

Emerging Myths About the Afghanistan War

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On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took control of Kabul, the capital city of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and home to one-fifth of the country's population. The president of the republic, Ashraf Ghani, fled the country and resurfaced in the United Arab Emirates. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) ceased to exist, surrendering en masse over a period of weeks¹ and allowing the Taliban to take over the country relatively bloodlessly. It is expected that the Taliban will announce the formation of an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan within the coming weeks, heralding its return to power in a country from which the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and other coalition partners the organization had ousted the organization in 2001.

The collapse of the Islamic Republic was precipitated by the United States withdrawing from the conflict between the Republic and the would-be Emirate's Taliban. In a remarkably straightforward speech, US President Joseph Biden defended the decision to do so. "How many more generations of America's daughters and sons would you have me send to fight Afghans—Afghanistan's civil war when Afghan troops will not? How many more lives—American lives—is it worth?" he said.²

Unequivocally, the Afghanistan War is over—both America's part in it, and the aspect of it that constituted a civil war between the central government the US supported and the Taliban. This has been a bitter pill to swallow for some, but not necessarily for the American public, which supports following through on the withdrawal by a meaningful margin.³

Perhaps the toughest part of the post-Afghanistan War era will be an honest accounting of its implications. Two narratives are fast-emerging about the American pullout and the collapse of the Islamic Republic—yet after a cursory examination these narratives are closer to myth than reality.

Could We Have Stayed?

Some critics of the withdrawal maintain that the decision to leave Afghanistan was unnecessary—the few thousand American advisors present before the 2021 withdrawal could have stayed in-country indefinitely and deterred the Taliban

from marching on Kabul.⁴ Furthermore, as this thread goes, American troops have not been under significant threat for many years: there were no American casualties in 2020, after all.⁵

However, this argument does not hold water. It is true that American casualties in Afghanistan have been infinitesimal in recent years, and lightly felt.⁶ Yet these critics need to familiarize themselves with the key context of the February 2020 Doha agreement between the United States and the Taliban.⁷ The letter of the agreement is quite clear: the Taliban would restrain itself from attacking America and its allies in return for a phased withdrawal of foreign troops.

To go back further, the situation before the Doha agreement was dire, and not, in any sense of the word, stable. The prior two years were intensely bloody: 2018 and 2019 both saw renewed fighting between the Taliban and the Afghanistan government, and a spate of terrorist attacks in urban centers.⁸ Indeed, one myth about the Afghanistan War to knock down now, in the immediate retrospective period, is that the Taliban defeated the central government “in a matter of weeks.” The two sides have been locked in grueling combat since the US and allied forces dramatically scaled back their combat presence in 2014, and this internecine war escalated significantly in 2018.⁹ From this perspective, the central government was facing an unsustainable attrition rate over a very long time. The July–August offensive of this year was simply the coup de grâce to the ANDSF.

In other words, the reprieve to US and allied forces that we saw in 2020 only came about because of the negotiations in Doha. The US footprint was not actually deterring the Taliban as much as critics of the withdrawal portray. The Taliban were holding back. And it is well that they did so: as we have seen with their unexpected surge into the capital, the Taliban did not lack the capacity to overrun the US and allied forces left in-country. The only way to have defeated the Taliban would have been to surge allied forces into the country yet again—dramatically escalating from where the prewithdrawal force was.

Wounded Pride

Another narrative, bordering on the hysterical, is that the collapse of the Islamic Republic represents a humiliation of the American military and US government on such a grand scale that it will permanently ruin US credibility with its allies and third-party nations around the world.¹⁰ The argument goes that because the United States allowed the Afghanistan government to collapse without further intervention, every other country under potential threat of an American adversary will take the US commitment to their security less credibly. No less than Walter Russell Mead and Chen Dingding, foreign policy experts in the United States and China, respectively, have forwarded this claim.¹¹ China’s state media is

practically crowing about the possibility of its neighboring island nemesis Taiwan folding under pressure.¹²

Unsurprisingly, the countries thrust into this analogy are unamused: Taiwan's premier pushed back immediately on the idea that it would "collapse" like Afghanistan after several pundits and editorializing journalists implied it would.¹³ This sentiment was later echoed by Taiwan's president, Tsai-Ing Wen.

One glaring problem with this thesis is that the United States did not have a security commitment to Afghanistan like it does other countries. Material support to the ANDSF does not remotely compare to the solid terms of the Mutual Defense Treaty the United States has with the Philippines, for example. There was no obligation to defend the Afghanistan government with American military might after the withdrawal.

