

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Back with a Bang

The US 'loss' of Afghanistan is a repositioning and the new mission is not a 'war on terror,' but Russia and China

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*Wait until the war is over
And we're both a little older
The unknown soldier
Breakfast where the news is read
Television children fed
Unborn living, living, dead
Bullet strikes the helmet's head
And it's all over
For the unknown soldier*

The Doors, "The Unknown Soldier"

In the end, the [Saigon moment](#) happened faster than any Western intel “expert” expected. This is one for the annals: four frantic days that wrapped up the most astonishing guerrilla blitzkrieg of recent times. Afghan-style: lots of persuasion, lots of tribal deals, zero columns of tanks, minimal loss of blood.

August 12 set the scene, with the nearly simultaneous capture of Ghazni, Kandahar and Herat. On August 13, the Taliban were only 50 kilometers from Kabul. August 14 started with the siege of Maidan Shahr, the gateway to Kabul.

Ismail Khan, the legendary elder Lion of Herat, struck a self-preservation deal and was sent by the Taliban as a top-flight messenger to Kabul: President Ashraf Ghani should step out, or else.

Still on Saturday, the Taliban took Jalalabad – and isolated Kabul from the east, all the way to the Afgan-Pakistan border in Torkham, gateway to the Khyber Pass. By Saturday night, Marshal Dostum was fleeing with a bunch of military to Uzbekistan via the Friendship Bridge

in Termez; only a few were allowed in. The Taliban duly took over Dostum's Tony Montana-style palace.

By early morning on August 15, all that was left for the Kabul administration was the Panjshir valley – high in the mountains, a naturally protected fortress – and scattered Hazaras: there's nothing there in those beautiful central lands, except Bamiyan.

Exactly 20 years ago, I was in Bazarak getting ready to [interview the Lion of the Panjshir](#), commander Masoud, who was preparing a counter-offensive against ... the Taliban. History repeating, with a twist. This time I was sent visual proof that the Taliban – following the classic guerrilla sleeping cell playbook – were already in the Panjshir.

And then mid-morning on Sunday brought the stunning visual re-enactment of the Saigon moment, for all the world to see: a Chinook helicopter hovering over the roof of the American embassy in Kabul.

'The war is over'

Still on Sunday, Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem proclaimed: "The war is over in Afghanistan," adding that the shape of the new government would soon be announced.

Facts on the ground are way more convoluted. Feverish negotiations have been going on since Sunday afternoon. The Taliban were ready to announce the official proclamation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in its 2.0 version (1.0 was from 1996 to 2001). The official announcement would be made inside the presidential palace.

Yet what's left of Team Ghani was refusing to transfer power to a coordinating council that will de facto set up the transition. What the Taliban want is a seamless transition: they are now the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Case closed.

By Monday, a sign of compromise came from Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen. The new government will include non-Taliban officials. He was referring to an upcoming "transition administration," most probably co-directed by Taliban political leader Mullah Baradar and Ali Ahmad Jalali, a former minister of internal affairs who was also, in the past, an employee of Voice of America.

In the end, there was no Battle for Kabul. Thousands of Taliban were *already* inside Kabul – once again the classic sleeper-cell playbook. The bulk of their forces remained in the outskirts. An official Taliban proclamation ordered them not to enter the city, which should be captured without a fight, to prevent civilian casualties.

The Taliban did advance from the west, but "advancing," in context, meant connecting to the sleeper cells in Kabul, which by then were fully active. Tactically, Kabul was encircled in an "anaconda" move, as defined by a Taliban commander: squeezed from north, south and west and, with the capture of Jalalabad, cut off from the east.

At some point last week, high-level intel must have whispered to the Taliban command that the Americans would be coming to "evacuate." It could have been Pakistan intelligence, even Turkish intelligence, with Erdogan playing his characteristic NATO double game.

The American rescue cavalry not only came late, but was caught in a bind as they could not possibly bomb their own assets inside Kabul. The horrible timing was compounded when the

Bagram military base – the NATO Valhalla in Afghanistan for nearly 20 years – was finally captured by the Taliban.

