
DISCUSSION

STRUCTURAL REALISM AND US WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN: THE CONSEQUENCE OF A CHANGING INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract: *The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is a direct consequence of structural changes in the polarity of the international system. Following the end of the Cold War, the US emerged as the dominant country in the system, making it relatively easy to pursue a foreign policy based on liberal principles, where state-building and social engineering were among the main principles. While some scholars consider the US withdrawal from Afghanistan a strategic failure of its foreign policy, this paper argues that such action was necessary due to fundamental changes in the constellation of forces in the international system. The main reason for this withdrawal is the economic growth of China and its power projection in Asia and other regions of the world. Therefore, similar US actions can be anticipated in the future. This paper adopts a structural realist approach as its primary theoretical framework and Afghanistan is used as the case study.*

Keywords: *International system, United States, Afghanistan, social engineering, international polarity*

INTRODUCTION

Despite the turbulence, lack of glory, and tragic events surrounding the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, it cannot be classified as a “strategic disaster” for the United States. The withdrawal was a necessary action, and it was not contingent on the president in power, which ethnic group, political faction, or terrorist organization would take control of the territory post-withdrawal. Instead, it was a direct outcome of structural changes in the international system and its polarity. During the “unipolar moment” when the US was the dominant country globally, it could pursue a foreign policy based on the principles of a liberal international order, which included the implementation of “social engineering” in other countries and societies, as was the case with Afghanistan and Iraq.¹ As the structure of the international system changes, pursuing a foreign policy based on liberal principles becomes increasingly challenging. Realism, as a theoretical and practical political approach, becomes the only viable option when the international system becomes “bi” or “multipolar,” as states tend to balance one another for power and influence. Disseminating values such as liberal democracy or conducting social experiments in countries such as Afghanistan can no longer be a priority.

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¹ KRAUTHAMMER, C. The Unipolar Moment. *Foreign Affairs*. 1990, Vol. 70, No 23, p. 24.

I. WAR ON TERROR AND THE LIMITS OF “SOCIAL ENGINEERING”

The United States, under the leadership of President George W. Bush, became embroiled in the conflict in Afghanistan approximately one month subsequent to the September 11 terrorist attacks, as part of the broader “War on Terror” initiative. The primary objective of this project was to effectuate the ouster of the Taliban regime.² In early December of that year, it appeared that the US military had achieved a swift, purposeful, and remarkable victory in Afghanistan. The Taliban had been removed from power and the threat of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda operating on Afghan soil had been eradicated. Hamid Karzai, a local leader who appeared committed to democratic values, had been installed in Kabul. The rapid success led the Bush administration to believe that it could achieve comparable positive outcomes in Iraq and, possibly, in other countries in the region. This policy became known as the “Bush Doctrine”.³

The sudden change in strategic aims resulted in a fundamental alteration of the US intervention in Afghanistan, shifting from a counter-terrorism campaign directly linked to the 9/11 attacks to a nation-building endeavor. This political blueprint was subsequently validated by the “Bonn Agreement,” which was forged in December of 2001.⁴ From that moment on the US approach to Afghanistan remained largely consistent, despite changes in presidential leadership. This continued until the election of President Trump who had promised during his 2016 campaign that one of his key decisions as president would be to bring American troops home and end the “endless war.”⁵ Guided by his “America First” doctrine, President Trump made it clear that the United States should withdraw from the business of state-building. The US war in Afghanistan is the longest and most expensive in the country’s history, particularly in financial terms. Over the course of two decades, the US spent more than two trillion dollars on the conflict in Afghanistan. A straightforward mathematical calculation shows that more than \$300 million per day was spent for twenty years.⁶ Considering the significant size of Afghanistan’s population, which is around 40 million, the cost per Afghan citizen amounts to approximately \$50,000. When compared to other historical examples, the intervention and reconstruction of Afghanistan have cost the US more than the “Marshall Plan,” which was implemented in Europe after World War II.⁷ According to an analysis conducted by Brown University’s Watson Institute, the main expenditures of the American engagement in Afghanistan were divided

² BUSH, G. W. The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days In: *U.S. Department of State Archive* [online]. 10. 11. 2001 [2023-02-03]. Available at: <<https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/6947.htm>>.

³ BUCKLEY, M., ROBERT, S. *The Bush Doctrine and the War on Terrorism: Global Reactions, Global Consequences*. 1st edition. New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 20–23.

⁴ KEANE, C. *US Nation-Building in Afghanistan*. 1st edition. New York: Routledge, 2017.

⁵ DIAZ, D. A History of Trump’s Thoughts on Afghanistan In: *CNN Politics* [online]. 21. 8.2017 [2023-02-03]. Available at: <<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/21/politics/history-president-trump-remarks-afghanistan-tweets/index.html>>.

