. The ensuing two decades have arguably borne witness to a slow and steady (relative) American decline. Whether the hubris of so much associated with the 'War on Terror' was a cause or merely a reflection of America's place in the world will continue to be debated for years to come. What is clear is that the consequences of America's quest to eradicate 'terror' has left lasting consequences on communities around the world and at home. While history never exactly repeats itself, the past is the only real light we have on understanding the future. Thus, any post-mortem of the last two decades requires us to understand the roots of policy choices taken in the days, months, and years after 9/11. Moreover, understanding the geopolitical significance of America's 'War on Terror', and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, in particular, requires contextualising these events in broader global developments and trends. It is hoped that by tracing the contours of the historical and future legacy of the post-9/11 world, decision-makers will be able to reflect on what they want the post-post 9/11 world to be and adjust their respective approaches accordingly.

Discursive wars

The 9/11 attacks constituted the perfect justification for neo-conservative forces to reshape American state identity and adopt an aggressive geopolitical posture. The wars unleashed on Afghanistan and Iraq were accompanied by equally devastating discursive wars, which divided the world along Manichean lines. Vitriolic rhetoric, emanating from the top of the US administration (as during the George W. Bush presidency) and intermittently afterwards from US politicians, think-tankers, and media commentators, depicted Islam and Muslims as the quintessential "other." This process triggered mass-mediated demonisation campaigns, targeting not only those involved in acts of terrorism but Islam as a whole.

In this context, two main discourses were used to justify US policies. The Orientalist discourse became the cornerstone of any discussion surrounding the Middle East and Central Asia. From the so-called experts on the 'Arab mind' to advocates of a pseudo clash of civilisations, past imaginary narratives were connected to the present Middle East and Central Asia populations. At the same time, ancient myths were refashioned to identify Islam as the major – if not the only – threat to the Western world. While the Orientalist discourse pervaded academia, the mass media, and popular culture, it perpetuated animosity and justified political, economic, and military imperialism. Meanwhile, as academic Tina Patel argues, by using a civilising undertone mixed with colonial ideals, Western values, and democracy, this discourse also contributed to maintaining anti-Muslim (and anti-minorities) stereotypes for generations to come. One of the direct implications of this discourse has been the normalisation of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia in the public sphere.

While commentators resorted to Orientalist clichés to interpret the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent 'War on Terror', many of these explanations were reductionist and simplistic. As Professor Khaldoun Samman argues, "an individual living in 1850 would not be able to recognise the same Islamic real estate some 70 years later, no matter how much he read the Quran." However, Orientalist analyses still ignored the various economic, social, and political predicaments ravaging the Middle East and Central Asia, which offer more to understanding the current dynamics than the sacred texts of Muslims.

The second discourse that pervaded the airwaves in the post 9/11 era was that of counter-terrorism. Terrorism is a complex topic that has vexed international jurists for decades and only a few scholars have managed to put forward comprehensive definitions.[1] However, in the post 9/11 era, some US and European pundits tended to handle this issue in very simplistic terms. Little meaningful analysis, context, or historical background was offered to audiences. Subsequently, many of the counter-terrorism measures and accompanying racialised narratives became measures that ultimately served to marginalise Muslims and other minorities, deemed problematic and deviant.

Externally, the discourse on terrorism became obsessed with legitimising the excessive force used by the US and its allies while reshaping US state identity and reinforcing the notion of an imagined Western identity. In her book "The State of Terror" (1998), Annamarie Oliverio argued that the counter-terrorism discourse was the ideal means to write "the script for historical interpretations of national identity

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[1] Among the most serious academic attempts to reach an adequate definition of terrorism was undertaken long before 9/11 by Schmid and Yongman in their seminal work "Political Terrorism" (1984). After going through and combining about 109 existing definitions, Schmid and Yongman narrowed these definitions down to one statement:

"Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-) clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes between terrorist (organization), (imperilled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought." (Schmid and Yongman 1984: 5– 6)

Taliban patrol the streets in Kabul, Afghanistan on September 11, 2021. (Wali Sabawoon - Anadolu Agency)

and political sovereignty," unleashing in the process further violence against forces both at home and abroad.

