



The Costs Of The Afghan Catastrophe

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By now, it's beyond question that the Biden administration's hasty, uncoordinated withdrawal from Afghanistan is nothing short of a debacle. The rapidity with which U.S. forces pulled back in recent weeks helped empower a surge on the part of the Taliban, with dramatic results, while the lack of proper contingency plans to evacuate – or even to protect – vulnerable civilians have led to tragic scenes of mayhem and ongoing disorder.

Polymakers in Washington are now frantically scrambling to undo the damage. The measures they are employing – including airlifts of U.S. citizens and Afghan refugees and the coordination of international human rights policies – may end up having some effect. But the long-term consequences of the Administration's miscalculation are sure to reverberate for years to come. And while the true extent of the damage has yet to be tallied, it's already apparent that those costs will be measured in a number of concrete ways.

For one thing, America's retreat, and the Taliban's advance, has set the stage for a reinvigoration of global Islamic extremism. Last month, a panel of experts reported to the UN Security Council that the threat posed by extremist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda remains severe. "The first half of 2021 saw broad continuity in terms of the nature and source of the threats posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al-Qaida and their affiliates, along with heightened threats emerging in some regions," their study underscored.

Now, the Taliban's stunning political and strategic successes threaten to make the situation significantly worse. Within Afghanistan itself, U.S. officials worry that the movement's successful takeover has set the stage for a potential al-Qaeda resurgence – one that the U.S. is now much less able to monitor. Abroad, the Taliban's victory has helped provide inspiration for a new generation of radicals eager to take up arms against the West.

For another thing, America's Afghan retreat has profoundly unsettled allies and partners. The way in which the United States disengaged from Afghanistan, and its abandonment of locals who previously assisted with the American war effort, has raised serious questions among partner nations about the durability of their cooperation with the U.S. – and perhaps even the advisability of it. For their part, America's adversaries are doing their best to amplify those fears. Chinese state media has warned Taiwan that it, too, is likely to be abandoned by the U.S. in due course. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has done much the same, publicly telling Israel that U.S. support cannot be relied upon.

In ordinary times, such doubts would be damaging. But at a time of "great power competition" between the United States and China, they are nothing short of ruinous.

Then there is the status of Afghanistan itself. During its previous experiment in governance, from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban was a global pariah, with few international contacts and even less world support. Today, however, the movement finds itself in a much more favorable position. Countries like Russia and Iran have already signaled cautious acceptance and recognition of Taliban rule. China, meanwhile, has been more effusive, and for good reason. For some time now, China has been quietly working to build up its influence in Afghanistan through investments and construction projects, with a singular goal: to make post-America Afghanistan a key strategic corridor along its Belt and Road.

This puts the United States on the horns of a serious dilemma. The Biden administration has stopped short of recognizing the Taliban, and threatened to turn Afghanistan into a "pariah state" if the group does not observe international norms. Yet if enough foreign nations follow China's lead and come to terms with the new leadership in Kabul, America won't be able to do any such thing. In fact, it may be forced to accept the Taliban as well – marking a major defeat for Washington, and a major success for Beijing.

For the moment, officials are still attempting to mitigate the immediate aftermath of the unceremonious U.S. departure from Afghanistan. Soon enough, though, America – and the world – will need to deal with the long-term strategic consequences of that fateful decision.