



US withdrawal from Afghanistan spells dangerous geopolitical realignments

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The Biden administration, like its predecessor, is poised to withdraw the remaining American troops from Afghanistan — at great cost to both its own and its allies' interests.

By treating Afghanistan as a small stand-alone conflict of interest only to voters in the United States, withdrawing a few thousand soldiers to end America's longtime commitment reframes a strategic failure as political relief. But relief will be short-lived, as America's absence from the competition emboldens its adversaries, including a host of nuclear states and credible nuclear aspirants, to reconsider objectives, redesign strategies, and combine capabilities in ways that will threaten U.S. interests over the longer term and across a larger geopolitical map.

American presence in the heart of Central Asia has long figured as a key determinant in the strategies of the region's other actors.

If the U.S. pulls out of Afghanistan, all — repeat all — of these actors will change their strategies to advance agendas that they could not have realized while the U.S. was present.

It makes no difference why the U.S. intervened in the first place; forget pulling out because “the job is done.” Fast forward 20 years, and intervention created a new strategic calculus for the region's other actors that has limited their objectives and tempered their strategies across a range of their interests, desires, and aspirations. Withdrawal will destroy these restraints.

Several allies will see U.S. withdrawal as dangerous to their own strategic defense. India, which is heavily invested in Afghanistan's viability, springs to mind — because U.S. withdrawal will expose India to both China's and Pakistan's machinations. Both will relish the moment at India's expense. Meanwhile, the message to India will be unequivocal: the U.S. is an untrustworthy partner for other “strategic alliance” activities into which it is pushing India in support of America's security agenda.

Even tiny Georgia, which has sent hundreds of its soldiers to support the U.S. military in Afghanistan in hopes that this would burnish its application for full NATO membership, will suffer America's thumb in its eye. Its claim will look much less credible for supporting the losing side.

Stay tuned for China, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Russia, all the Central Asian states — and even those of the South Caucasus — to adapt their strategies to account for the consequences of U.S. withdrawal.

It won't be pretty.

Some of these actors will likely combine capabilities. Think China, Russia, and Iran for openers, with other currently unimaginable combinations to follow. Powerful neighbors will jeopardize the welcome gains in development, security, and cooperation among the Central Asian “stans,” who view America's commitment to neighboring Afghanistan as organic to its support for themselves.

Successive administrations have long resisted building an understanding of the dynamics of Eurasia's geopolitical competition into a coherent American strategy for the region. A chorus from the State Department sings that the U.S. has lots and lots of programs for Afghanistan. Not to worry, they say, our competitive position is secure. This is what they always claim, never understanding that programs are not strategy. They are like plumbers insisting that they have lots of wrenches, without ever understanding the plumbing architecture.

This administration's — and the last one's — simplistic rejection of “forever wars” reveals a deep misunderstanding of the persistent requirements of geopolitical competition in a region of vital U.S. interests.

It is time to replace a one-dimensional “strategy” for Afghanistan based on the fiction that we cut our losses pulling out. Afghanistan is messy, to be sure, but it is nothing like the mess that will ensue from all other regional actors re-setting objectives and designing more aggressive strategies — inevitably including dangerous opportunism and miscalculations — as they move to profit from America's lack of strategic understanding and sustainable resolve. Our modest investment in Afghanistan is a sensible and effective brake on this momentum.

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