⁶ KNICKMEYER, E. Costs of the Afghanistan War, in Lives and Dollars In: *AP News* [online]. 17. 8.2021 [2023-02-04]. Available at: <<https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-afghanistan-43d8f53b35e80ec18c130cd683e1a38f>>.

⁷ GROLL, E. The United States Has Outspent the Marshall Plan to Rebuild Afghanistan In: *Foreign Policy* [online]. 30. 7. 2014 [2023-02-07]. Available at: <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/30/the-united-states-has-outspent-the-marshall-plan-to-rebuild-afghanistan/>>.

into separate budget lines, with \$800 billion dedicated to financing direct fighting and \$85 billion allocated to training the Afghan army. U.S. taxpayers paid approximately \$750 million annually in salaries for Afghan soldiers. The costs in terms of lives lost were, of course, much higher. Over the course of twenty years, around 2,500 American soldiers and 4,000 other civilian contractors lost their lives. This seems relatively low when compared to the 69,000 casualties suffered by the Afghan military police, 47,000 civilians, and 51,000 other combatants who lost their lives.⁸

Despite significant financial investments and two decades of political, military, diplomatic, and professional commitment to the task of institution-building in Afghanistan, why did the United States ultimately prove unsuccessful in its efforts to establish a viable state in the region? Undertaking large-scale social engineering is an intricate and multifaceted process. Despite its complexity, it is surprising that influential policymakers and commentators in American public life maintained for an extended period the conviction that they could effect fundamental transformations in the socio-political landscapes of numerous Middle Eastern nations, Afghanistan included, and establish them as democratic regimes. Neglecting contextual factors such as history, political culture, traditions, tribal, religious, and social relations, while concurrently adhering to the persistent belief that the principles of liberal democracy should be imposed in these societies, has frequently proven to be a “recipe” for successful failure in multiple countries. Furthermore, the endeavor to engage in social engineering in a foreign country while simultaneously engaging in an armed conflict to gain control over it is a challenging undertaking, even for a powerful state such as the United States.

Historical records demonstrate that attempts to impose democracy as a system of government are usually destined to fail. Researchers from the University of North Texas, Andrew Enterline and Michael Greig, analyzed 43 cases of “imposition of democratic regimes” between 1800 and 1994 and concluded that such attempts failed in 63% of cases.⁹ Jeffery Pickering and Mark Peceny conducted a study examining military interventions carried out by the US, Great Britain, France, and the United Nations from 1945 to 1996 to determine the extent to which these interventions played a positive role in the democratization of targeted countries.¹⁰ After conducting a thorough analysis using sophisticated scientific methods, these authors concluded that “liberal interventions only sporadically played a positive role in democratization” from 1945 onward. Therefore, as Alexander Downes and Jonathan Monten suggest, imposing a democratic political system on another state is only likely to succeed when “favorable domestic preconditions are present”.¹¹ Unfortunately, these conditions are rare in many countries.

Some scholars hold the view that democracy, as a political system, can be effectively exported to other countries. Proponents of this assertion often cite examples such as Japan

⁸ KNICKMEYER, E. Costs of the Afghanistan War, in *Lives and Dollars In: AP News* [online]. 17. 8.2021 [2023-02-04]. Available at:

<<https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-afghanistan-43d8f53b35e80ec18c130cd683e1a38f>>.

⁹ ENTERLINE, A. J., MICHAEL G. Against All Odds?: The History of Imposed Democracy and the Future of Iraq and Afghanistan. *Foreign Policy Analysis*. 2008, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 8–10.

¹⁰ PICKERING, J., MARK, P. Forging Democracy at Gunpoint. *International Studies Quarterly*. 2006. Vol. 50, No. 3.

¹¹ DOWNES, A. B., JONATHAN M. Forced to Be Free? Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization. *International Security*. 2012, Vol. 37, No. 4.

and Germany after World War II. However, it is noteworthy that the historical evidence suggests that the successful establishment of liberal democracy in foreign countries by a powerful state like the United States is more of an exception than the norm. To achieve this outcome with complete success, a set of local characteristics and contextual factors that foster democratic values are required. States with high levels of ethnic or religious divisions, in particular, pose significant challenges for an imposed democracy. It is imperative that the country undergoing transformation has ethnic and religious homogeneity, a consolidated central government, reasonable levels of prosperity, and prior experience with democratic values. Germany and Japan after World War II fulfill these requirements, but Afghanistan, one of the poorest and most ethnically and religiously divided countries globally, does not.¹² In nations where ethnic, religious, or tribal bonds hold greater sway than the connection forged between citizens and state institutions, it proves arduous to establish the requisite legitimacy for political institutions to impose their decisions, and for citizens to acquiesce to those decisions voluntarily.