However, it is not only nonsensical to compare the situation of Afghanistan to that of Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, South Korea, or anywhere else the United States has some kind of security arrangement—it is also insulting. The collapse of Afghanistan was not because of a lack of US commitment. The United States and its allies kept the Islamic Republic afloat in a deteriorated security environment for 20 years, despite how peripheral the country was to any Western interests. The longevity of that commitment, alone, is more a boon to America's staying power than anything. Afghanistan ultimately collapsed because the United States—and its allies—crafted a government that quite literally nobody was willing to defend in the end.¹⁴

The Taliban won through a series of negotiated surrenders and defections, and not through stunning battlefield victories. This same scenario is out of the realm of possibility for other countries the United States is involved or interested in. None of America's fellow travelers would trade away their government in such a fashion. None of them have the issues the Islamic Republic had that made their war unwinnable,¹⁵ and to imply they only exist at the whim of a US commitment essentially erases their sense of self-preservation as if it does not exist. There is no doubt the militaries—and societies—of US allies like Japan or South Korea consider their governments worth fighting for.

The European Caveat

The only real notes of anger from American allies that one can hear, so far, come from Europe. Armin Laschet, the head of Germany's ruling party, blasted the withdrawal as a "debacle."¹⁶ The United Kingdom's Conservative Party is incensed at how the withdrawal proceeded, and Tom Tugendhat, a member of Parliament, gave an emotional speech that, among other things, called President Biden "shameful."¹⁷

The criticism is not aimed just at the withdrawal process but instead at the decision to withdraw at all, taking issue with America's washing of its hands of the Afghanistan conflict. These European grievances about Afghanistan will increase in volume and tempo. However, it is difficult not to think some parts of NATO are simply looking to shift blame over their own lack of agency. It was not a secret that the United States was going to pull out completely. NATO, too, agreed to withdraw.¹⁸ Individual countries knew the writing was on the wall, and had the time to plan out what they would do during and after the withdrawal. And there was never serious discussion among NATO members about keeping the mission going without US support.

The United Kingdom, the greatest contributor to the mission besides the United States, saw fit to remove itself from any strategic role in the conflict.¹⁹ It was involved greatly at the operational level, but not at all keen to influence the overall direction of the war—it left that to the United States. If it truly wanted to maintain a role post-withdrawal, the United Kingdom would have had to not only invest in the capacity to do so but envision a real purpose for its staying in Afghanistan—which it could not.²⁰ Probably because, as the United States itself seems to now believe, it has better things to be doing with its limited resources.

The plain truth is this: NATO's dominant European members, for a variety of reasons, do not have an expeditionary capability necessary to influence events in Afghanistan.²¹ That alone would imply that not even the United Kingdom, Germany, or elsewhere saw the Afghanistan War as really theirs to own in the first place. Europe, as a whole, has grown in recent years to only have one overriding concern in its foreign policy, and that is limiting the number of migrants and refugees that come into European countries' borders.²² It is meaningless to suddenly attach importance to Afghanistan and protest now, well past the Islamic Republic's twilight.

Conclusion: The Pain of Silence

In summation, the debate about the wisdom of withdrawal is not really much of a debate. However, the debate about the aftereffects of the Taliban's resurgence can begin now. In many cases, though, outside experts, American allies, and American society have not yet progressed to the soul-searching part of this phased withdrawal. That part can begin with this question: what does it suggest if the Afghanistan War meant very little to the United States? It may actually be tougher to swallow that there is little reason to compare Afghanistan, or the Afghanistan War, to other countries in the world today or to other potential conflicts that may occur.

Sometimes it is more comforting to inflate the importance of a conflict than it is to acknowledge how peripheral a 20-years-long war over nothing immediately relevant to the national interest actually was. And for America's allies, Afghanistan was always on the periphery of a periphery, at best, in terms of their own interests.

This is all caveated with the possibility that the toughest part of the post-Afghanistan War world may be its silence. In American society, the war has not been a topic of discussion for a very, very long time.²³ And after the withdrawal is complete, it will likely lapse back into being so. There may not be the requisite soul-searching, because it is more likely there will be no conversation at all.

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Notes

1. "Collapse and Conquest: The Taliban Strategy That Seized Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

2. "Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan," White House Speech, 16 August 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

3. Ipsos Snap Poll: Afghanistan, 16 August 2021, <https://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/>. Results show 61 percent of respondents support completing the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, despite the country falling to the Taliban.

