After the Flee: The Causes and the Likely Impact on Main Actors of the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Afghanistan is an astounding failure for the US not only in terms of the outcome but also enormous cost in 1) money (2 trillion dollars?), 2) lives lost on both sides, 3) manpower, 4) time, 5) diplomatic capital, 6) precious leadership bandwidth devoted to it, 7) decline of the US reputation in credibility and competence, 8) harm to the intra-alliance relationships, 9) distortion of domestic politics, angry veterans who feel they were duped and used, and their resultant anger that may still benefit Trump(s), 9) corrupting impact of the expansion of the military industrial complex etc. And also the opportunity cost of wasting all these when China grew economically and expanded geopolitically with breathtaking speed is increasingly realised even by many of those who devised and executed the very policy.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was necessary, long overdue and perhaps urgent. But it was also poorly planned and implemented. Biden administration seems not to think deeply enough about its implications, implementation, details, preparation, coordination, difficulties, optics and the inevitable costs for US reputation. A decision can be “right” but may still bring many complications. This looks like it.

The causes of failure are many, varied, most were “present at the creation,” dated back to its initial stages. Afghanistan was the wrong (and difficult) country, nation-building was the wrong objective and COIN was the wrong strategy. US should have devoted more troops to Tora Bora after Taliban fell (imagine if bin Laden was captured in 2002!), try to integrate Taliban to the new political structure and should not rush to Iraq and ignore Afghanistan. This may sound like 20/20 hindsight but many people warned about them at the time.

The absymal failure of the Afghanistan project and the incompetent way withdrawal was

handled inevitably raises some questions. Is the US reliable, trustworthy, predictable, wise and competent as an ally, protector, superpower? Does it have enough resources, will and stamina to manage and succeed worldwide in long struggles? Should I put all my all eggs on its basket? Or should I diversify my strategic portfolio or at least wait? For almost all leaders, regimes and states answering these type questions correctly is important, for some it may be vital, even existential.

Russia: A US with a bloody nose is an instant satisfaction for Putin. US withdrawal will also likely decrease the American influence in Central Asia. But the Taliban's unpredictability will be a concern. Moscow will try to use carrot and stick policies to tame it. Recognition, trade, aid, intelligence sharing on the one hand, and (the possibility of) supporting groups unhappy with Taliban, increasing presence and vigilance at the borders, blocking initiatives at the UN, on the other. Anxious bordering states will look for more Russian leadership and support. Although there are some risks and Moscow will be cautious, US withdrawal is a net gain for Russia.

China: Ditto for Beijing. Among the great powers China seems to be the most forthcoming of Taliban. Any loss of US credibility is "good" for China. Many will view failure in Afghanistan as an other sign of US decline. But it is clear that US will devote more time and energy to contain China. And while the haste of the Afghan withdrawal may raise eyebrows elsewhere, in eastern Asia it may paradoxically be seen as a signal that US is serious about China.

Americans may hope that Afghanistan will now be "other people's problem." If the country becomes a cauldron of radicalism China, Russia and Iran may have to devote time, resources and energy to contain it. It may create complications for the Belt and Road. But it may also increase the cooperation between these states and neighbors. And if China

manages to pacify, stabilize and develop the country then people may compare that with the US record there and draw conclusion from it.

Afganistan is a land-locked country. Its population is half percent of the world, its economy is much smaller. It is more likely to be a burden on its patron than be a prize. Still, if the Chinese are able to flip the country to themselves it may be an important PR coup. Afghanistan may not be necessary for the Belt and Road to succeed. But it may help, perhaps more psychologically. If the country comes under Chinese influence third parties may think that China is winning. But probably it will not be easy, quick, cheap and complete.

Iran: Tehran may share many of Russia's concerns and glee, though there may be differences of degrees, and it may have some specific interests regarding its neighbour. Hazara's security, the degree of their incorporation to the body politics, migration, ever increasing appetite for Afghan drugs in Iranian society, Taliban's possible partnership with Gulf states are all concerns for Tehran. On the positive side, if things go smoothly, suddenly Iran will be much closer to China geographically and psychologically. Chinese influence may travel westward pretty fast in the future. Already diminished before the withdrawal, US military presence in its east will no longer trouble Iran. Taliban's promises of not supporting cross boundary jihadists will be closely monitored but it's not nothing. If Russia/China/Iran are able to cooperate effectively on Afghanistan it may deepen their general geopolitical partnership. With the possible (though far from certain) addition of Afghanistan to Chinese BRI, Iran may derive additional economic benefits.

Middle East: Taliban's rise to power may increase concerns about radical Islam among the region's rulers. Taliban promised not to support any terrorist organizations. But even if it keeps its promise its success, methods, tactics, perserverance, practices may inspire radical

islamists in the region. Some of them may go there to observe, study and work for the Taliban. And they may return!

Apart from that, questions about American staying power may lead the Gulf sheikhdoms to 1) increase their defense efforts, 2) try to overcome their differences, 3) talk and maybe appease Iran, 4) diversify their strategic portfolio to a degree (Russia, China, Turkey, India, France), 5) develop their relationship with Israel, 6) try to gauge the future US intentions, and 7) lobby in the US about their importance, reliability, usefulness.

Turkey: Ankara tried to use the Kabul airport thing as a bridge to Taliban, hope to create a leverage in its deteriorating relations with the US, and display it as sort of a prestige project. Some even hoped to use Afghanistan as a hopping point. For now, though, this seems to fail. Things may change but the problem is the security risk is too great, benefits are uncertain, distant and marginal, Taliban is unwilling and the US does not seem to care much. The amount of time and diplomatic capital devoted to the subject looks disproportionate to its importance and the chances of success. In a more general way, though, US withdrawal may benefit Turkey. Many small states in the region may look for Turkey's help in countering the new uncertainty. But mass migration and the risk of radical Islamists taking inspiration from Taliban are troubling for Ankara, too.

After the Afghanistan debacle Biden may feel the need to prove that the US is, 1) not in decline, 2) reliable, 3) not "withdrawing" from the world. Hence the next actor who seems to be testing these propositions may receive a very harsh and disproportionate response. Though of course it will depend on the context, timing and the nature of the issue, Ankara should vary of this possibility and be cautious. Against PKK PYD YPG in Syria, for instance, salami tactics may be preferable than dramatic one-time big moves, at least for some time. But whatever Turkey does PYD YPG have seen that US protection may not be long term and

what one president promises the next one my easily cancel of forget. Hence, they may be more willing to negotiate an agreement under the Russian auspieces. Turkey should try to impact and shape this process with its military actions, declarations, secret and open diplomacy and "strategic silence."

Europe: The world is globalised not only in economy and communications but also in geopolitics. US withdrawal from Afghanistan may have ricochet effects in distant corners of the world. After Afghanistan Europeans may finally understand the necessity of increasing their defense effort. This may lead to a different defense identity, and although not all will desire that, some weakening of Nato. It will obviously leave Turkey outside and may complicate Ankara's defense and its relations with the Europeans. A more assertive European defense identity may easily clash with Turkey through Greece and Greek Cyprus.

The US withdrawal confirms the impression of a more modest policy aims other regarding China, continues the trend for giving up unnecessary burdens, and clarifies future US policy centered around containing China. But the implications of the withdrawal may be less tidy and in some cases less welcome than the Biden people predict. It will inevitably raise questions of credibility, competence, resolve, alliance solidarity and consultation. Biden famously declared "America is back" but many partners may find this new America wanting as a dependable ally.