Worse still, the discourse on terrorism shied away from the legal framework. For instance, earlier attacks on US interests were labelled as criminal acts. Examples include the bombings of the World Trade Centre in 1993, Pan Am 103 in 1988, the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and the Alfred P. Murrah building in 1995. They were all pursued as criminal investigations. However, the attacks of 9/11 were framed as an act of war. By discarding the legal path and opting for never-ending wars against groups with no positive legal status, successive US administrations chose to operate outside the framework of international law. This decision paved the way for massive human rights abuses in US-operated detention facilities (e.g., Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, Diego Garcia, Bagram airbase), and countless war crimes that came to define the US-led 'War on Terror'.

The fusion of the Orientalist and the counter-terrorism discourse played a major role in legitimising human rights abuses. Examples of such incitements proliferated in the media after 9/11. In the *New York Post*, a day after the attacks, columnist Steve Dunleavy wrote: "...kill the bastards. A gunshot between the eyes, blow them to smithereens, poison them if you have to. As for cities or countries that host these worms, bomb them into basketball courts". Similarly, on Fox News, Bill O'Reilly said on his show The O'Reilly

Factor (17 September 2001) that "the US should bomb the Afghan infrastructure to rubble – the airport, the power plants, their water facilities, and the roads." He added: "the people of any country are ultimately responsible for the government they have." O'Reilly then went on to say: "the Germans were responsible for Hitler; the Afghans are responsible for the Taliban. We should not target civilians. But if they do not rise up against this criminal government, they starve, period".

Two decades and hundreds of thousands of victims later, the discursive wars with their torrents of antagonism and bigotry proved to have little bearing on the ground as the Taliban are back in power. Trillions of dollars and 20 years of warfare proved that imperialist endeavours and wars of subjugation will always face resistance regardless of the cultural hubris that took root in some Western capitals and particularly in Washington DC.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan is an event of tectonic magnitude. As such, it has already generated various traumatic experiences. Former British Diplomat Alastair Crooke observed that many Western officials entered "into the first three stages of grief simultaneously: shock and denial (a state of disbelief and numbed feelings); pain and guilt (for those allies of ours huddled at Kabul airport); and anger." However, there were some *mea culpas* too. For example, in a piece for *Wall Street Journal* titled "the unconquerable Islamic World", Robert Nicholson wrote:

"The West cannot change the Islamic world, but neither can it ignore the world's fastest-growing religious community. The best strategy will move from rollback to containment and prioritise the defence of American interests and allies over the promotion of values and institutions. Muslim Americans naturally merit the same rights as other citizens. Muslim-majority states that seek friendship with the US deserve a warm welcome, especially when they make difficult decisions for peace...But overall, the US needs to step back. The best way to honour American values is to stop forcing them on those who reject them."

Strategy versus rhetoric

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan represents a tectonic shift from a geopolitical point of view. Key Western theorists have long emphasised the importance of Central Asia. For example, in the 19th century, British political geographer Halford Mackinder coined the theory of the Asian heartland.

Mackinder contended that the future of global power does not reside, as most British strategists then believed, in controlling the global maritime routes, but in controlling a vast landmass he called "Euro-Asia" (Eurasia). Mackinder's theory did not consider Africa, Asia, and Europe as three distinct continents but rather as a singular landmass, a deep "heartland." The latter includes 6500 kilometres from the shores of the Arabian Peninsula to the Siberian Sea. Mackinder argued that the power that controls this heartland controls the world.

It is worth noting that MacKinder's theory influenced not just British imperial strategy but also impacted the US strategy makers as it formed the backbone of George Kennan's containment strategy against the Soviet Union. In fact, MacKinder's principles continued to infuse the thinking of US strategists even after the Cold War. In the post 9/11 period, when the US decided to invade Afghanistan and Iraq, some commentators such as historian Paul Kennedy referred to Mackinder's theory to justify the US administration's moves. "Right now, with hundreds of thousands of US troops in the Eurasian rimlands," Kennedy explained in *the Guardian*, "it looks as if Washington is taking seriously Mackinder's injunction to ensure control of 'the geographical pivot of history.'"

In retrospect, it is evident that the strategic rationale for the US behaviour post-9/11 resided in ensuring command of such strategic heartland. The US presence in Central Asia and the Gulf was not only aimed at deterring Russia, China and Iran from filling any vacuum in the region, but it also aimed at occupying a strategic location in the global inland energy supply infrastructure. Central Asia is strategically situated between two of the largest energy consumption markets, Europe and Asia.

Moreover, US multinational corporations were also attracted by the region's enormous potential in terms of natural resources. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have abundant oil and natural gas reserves, while Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have considerable gold reserves. Moreover, Kazakhstan has the world's largest uranium reserves.

