The Slow Decay of a Once-Great Empire?

After twenty years of its occupation of Afghanistan, the US is walking away, or, to call things by their proper names, fleeing cowardly, frantically looking over their shoulder to avoid getting kicked again. Most likely, and this is quite obvious, the Taliban (banned in Russia) will return immediately to control essential areas of the country, smuggling weapons and drugs to dominate the Afghan economy. The internal policy of the country, based primarily on tribal interests, will again regulate social life.

“The Americans left, as [US President Joe] Biden confirmed because they considered their mission accomplished. Of course, he tried to present the situation in as positive colors as possible, but everyone understands that the mission has failed. This is openly acknowledged, including in the United States itself,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov rightly noted. He said terrorism has not disappeared. The terrorist group DAESH (banned in the Russian Federation) and a branch of al-Qaeda (a terrorist organization banned in Russia) have strengthened their positions in Afghanistan. At the same time, drug production has reached record highs.

On July 14, former US President George W. Bush criticized the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, calling the White House’s decision a mistake. At present, the situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating against the backdrop of the withdrawal of the US military contingent from the country. Members of the Taliban (banned in Russia) were able to capture several settlements, including near the border with Tajikistan.

When many around the world rightly say that the American occupation of Afghanistan was a colossal mistake, the ruling circles bluntly, like a mantra, keep repeating that the US achieved the main goals for which it occupied
Afghanistan in the first place, violating all international laws: inflicting a painful blow on the Taliban and killing Osama bin Laden, basically, taking revenge after 9/11. But was it worth a few thousand American lives, tens of thousands of Afghan lives, and a trillion dollars? But this is the philosophy of the ruling circles in the USA - to achieve some unknown results to strengthen their power by killing people worldwide, even their soldiers and officers.

The flight of the military contingent from Afghanistan immediately raises several thorny questions about America’s political and military position in the world. The first question is the positioning of the United States in Asia. The New York Times noted that the Pentagon’s presence in Afghanistan has put its armed forces against Russia’s soft underbelly, possibly giving the US strategic leverage over Moscow. This reinforced the Pentagon’s presence in the Persian Gulf, which meant additional forces against Iran, if necessary. It also allowed Washington to observe and potentially intervene in perhaps the most dangerous dispute on the continent: the conflict between the two nuclear-armed states, India and Pakistan.

But these advantages, which were highly valued in the past, are now obsolete. Strategic interests in the Persian Gulf are declining, which is one reason why America is seeking to change its relationship with Iran from confrontation to containment and, in some cases, cooperation. As for the Indian-Pakistani conflict, Washington is well aware that its presence on the border is neither helpful nor desirable.

Now America’s main question in its positioning in Asia is what to do about China, as many diplomats and politicians point out. So far, the most widely held view in American decision-making circles is that the USA must remain capable of operating - including militarily - across the continent, in close proximity to China. On the other hand, Beijing’s primary goal is to deter Washington from military action in this particular area. These two conflicting goals create an essential point of contention in the emerging US-China strategic confrontation.

This conclusion leads to the second question. Over the past twenty years, beginning in Afghanistan, the Pentagon has become accustomed to acting only against adversaries who are much weaker, less sophisticated, and organized. In China, however, America will find an opponent that is almost equal to it in many ways. The rivalry between the USA and China, the Saudi-based Arab News notes, could most hinder peace and prosperity in the region, given their competing ambitions to shape the regional order. Underscoring the diplomatic struggle for influence that the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified, the White House informed that it intends to serve as “an arsenal of vaccines for the region.” At the same time, China said it has already delivered more than 500 million doses to developing countries. See the difference between Beijing has already delivered its vaccine, while Washington is only promising. But whether Washington delivers the vaccine or not is a big question.

This brings to the fore two points about how America is perceived - internally and externally. Domestically, American strategists, the military, and various segments of society know or at least feel that two decades of fighting in Afghanistan did no good. The situation is probably worse than in Vietnam fifty years ago. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the American public was split in two: one was for, and the other was against the war. Vietnam was at the heart of American domestic politics and fierce controversy, not to mention foreign policy. During the last decade, however, Afghanistan (and, indeed, Iraq) have been secondary issues in US politics, hardly receiving serious attention in public life. Surprisingly, the Afghan issue has hardly received serious attention in the key centers of American foreign policy thinking, either.

This is a consequence of waging wars against much weaker adversaries in terms of strength and resources. In such cases, wars turn into campaigns, where “missions” are supposedly completed after the defenses of weaker opponents have been destroyed. Politicians who have never doubted the results of campaigns move on. The public has never been inspired or doubted about a possible “victory.” The stakes were supposedly too low. And yet, the actual operations go on for years, and over time not only do the campaigns fade from the public eye, but they also lose the meaning for which they were presumably created in the first place.

This leads to disillusionment and potentially a loss of faith in the political decision-making mechanism. Questions such as: Why did we struggle? For what purpose? What has been accomplished? How were these decisions made? And why did we continue? - All of them remain unanswered in the United States.

The sheer absurdity of how these military campaigns have claimed lives and gone on for years without clear grand strategies behind them undermines any credibility and, above all, America’s credibility. The problem is not the allies, who have understood the short-term perspective, the theatricality, and centrality of certain compromises in American politics for years. For many allies, these characteristics are essential features and results of the diversity, openness, and dynamism inherent in the politics of a global empire based on a continent with its own well-
established system of governance.

However, assessments of opponents differ. Many view these characteristics as the severity of the United States’ vulnerability. From this perspective, America is already a modern version of the Roman Empire in decline - huge inequalities and social differences within; a weak center, embroiled in internal political disputes, barely aware of the severe changes taking place around the empire; military and bureaucracy that look on the weakness of the center with frustration. For all that, the decision-making mechanisms at the center, the well-informed Time magazine stresses, often lack the discipline, decisiveness, and critical long-term perspective - features that these opponents seek to command and project.

The withdrawal, or the disgraceful flight from Afghanistan, completes another strange chapter in American foreign policy. But it underscores questions about American positioning in the world. These questions were set aside when the USA ruled exclusively as the world’s only superpower. These issues are relevant today because the United States is entering its most crucial strategic confrontation since the end of the Cold War. This confrontation will affect almost every part of the world. Apparently, the USA will not be the victor in this challenging and persistent struggle. If it does achieve superiority over the entire world, as it used to, it will be a Pyrrhic victory that will destroy America itself.

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