That led the US and NATO to literally *beg* the Taliban to let them evacuate everything in sight from Kabul – by air, in haste, at the Taliban’s mercy. A geopolitical development that evokes suspension of disbelief.

Ghani versus Baradar

Ghani’s hasty escape is the stuff of “a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing” – without the Shakespearean pathos. The heart of the whole matter was a last-minute meeting on Sunday morning between former President Hamid Karzai and Ghani’s perennial rival Abdullah Abdullah.

They discussed in detail who they were going to send to negotiate with the Taliban – who by then not only were fully prepared for a possible battle for Kabul, but had announced their immovable red line weeks ago – they want the end of the current NATO government.

Ghani finally saw the writing on the wall and disappeared from the presidential palace without even addressing the potential negotiators. With his wife, chief of staff and national security adviser, he escaped to Tashkent, the Uzbek capital. A few hours later, the Taliban entered the presidential palace, the [stunning images](#) duly captured.

Commenting on Ghani’s escape, Abdullah Abdullah did not mince his words: “God will hold him accountable.” Ghani, an anthropologist with a doctorate from Columbia, is one of those classic cases of Global South exiles to the West who “forget” everything that matters about their original lands.

Ghani is a Pashtun who acted like an arrogant New Yorker. Or worse, an entitled Pashtun, as he was often demonizing the Taliban, who are overwhelmingly Pashtun, not to mention Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, including their tribal elders.

It’s as if Ghani and his Westernized team had never learned from a top source such as the late, great Norwegian social anthropologist Fredrik Barth (check out a sample of his Pashtun studies [here](#)).

Geopolitically, what matters now is how the Taliban have written a whole new script, showing the lands of Islam, as well as the Global South, how to defeat the self-referential, seemingly invincible US/NATO empire.

The Taliban did it with Islamic faith, infinite patience and force of will fueling roughly 78,000 fighters – 60,000 of them active – many with minimal military training, no backing of any state – unlike Vietnam, which had China and the USSR – no hundreds of billions of dollars from NATO, no trained army, no air force and no state-of-the-art technology.

They relied only on Kalashnikovs, rocket-propelled grenades and Toyota pick-ups – before they captured American hardware these past few days, including drones and helicopters.

Taliban leader Mullah Baradar has been extremely cautious. On Monday he said: “It is too early to say how we will take over governance.” First of all, the Taliban wants “to see foreign forces leave before restructuring begins.”

Abdul Ghani Baradar is a very interesting character. He was born and raised in Kandahar. That's where the Taliban started in 1994, seizing the city almost without a fight and then, equipped with tanks, heavy weapons and a lot of cash to bribe local commanders, capturing Kabul nearly 25 years ago, on September 27, 1996.

Earlier, Mullah Baradar fought in the 1980s jihad against the USSR, and maybe - not confirmed - side-by-side with Mullah Omar, with whom he co-founded the Taliban.

After the American bombing and occupation post-9/11, Mullah Baradar and a small group of Taliban sent a proposal to then-President Hamid Karzai on a potential deal that would allow the Taliban to recognize the new regime. Karzai, under Washington pressure, rejected it.

Baradar was actually arrested in Pakistan in 2010 - and kept in custody. Believe it or not, American intervention led to his freedom in 2018. He then relocated to Qatar. And that's where he was appointed head of the Taliban's political office and oversaw the signing last year of the American withdrawal deal.

Baradar will be the new ruler in Kabul - but it's important to note he's under the authority of the Taliban Supreme Leader since 2016, Haibatullah Akhundzada. It's the Supreme Leader - actually a spiritual guide - who will be lording over the new incarnation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Beware of a peasant guerrilla army

The collapse of the Afghan National Army (ANA) was inevitable. They were "educated" the American military way: massive technology, massive airpower, next to zero local ground intel.

The Taliban is all about deals with tribal elders and extended family connections - and a peasant guerrilla approach, parallel to the communists in Vietnam. They were biding their time for years, just building connections - and those sleeper cells.