Therefore, in the years preceding 9/11, both the Clinton and Bush administrations considered Afghanistan vital to America's Central Asian strategy. As a result, US strategists devised a strategy of engagement towards the region. For instance, the Silk Road Strategy Act was endorsed in 1999, authorising "enhanced policy and aid to support conflict amelioration, humanitarian needs, economic development, transport and communications, border controls, democracy, and the creation of civil societies in the South Caucasus and Central Asia." However, linking US engagement with the spread of democracy was not always to the liking of the former Soviet republics, which became exasperated with the US official rhetoric in the medium run.[2]

On the other hand, the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) provided Washington with the perfect pretext to be present in Central Asia and take advantage of the centrality of Afghanistan as a strategic location. This new doctrine allowed the US to design a new security architecture for the region and spearhead new interconnectivity from Central Asia to Europe while circumventing Iran, Russia, and China. By controlling pipeline routes and enhancing military presence in the region, Washington achieved what former diplomat M K Bhadrakumar deemed "the biggest geopolitical coup ever instigated in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus".

Similar developments characterised US foreign policy vis-à-vis Iraq and the Gulf. In this context, it is worth noting that a small group of powerful Washington insiders,[3] known as the neo-conservatives (or neo-cons), issued a document a decade before 9/11 titled "Defence Planning Guidance", arguing that the US should be the sole 21st-century superpower. The document contended that such an outcome would only occur if pre-emptive wars were waged to prevent the emergence of potential challengers. Intriguingly, this policy statement also called upon the US to safeguard "access to vital raw materials, primarily Persian Gulf oil." Then, in 1998, some of the most prominent neoconservative figures sent an open letter to President Clinton to request the invasion of Iraq and the

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[2] For example, when the US condemned the heavy-handed repression against the peaceful protests in Andijan, Uzbekistan on 13 May 2005, and called for an independent investigation into the repression with international involvement, the Uzbek government ordered the closing of the United States airbase in Karshi-Khanabad.

[3] During the presidency of George W. Bush, several neo-conservative figures filled some of the most influential positions. Examples include Dick Cheney (US Vice-President), Donald Rumsfeld (Defence Secretary), Paul Wolfowitz (Deputy Defence Secretary), and Richard Perle (Chairman of the Pentagon Defence Policy Board).

Men and women wearing orange jumpsuits, with their heads covered by black hoods, stand in silence to represent the detainees currently held during a demonstration to mark the seventeen 17th anniversary of foundation of Guantanamo Bay prison in front of the White House in Washington, United States on January 11, 2019. (Umar Farooq - Anadolu Agency)

removal of Saddam Hussein from power. Subsequently, the neoconservative think tank, the Project for the New American Century, or PNAC, published a report in 2000 calling for a serious transformation of US national security strategy, military missions and defence budgets. PNAC forecasted that the shift would come about slowly unless «some catastrophic and catalysing event, like a new Pearl Harbor» occurred. In the report, there were several references to the toppling of Saddam Hussein as an alleged requirement for asserting the US status as a superpower.

These developments reveal that the US strategic behaviour in Afghanistan and Iraq has more to do with the control of the Eurasian heartland than any counter-terrorism rhetoric. The latter was no doubt useful to find a pretext for waging wars of domination and gain the American people's support. As Professor Barry Buzan puts it, terrorism became the global scale overriding threat around which the US could organise its geopolitical interests immediately after 9/11.

Seen from this perspective, the withdrawal from Afghanistan is a huge geopolitical event because it means the implosion of this grand strategy that took decades to shape. What is worse, as former British diplomat Alastair Crooke commented, such a drastic U-turn "was accomplished without fighting, and in a few days."

Strategic Aftershocks: Beyond the 'War on Terror'

There is often an understandable temptation to read epochal moments into historical events that shape the most formative years of one's life. We have seen this with numerous readings of the yet to be determined historical significance of the Covid-19 pandemic that take the pandemic and its aftermath as a sort of 'zero moment' in the arc of modern man's history. This is perhaps more true for

policymakers than others for whom the present seems to stand alone, detached from either the past or future. It is also true for some of history's great thinkers. It was not only Fukuyama that reflected on his own time as potentially marking the 'end of history'. From Hegel to Weber, for whom the post-Napoleonic era and the rise of the centralised Prussian state represented the 'end of history', the tendency to see the arc of history through the lens of seminal events is understandably strong. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Western triumphalism filled the halls of the academy and ultimately trickled down to US decision-makers. In the absence of a competing ideology, those who put their hopes in the potential of American hegemony to create peace and prosperity across the globe have been proven incorrect. For their part, the so-called 'Neo-Conservatives' for all their delusions of grandeur regarding the ability of American power to reshape the world, were perhaps more honest, but alas, they too were blinded by the hubris that American power could reshape parts of the world that had not yet been infected by the delirium of post-Cold War America.