4. *See*, for some examples: Michael Rubin, "NATO is Dead Man Walking After Afghanistan Debacle," *1945*, 20 August 2021; Isaac Chotiner, "How American Failed in Afghanistan," *New Yorker*, 15 August 2021; Bret Stephens, "Disaster in Afghanistan Will Follow Us Home," *New York Times*, 15 August 2021; and Red Jahncke, "Biden's surrender is damaging in so many ways," *The Day*, 18 August 2021.

5. "As US troops prepare to pull out, a look at the war in Afghanistan by the numbers," *ABC News*, 13 April 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/>.

6. "Lightly felt" in this case meaning American society had little personal connection to the Afghanistan War in the conflict's later years. Tom Nichols put the blame for the Afghanistan War ending with a Taliban resurgence on the American public's apathy toward the war effort. *See*: Tom Nichols, "Afghanistan is Your Fault," *The Atlantic*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

7. *See*: "Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," 29 February 2020, <https://www.state.gov/>; and, "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America," 29 February 2020, <https://www.state.gov/>.

8. "Afghanistan: Events of 2018," *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/>; and "Afghanistan: Civilian deaths at record high in 2018 – United Nations," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 24 February 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

9. The US combat mission in Afghanistan formally ended in 2014. *See*: “Statement by the President on the End of the Combat Mission in Afghanistan,” White House Office of the Press Secretary, 28 December 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

10. Several journalists as well as foreign policy experts advanced this claim. *See*, for some examples: Daniel Henninger, “The Taliban Capture Joe Biden,” *Wall Street Journal*, 18 August 2021; “This is What a Whole of Government Epistemic Failure Looks Like,” *CDRSalamander*, 17 August 2021, <https://cdrsalamander.substack.com/>; Austin Bay, “America’s Afghanistan Disaster Didn’t Have to Happen,” *Epoch Times*, 18 August 2021; Mike Allen, “Biden’s stain: U.S. flees Kabul,” *Axios*, 15 August 2021. *See also* the statements by: Jeff Blehar, co-host of the Political Beats Podcast at National Review, <https://twitter.com/>; Stuart Lau, China-Europe reporter for Politico, <https://twitter.com/>; and Jim Sciutto, Chief National Security correspondent for CNN, <https://twitter.com/>.

11. Walter Russell Mead, “Biden’s Chamberlain Moment in Afghanistan,” *Wall Street Journal*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/>; and Professor Chen Dingding’s statement from 16 August, 2021, <https://twitter.com/>.

12. “Chinese state media using Afghanistan collapse to scare Taiwan,” *American Military News*, 16 August 2021, <https://americanmilitarynews.com/>.

13. “Taiwan would not collapse like Afghanistan, premier says,” *Japan Times*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/>.

14. Numerous reports from journalists in the field have confirmed this. For one example, see: “Afghanistan’s military collapse: Illicit deals and desertions,” *Washington Post*, 15 August 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

15. A vital read on the structural issues within the Islamic Republic would be Sarah Chayes’ “The Ides of August,” available on her website, <https://www.sarahchayes.org/>.

16. “Afghan pullout is ‘biggest NATO debacle’: Merkel party chief,” *France24*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.france24.com/>.

17. “Afghanistan withdrawal ‘damn well feels like defeat’ Tory MPs tell Boris Johnson,” *Telegraph*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/>.

18. “Afghanistan: All foreign troops must leave by deadline – Taliban,” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 5 July 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

19. *See*: Professor Michael Clarke, “Afghanistan and the UK’s Illusion of Strategy,” *Royal United Services Institute*, 16 August 2021, <https://rusi.org/>.

20. *See*: Tim Willasey-Wilsey, “Twelve Dilemmas Behind the UK’s Afghan Defeat,” *Royal United Services Institute*, 2 August 2021, <https://rusi.org/>.

21. “Europe a fearful bystander as Taliban sweep through Afghanistan,” *Politico*, 12 August 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/>.

22. *See* statements put out by German and French politicians in: “German politicians fret about refugees from Afghanistan,” *Deutsche-Welles*, <https://www.dw.com/>; “Macron’s comments on ‘irregular’ migration draw ire,” *Al Jazeera*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/>; and Florian Bieber, “Mainstreaming the far right: the wrong lesson from Afghanistan,” *Politico*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/>.

23. Coverage of Afghanistan in American media dropped off heavily after the initial invasion. *See*: Sandra Korn, “Afghanistan in the Media,” *Harvard Political Review*, 6 November 2011. <https://harvardpolitics.com/>.

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