It is worth noting that a significant reason why efforts to establish a democratic political system in countries like Afghanistan are likely to falter from the outset is due to the preference of citizens and elites in that nation for a particular ideal system of government. Throughout history, there has been no consensus on what constitutes the ideal political system. Therefore, while some may contend that liberal democracy is the optimal form of government, others may favor different systems. This preference may vary from state to state, and even within the same state over different historical periods. For example, during the 1930s, many people in Europe preferred communism and fascism over liberal democracy. While some authors believed that the history of ideological competition had ended with the triumph of liberal democracy after the Cold War, this is not necessarily the case for all societies.¹³ However, this assumption has proven to be false. There are states within the European Union (EU), such as Hungary and Poland, that are highly critical of the values of liberal democracy and are attempting to modify their political systems towards a model known as “illiberal democracy”.¹⁴ In contrast, countries like China and Russia have embraced authoritarian regimes, North Korea is a dictatorship, and Iran is an Islamic republic.¹⁵ It is important to recognize that Afghans, in their own right, may hold a preference for a different form of government over liberal democracy.

II. CHINA AS THE CAUSE OF US WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

Numerous scholars and political commentators have hastily concluded that the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan represents the nation’s most significant foreign policy failure in recent decades. However, this event is clear evidence of the country’s irreversible decline in strength and weakening relevance in international politics. From my perspective, the primary strategic mistake made by the United States in regards to Afghan-

¹² PICKERING, J., MARK, P. *Forging Democracy at Gunpoint*. 2006. Vol. 50, No. 3.

¹³ FUKUYAMA, F. The End of History? *The National Interest*. 1989, No. 16, pp. 3–18.

¹⁴ ZAKARIA, F. The Rise of Illiberal Democracy. *Foreign Affairs*. 1997, Vol. 76, p. 22.

¹⁵ COOLEY, A. Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms. *Journal of Democracy*. 2015, Vol. 26, No. 3.

istan was its prolonged occupation of the country and its unsuccessful effort to foster democratic political values and build institutions in a political culture that fundamentally opposes these principles. The decision to withdraw US military forces from Afghanistan is linked to changes in the polarity of the international system and reflects a reorientation of national interests towards balancing rival and competing states in the system, such as China.

It should be emphasized that Afghanistan's impact on US geopolitics is irrelevant, as this withdrawal is simply a consequence of systemic forces rather than a cause. Moreover, the US has withdrawn from not-so-glorious military engagements before, and this is unlikely to be the last instance. The US has survived previous failures that were no less denigrating for its soft power, such as the withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. In that case, the US was able to regain its strength quickly and restore its dominance within less than a decade, never ceasing to rival the Soviet Union until the end of the Cold War. Today, the US is a close partner to Vietnam with complementary interests in many areas, with the most significant being coordination to limit Chinese expansion. Additionally, the US maintains many technological, economic, and cultural advantages that few countries can match or compete with. While the US may withdraw from military intervention or state-building efforts in the Middle East, its military remains dominant in many parts of the world. Despite non-elegant failures in Afghanistan, Iraq, or other countries, this situation is likely to continue. While scenes of chaos at the Kabul airport as American troops retreated create a perception of failure, strategically these scenes are more a matter of image than substance.

The withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan is a political move that is conditioned by structural transformations in the international system¹⁶. It is evident that China's growing power is prompting the US to take the necessary actions to balance and rival Beijing for influence and dominance in the international system. During the period in which the international system was entirely dominated by the US, from the end of the Cold War until the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2007/9, the US enjoyed a certain geopolitical comfort that allowed them to pursue a foreign policy based on liberal principles. This enabled the US to engage in megaprojects to install a democratic political system or accomplish social engineering in Afghanistan and other countries in the region. However, with China's economic growth and projection of power across the globe, many scholars have concluded that the American "unipolar" moment is over, and the international system is now in transition to "bi" or even "multi" polarity. Therefore, due to these structural constraints, the political leadership in Washington, regardless of personal or party beliefs or values, is forced to adopt and implement a foreign policy based on the postulates of structural realism. Thus, for most of this century, the primary objective of the US appears to be competition and rivalry against China's power and strategic management of the latter's growth and influence.

¹⁶ MARLEKU, A. Kthimi në të Shkuaren: Rendi Liberal dhe Struktura e Sistemit Ndërkombëtar (Eng: Back to the Past: Liberal Order and the Structure of International System) In: *Sbunker* [online]. 18. 12. 2020 [2023-02-12]. Available at: <<https://sbunker.net/op-ed/90738/kthimi-ne-te-shkuaren-rendi-liberal-dhe-struktura-e-sistemit-nderkombetar-pjesa-i/>>.