When President Biden announced the official end to America's longest war, it prompted a flood of reflections from scholars and journalists alike on issues ranging from the who won the 'War on Terror' to the present state of the American Empire. Some have taken the opportunity to offer a rebuttal against the tide of 'retreat of American power' analyses, arguing that not only are they exaggerated and far-fetched, but that this narrative ultimately benefits America's adversaries. More nuanced analyses have reflected an understanding that geopolitical shifts over the last two decades are demonstrative of at least a relative decline in US power while pointing to the fall of Kabul as the first major manifestation of America's waning appetite to use hard power to maintain its position of global dominance. Reflecting on two decades of war, former Obama-era advisor Ben Rhodes, writing in Foreign Affairs argues that the 'War on Terror' was the most significant undertaking of US hegemony in the post-Cold War era and has now reached its dusk. Others, such as Niall Ferguson writing in

Loved ones pay their respects at the 9/11 memorial for those killed on the 14th anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks at the site where two of four hijacked planes struck the World Trade Center towers in New York, USA on September 11, 2015. (Bilgin S. Şaşmaz - Anadolu Agency)

the Economist, argue that American hegemony effectively ended around the time of the 2008 financial crisis and that the world has been in the process of reverting to a normal state of multipolarity ever since, with Russia, India, Europe, China and other centres rising in status relative to American power. For Fukuyama, the end of the American era had in fact come much earlier, with sources of weakness and decline tied more to domestic than international dynamics.

By way of demonstration, it is expected that by 2030, Asia will have surpassed both North America and Europe in terms of GDP, population size, military spending, and investments in technology. While China and India will be the largest and most significant of this lot, others including Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Turkey, South Korea, and Vietnam, referred to by US investment bank Goldman Sachs as 'the next 11' will make this shift even more pronounced. This, of course, has nothing to do with the credibility the US may or may not have lost through its Afghan debacle. The inordinate focus on the coming US-China confrontation seems to bypass the fact that just as the American unipolar moment is in its twilight phase, a Cold War 2.0 between the US and China is a scenario that appears detached from the fundamentals. Today's geopolitical landscape is increasingly characterised by multiple viable centres of global power including the US, China, the EU and what Parag Khanna has referred to as 'democratic Asia' (with a particular focus on the growing partnership between Australia, India and Japan). The 'Goldilocks' period of the past three decades marked by great power stability, is no more. Today, not only are we faced with renewed great power competition, but the simultaneous existence of increasing globalised interdependence, powerful private networks, and multiple centres of global power.

Geopolitics and the Post-Post 9/11 Era

While the geopolitical consequences of Afghanistan should not be overstated, particularly in the long term, there are several potential immediate and medium-term impacts that at the very least, point to significant shifts in the international system. As alluded to above, for Europe in particular the American withdrawal from Afghanistan has brought to the fore a number of important realisations with potential consequences down the road. First and foremost, Afghanistan has made it abundantly clear to European and British political leaders that, as remarked by UK Conservative Member of Parliament James Sunderland, "the fall of Kabul, like Suez, has shown that the United Kingdom may not be able to operate autonomously without US involvement." Outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel also weighed in on the issue saying that "We must realise that when it comes to the NATO mission in Afghanistan, it was not possible to have an independent role for Germany of the European forces." Beyond the immediate concerns of terrorism and the spectre of a new migrant crisis in Europe, Europe appears anxious that US – and therefore NATO – credibility and will to act in the world may be waning. This is of particular concern to Europe, and the UK for that matter, because of their now clear inability to act militarily independently of the United States. In Biden's speech marking the official end of America's 20-year war in Afghanistan, the US President made the following statement, which no doubt caught the attention of European policymakers:

"As we turn the page on the foreign policy that has guided our nation the last two decades, we've got to learn from our mistakes. To me, there are two that are paramount. First, we must set missions with

clear achievable goals, not ones we'll never reach. And second, we must stay clearly focused on the fundamental national security interests of the United States of America."