Afghan troops who had not received a salary for months were paid not to fight them. And the fact they did not attack American troops since February 2020 earned them a lot of extra respect: a matter of honor, essential in the Pashtunwali code.

It's impossible to understand the Taliban - and most of all, the Pashtun universe - without understanding Pashtunwali. As well as the concepts of honor, hospitality and inevitable revenge for any wrongdoing, the concept of freedom implies no Pashtun is inclined to be ordered by a central state authority - in this case, Kabul. And no way will they ever surrender their guns.

In a nutshell, that's the "secret" of the lightning-fast blitzkrieg with minimal loss of blood, inbuilt in the overarching geopolitical earthquake. After Vietnam, this is the second Global South protagonist showing the whole world how an empire can be defeated by a peasant guerrilla army.

And all that accomplished with a budget that may not exceed \$1.5 billion a year - coming from local taxes, profits from opium exports (no internal distribution allowed) and real estate speculation. In vast swaths of Afghanistan, the Taliban were already, de facto, running local security, local courts and even food distribution.

Taliban 2021 is an entirely different animal compared with Taliban 2001. Not only are they battle-hardened, they had plenty of time to perfect their diplomatic skills, which were recently more than visible in Doha and in high-level visits to Tehran, Moscow and Tianjin.

They know very well that any connection with al-Qaeda remnants, ISIS/Daesh, ISIS-Khorasan and ETIM is counter-productive – as their Shanghai Cooperation Organization interlocutors made very clear.

Internal unity, anyway, will be extremely hard to achieve. The Afghan tribal maze is a jigsaw puzzle, nearly impossible to crack. What the Taliban may realistically achieve is a loose confederation of tribes and ethnic groups under a Taliban emir, coupled with very careful management of social relations.

Initial impressions point to increased maturity. The Taliban are granting amnesty to employees of the NATO occupation and won't interfere with businesses activities. There will be no revenge campaign. Kabul is back in business. There is allegedly no mass hysteria in the capital: that's been the exclusive domain of Anglo-American mainstream media. The Russian and Chinese embassies remain open for business.

Zamir Kabulov, the Kremlin special representative for Afghanistan, has confirmed that the situation in Kabul, surprisingly, is “absolutely calm” – even as he reiterated:

“We are not in a rush as far as recognition [of the Taliban] is concerned. We will wait and watch how the regime will behave.”

The New Axis of Evil

Tony Blinken may blabber that “we were in Afghanistan for one overriding purpose – to deal with the folks who attacked us on 9/11.”

Every serious analyst knows that the “overriding” geopolitical purpose of the bombing and occupation of Afghanistan nearly 20 years ago was to establish an essential Empire of Bases foothold in the strategic intersection of Central and South Asia, subsequently coupled with occupying Iraq in Southwest Asia.

Now the “loss” of Afghanistan should be interpreted as a repositioning. It fits the new geopolitical configuration, where the Pentagon's top mission is not the “war on terror” anymore, but to simultaneously try to isolate Russia and harass China by all means on the expansion of the New Silk Roads.

Occupying smaller nations has ceased to be a priority. The Empire of Chaos can always foment chaos – and supervise assorted bombing raids – from its CENTCOM base in Qatar.

Iran is about to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a full member – another game-changer. Even before resetting the Islamic Emirate, the Taliban have carefully cultivated good relations with key Eurasia players – Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian ‘stans. The ‘stans are under full Russian protection. Beijing is already planning hefty rare earth business with the Taliban.

On the Atlanticist front, the spectacle of non-stop self-recrimination will consume the Beltway for ages. Two decades, \$2 trillion, a forever war debacle of chaos, death and destruction, a still shattered Afghanistan, an exit literally in the dead of night – for what?

The only “winners” have been the Lords of the Weapons Racket.

Yet every American plotline needs a fall guy. NATO has just been cosmically humiliated in the graveyard of empires by a bunch of goat herders – and not by close encounters with Mr [Khinzal](#). What’s left? Propaganda.

So meet the new fall guy: the New Axis of Evil. The axis is Taliban-Pakistan-China. The New Great Game in Eurasia has just been reloaded.

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