Based on this line of reasoning, it can be inferred that the recent withdrawal of US troops from multiple countries in which they have been involved for extended periods to establish democratic political systems and introduce liberal institutions and values will not be the final occurrence of its kind. Other comparable actions can reasonably be anticipated in the foreseeable future. While this may appear to be a purely theoretical assertion, it is also supported by President Biden's pronouncements. Specifically, in a social media post, the President stated that the decision regarding Afghanistan was not solely focused on Afghanistan, but rather marked the conclusion of an era characterized by ambitious military endeavors aimed at reconstructing other nations.¹⁷ The theory of structural realism has experienced a resurgence as the predominant approach with the greatest explanatory power for global realities within the field of International Relations.

The United States and China have been engaged in a strategic competition that is proving to be more challenging, comprehensive, and intense than any other rivalry between nations in the field of international relations, including the Cold War. Beginning with President Trump's term and continuing into the Biden administration, American policymakers have exhibited a shift in behavior towards a more confrontational approach to Beijing. This shift is evident in the "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance" published by the White House, which was signed and approved by President Biden. The document asserts that China represents "the only potential competitor capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to pose a serious challenge to an open and stable international system".¹⁸

It is evident why US officials view China as their primary competitor for dominance and influence in global politics. This perception is supported by data that indicate that by the start of 2022, China's GDP will be equivalent to approximately 71% of the US GDP.¹⁹ In the early 1980s, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union's GDP was on par with 50% of the US GDP. However, China has now surpassed the United States as the world's largest recipient of foreign investment. Chinese leadership has portrayed a pessimistic view of the US, with Beijing reaching a consensus that the US represents the most significant external challenge to China's national interests, sovereignty, and internal stability. Many Chinese scholars hold the belief that the US is motivated by fear and envy, leading them to employ all available resources to exert control over China in any way possible.

In addition to being a result of structural changes in the international system, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan aligns with public opinion, strategic orientations of leadership, and national interests. This notion has been explicitly stated by President Biden himself, who, in an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, pledged to be guided by a foreign policy that prioritizes the "middle class," among other things.²⁰ This indicates that foreign policy

¹⁷ MILLER, L. Biden's Afghanistan Withdrawal: A Verdict on the Limits of American Power. *Survival*. 2021, Vol. 63, No. 3, pp. 37–44.

¹⁸ BIDEN, J. Interim National Security Strategic Guidance In: *The White House* [online]. 3. 3. 2021 [2023-01-21]. Available at: <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>>.

¹⁹ WANG, J. The Plot Against China? *Foreign Affairs*. 2021, Vol. 100, No. 4, pp. 50–53.

²⁰ BIDEN, J. Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump. *Foreign Affairs*. 2020, Vol. 99, No. 2, pp. 65–67.

decisions will be tailored to the interests of the majority of American voters, rather than being solely based on the analysis and vision of policymakers in Washington. Furthermore, American public opinion has long supported the idea of a troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, with a poll conducted on April 16 and 18, 2021, finding that 80% of Americans favored the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops.²¹ In July of the same year, the figure of Americans favoring the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan decreased to 70%. In the same article, President Biden acknowledged that “China poses a special challenge” to the United States. Drawing from his personal experience with leaders of China, he made it clear about whom he was dealing with.²² President Biden reiterated the same reasoning in his speech after US troops began withdrawing from Kabul. He emphasized that the US was withdrawing from Afghanistan to concentrate its resources on facing the strategic competition with China and other countries. Despite criticism, President Biden’s actions appear to be aimed at extricating the US from the “Graveyard of Empires” and steering it towards a new chapter in the race for global dominance.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that officials in China, Russia, and other powerful nations with competing interests with the United States would prefer the US to maintain its presence in Afghanistan. It is understandable that they would want their primary political and economic rival to expend its attention, resources, and energy on a costly undertaking, rather than engaging in competition with them. Nonetheless, the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan has lifted a considerable burden and commitment that had lost its strategic focus long ago. The move permits the US to reassess and redirect its resources to other regions and objectives that align with its vital interests and strategic priorities. The US can now shift its attention from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region, where it faces the primary challenge posed by China. This reallocation of resources empowers the US to compete more effectively with its rivals in the strategic race for global preeminence.

²¹ NEWPORT, F. American Public Opinion and the Afghanistan Situation In: *Gallup* [online]. 27. 9. 2021 [2023-02-23]. Available at: <<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/354182/american-public-opinion-afghanistan-situation.aspx>>.

²² BIDEN, J. *Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump*. pp. 65–67.