Writing for the Economist, French diplomat Gérard Araud commented on how for the Europeans, the issue was not so much the President Biden's decision to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan, but rather "his affirmation that America would from now on use force only to defend its vital interests. This, far more than the defeat in Afghanistan, marks a turning point in international relations." European leaders, who like France's President Macron, have called on Europeans to take decisive steps needed to achieve "strategic autonomy", must now face the music. For proponents of this perspective, including Araud, "At a time when Ukraine, Syria, Libya and North Africa's Sahel region – that is Europe's closest neighbours – are ablaze and America is losing interest, the European Union should be capable of dealing with these crises itself, including military." The problem is, as argued by Rachel Ellehuss and Pierre Morcos of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) an American think tank, "while the Afghan crisis will likely reinforce Europe's desire to have more independence of action, Europeans have a long road ahead before being back to act autonomously any time they need." Decades of disinvestment in defence and an over-dependence on the American security umbrella has led to major capability gaps ranging from mid-air refuelling – as was the case in the European-led air campaign against Gaddafi – to strategic transport. For Europe, the fall of Kabul may indeed represent a "Suez moment" as it pertains to the harsh realisation of the material limitations to European strategic ambitions.

At the same time, if we start to look at the world through the lens of geopolitics a clearer picture begins to emerge of the place and significance of Afghanistan to the geopolitical landscape. This entails considering a whole host of issues ranging from technology and finance to culture, history, and philosophy as they relate to power, specifically, power maximisation. For Parag Khanna, "geopolitics is the materialism to political philosophy's idealism […] While political theories emphasised ideological affinity and common values, geopolitics attaches greater importance to self-interest as defined by power-maximisation." From this perspective, divergences between the United States and Europe predate Afghanistan and have arguably been apparent since at least the 1980s when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher's crusade of privatisation and deregulation were creating widespread inequality and social degeneration, leading to a delegitimation of the Anglo-American model in the eyes of continental Europe. Relations with a resurgent Russia, the Iraq war and other post-Cold War and post-9/11 developments including issues revolving around trade, climate change and financial regulation have exacerbated the divide.

Hopes for some sort of grand renewal of transatlantic relations based on common democratic values under the Biden administration fail to account for the material realities that are likely to limit the scope of any such post-Trump reconciliation. While the West will likely continue to constitute a strategic community (broadly speaking) this should not be mistaken with thinking that the US and Europe will continue to form a political or economic community. From this perspective, rather than constituting a cause, Afghanistan merely reflects this dynamic. Both the US and Europe will likely engage with Afghanistan and the region on their respective terms while keeping some sense of unity as it relates to limiting Chinese and Russian gains.

As the US continues to refocus its strategic priorities, China will inevitably become more involved in global hotspots, economically, diplomatically, politically, and even militarily, as they are poised to do in Afghanistan. The US and Europe may even try to encourage China to take a more active stance in difficult regions in the hope that Beijing will face some drain on its financial and political resources. For those who wish to pursue such an agenda, Afghanistan may be a good place to start. At the same time, both the US and Europe will continue to push for reciprocal access to Chinese markets while also competing over market share for their own firms and industries of interest. In this context, Afghanistan's ultimate impact on geopolitics is likely to be relatively minor. However, the dynamics at play in Afghanistan, particularly as they relate to transatlantic relations, are reflective of the 'tectonic shifts' taking place in geopolitics. While the specifics of the post-post 9/11 era remain to be seen, it has become clear that the world is reverting to a more 'normal' state of affairs that has characterised most of the last several thousand years of political history, namely, multiple centres of relatively equal power.

From a global historical perspective, Afghanistan is an important reflection of these dynamics, particularly given the symbolism which it evokes as the 'graveyard of empires', but also because the very real defeat suffered by a superpower whose mission was as unfocused as it was misguided. Today's geopolitical context is also important because it tells us that Kabul is not in fact Saigon, a comparison that has quite understandably been made abundantly in the last several weeks. In 1975, when US forces withdrew from the South Vietnamese capital, the US was in the midst of the Cold War, and its global power was on the ascendancy. Other than the Soviet Union, no power or coalition of powers could even remotely come close to matching US military or even economic power. The geopolitical significance of the fall of Saigon was ultimately minor, nor did it take place in a global environment amid a paradigm shift. Today's world is a different place.