Exiting Afghanistan: Biden Sets the Date

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It had to be symbolic, and was represented as such. Forces of the United States will be leaving Afghanistan on September 11 after two decades of violent occupation, though for a good deal of this stretch, US forces were, at best, failed democracy builders, at worst, violent tenants.

In his April 14 speech, President Joe Biden made the point that should have long been evident: that Washington could not "continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan hoping to create the ideal conditions for our withdrawal, expecting a different result." As if to concede to the broader failure of the exercise, "the terror threat" had flourished, being now present "in many places". To keep "thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year makes little sense to me and to our leaders."

For such a long stay, the objectives have been far from convincing. The US presence in Afghanistan should focus "on the reason we went there in the first place: to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again. We did that. We accomplished that objective." A debacle is dressed up in the robes of necessity, the original purpose being to "root out al Qaeda" in 2001 and "to prevent future terrorist attacks against the United States planned from Afghanistan."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is marshalling European leaders to aid in the withdrawal effort. "I am here," he stated at NATO's Belgium headquarters, "to work closely with our allies, with the secretary general, on the principle that we have established from the start, 'In together, adapt together and out together'." There have been few times in history, perhaps with the exception of the Vietnam War, where defeat has been given such an unremarkable cover.

Little improvement on this impression was made at a meeting between Blinken and Abdullah Abdullah, chair of the Afghanistan High Commission for National Reconciliation. According to State Department spokesperson Ned Price, the secretary "reiterated the US commitment to the peace process and that we will use our full diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian toolkit to support the future the Afghan people want, including the gains made by Afghan women."

At the US embassy in Kabul, Blinken made an assortment of weak assurances about

"America's commitment to an enduring partnership with Afghanistan and the Afghan people." Despite the troops leaving the country, the "security partnership will endure." There was "strong bipartisan support for that commitment to the Afghan Security Forces." There would be oodles of diplomacy, economic investment and development assistance. And, as for the Taliban, joyfully lurking in the wings to assume power, Blinken had this assessment: "It's very important that the Taliban recognize that it will never be legitimate and it will never be durable if it rejects a political process and tries to take the country by force."

A better, and more accurate sense of attitudes to Kabul could be gathered in the remarks of a senior Biden official, as reported in the *Washington Post*. "The reality is that the United States has big strategic interests in the world…. Afghanistan just does not rise to the level of those other threats at this point." Afghanistan, in time, will be discarded like strategic refuse.

Critics invariably assume various aspects of the imperial pose: to leave the country is to surrender a policing function, to encourage enemies, to reverse any gains (shallow as they are), to lay the grounds for the need for potential re-engagement. An erroneous link is thereby encouraged linking US national security interests with the desperate ruination that has afflicted a State that has not seen peace in decades. For its part, the US contribution to that ruination has been, along with its coalition allies, far from negligible.

Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell preached that the withdrawal was "a grave mistake," a reminder that such foolish decisions had been made before. "Ten years ago, when President Obama let politics dictate the terms of our involvement in Iraq, those failed decisions invited the rise of ISIS." For McConnell, battling terrorism remained a central purpose for keeping boots on the much trodden ground of Afghanistan. "A reckless pullback like this would abandon our Afghan, regional, and NATO partners in a shared fight against terrorists we have not yet won."

In March, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, told a National Security Council Principal Committee meeting that withdrawing would see women's rights return "to the Stone Age". Leaving was also not advisable, given "all the blood and treasure spent". (Others at the meeting felt that Milley's arguments had the soft stuffing of emotion rather than firm logic.)

The *Washington Post*, in a vein similar to that of McConnell and Milley, resorted to the conventional betrayal thesis: leaving was "an abandonment of those Afghans who believed in building a democracy that guaranteed basic human rights". It would also mean nullifying "the sacrifices of the American servicemen who were killed or wounded in that mission." Little thought is given to the shallow, corruption saturated regime in Kabul that can barely claim any semblance of legitimacy beyond the sponsorship of external powers.

The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, William Burns, takes a more prosaic, utilitarian line. Leaving Afghanistan will, he explained at a hearing of a Senate Intelligence Committee on global threats, drain the intelligence pool. "When the time comes for the US military to withdraw, the US government's ability to collect and act on threats will diminish. That's simply a fact."

The pessimists from the *National Review* are also full of warning. Jim Geraghty is almost shrill in worrying what the media headline, "Taliban Rule Afghanistan Again" will do in

spurring on "global Islamist jihadism," [claiming that](#), "[a] bad withdrawal only sets up the need for more combat in the future." Kevin Williamson is at least [accurate on one point](#): Afghanistan, for the US, is a clear picture of "what failure looks like. What success is going to look like, we still don't know." Nor, it would seem, ever will.

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