US Removal from Afghanistan is Only Part of the Solution to the Region’s Problems

The complete and utter shambles that has characterised the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan raises a serious question of whether or not Joe Biden is actually in control of his administration. There are unconfirmed reports that the vice president Kamala Harris refused point-blank to have anything to do with the withdrawal. It was probably a wise decision on her part. On the one hand she has no military experience and has illustrated no special interest in military matters in her career to date. On a political level she has no doubt anxious not to be associated too closely with what is turning out to be an almost entirely unmitigated disaster.

The shambles actually began some weeks ago when the United States withdrew from the massive Bagram military base that had been their headquarters throughout the 20 year occupation of Afghanistan. They abandoned the base in the dead of night, not telling their erstwhile colleagues of their intention. They left behind a vast quantity of military equipment, that opportunistic raiders were quick to seize before the Taliban (banned in Russia) moved in.

Also left behind were thousands of prisoners the United States was holding, without trial and without any plan for their future. They were allegedly all Taliban sympathises, which is probably one of the major reasons they were instantly released by the Taliban when the latter took over the base.

An even greater shambles is taking place at Kabul’s International airport, where thousands of Afghans are desperately trying to board the United States planes that were able to land. Such is the state of dishevelled disorder that the planes are taking off again with only a few passengers on board. The Taliban have told the Americans that these flights will only be able to continue until 31 August. It seems highly improbable but more than a fraction of those desperate to leave will in fact have been able to do so. The fate of those unable to leave is yet to be
determined, but it is hard to imagine that the new Taliban government will have a great deal of sympathy for them.

The two countries that look to gain the most from the precipitous United States withdrawal from Afghanistan are Russia and China. There have been extensive talks between Taliban officials and both the Russian and Chinese governments. Not the least of the Chinese interest will be focused on the huge and still largely unexploited mineral resources that Afghanistan enjoys.

Both Russia and China also offered the Taliban the opportunity to expand Afghanistan’s role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation for which it is currently an associate member. That represents a real opportunity for Afghanistan that they will be anxious to exploit. Not the least of their economic problems is a dire shortage of foreign currency. The position has not been assisted by the United States freezing the estimated $7 billion held in the United States on behalf of the government of Afghanistan. It is highly unlikely the Taliban will ever be able to put their hands on these funds.

The United States has no right to withhold the money from the Afghanistan government. Not to put too fine a point on it, what the Americans have done could reasonably be described as theft. It is not the first time that they have seized funds deposited by foreign governments of which they disapprove. Venezuela has suffered a similar fate and there are plenty of other examples.

A further major issue for China and Russia is the fate of the huge heroin crop the accounts for more than 90% of the world’s supply. During their last time in power, from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban showed zero tolerance for the production of heroin, cutting production to 0% in the areas that they controlled and massively reducing production elsewhere.

It was one of the first things that the Americans reinstated after the October 2001 invasion. It is a factor that the western media have been remarkably reluctant to publicise. But the role of the Americans, and in particular the CIA, in control of that massive crop and its distribution throughout the world to the enormous benefit of their coffers, is one of the most important consequences of the United States invasion and occupation.

The Taliban have assured their Russian and Chinese backers that their zero tolerance for the production and distribution of heroin remains unchanged. They have vowed to exercise the same zero tolerance that marked their last period in power. The Russians and Chinese have made it clear that their continued support is contingent upon the same level of zero tolerance being shown this time around.

The CIA is of course profoundly unhappy at the loss of illicit revenue the change of government in Afghanistan represents to them. Whether they will be able to find an alternative country willing to take over from Afghanistan remains a big question. Other countries are acutely aware of the enormous damage playing host to heroin production will incur for them. It is associated for example, with massive levels of corruption in the host governments. There are few that will be willing to take that risk.

Afghanistan itself was the second choice for the United States profiteers from heroin. It used to be the golden triangle of Laos that was the centre of the world production, run by the CIA and distributed throughout the world by the notorious Air America airline. Both Russia and China have been victims of United States narcotic trafficking and both are anxious to see the closure of the Afghanistan production line.

The Taliban have also promised that they have no interest in territory beyond their existing border. Neighbouring countries, of which there are seven, will be particularly concerned to ensure that happens. Not the least of the neighbours’ concerns are the movement of terrorist groups from Afghanistan across their borders. These groups are almost invariably proxies of the United States which has no interest in avoiding disrupting countries in the region, and especially fermenting trouble in China. The Uighur area has been an area of long time interest by the Americans who have actively pursued a propaganda campaign against China for its alleged mistreatment of the Uighur population.

Although the United States is now in the process of withdrawing from Afghanistan, their interest in fermenting trouble in the region remains undiminished. Several of Afghanistan’s neighbours are former republics of the USSR. It is interesting how the Russian government has recently displayed an increased level of interest in these countries, and has held military exercises with some of them. The Americans have finally been kicked out of Afghanistan. It would be naïve to assume however that they have lost their interest in causing trouble in the region.

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