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US Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Is the US Falling?

الانسحاب الأمريكي من أفغانستان: هل الولايات المتحدة تتهاوى؟

Djaalal meriem 1*
Biskra university
meriem.djaalal@univ-biskra.dz

Assassi tarek 2
Biskra university
t.assassi@univ-biskra.dz

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the discrepancy between US military superpower status, economic might, and effective leadership following its withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. By examining the withdrawal's chaotic execution and the strategic inconsistency of negotiating with the very adversaries of the U.S, the paper interrogates how such a setback affects a superpower's reputation for competence and reliability.

Employing a qualitative methodology relying on primary sources such as official policy documents and diplomatic statements and secondary sources, such as authoritative analyses from research institutes and academic journals, this article argues that the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was inevitable after a two-decade-long misuse of power, driven by strategic hubris, a phenomenon explained by realist theories on the limits of hard power and the cognitive psychology of the Dunning-Kruger effect with bureaucratic infighting intensified this strategic failure, ensuring the departure was as mismanaged as the war itself.

Keywords: Afghanistan- decline- end of American supremacy- Taliban-USA-withdrawal.

* ***Corresponding author***

Introduction

It remains marking that the US is a world superpower since the fall of the Soviet Union and hence the end of the Cold War. It was evident among the Greek city-states at the time of Herodotus, who said that: the cities that were formerly great have most of them become insignificant; and such as are at present powerful, were weak in old time. The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked the end of a 20-year military campaign that began in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The chaotic evacuation of Kabul, the rapid collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan government, and the Taliban's return to power raised urgent questions about the legacy of America's longest war and its implications for U.S. global leadership.

For two decades, the U.S. justified its presence in Afghanistan as a mission to dismantle terrorist networks, promote democracy, and stabilize the region. Yet, the abrupt departure, which left thousands of Afghan allies stranded and triggered a humanitarian crisis, has reignited debates about whether the United States is experiencing a decline in its global influence and credibility. This article examines the historical context of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, analyzes the consequences of its withdrawal, and interrogates the central question: Is the U.S. falling? While critics argue that the withdrawal exposed systemic weaknesses in U.S. foreign policy, this article contends that the decision reflects a strategic recalibration rather than an irreversible decline, as the U.S. continues to wield significant economic, military, and institutional power on the global stage.

Firstly: Historical Context of U.S. Engagement in Afghanistan

The historical context of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan is marked by a series of strategic interests and evolving policies from the Cold War to the post-9/11 era. This historical engagement illustrates the U.S.'s transactional relationship with Afghanistan, often driven by immediate security concerns rather than long-term commitments.

1. Securitization and the 'War on Terror': The Bush Administration's Justification for Military Intervention after 9/11.

After the demise of Soviet Union, the United States now had a freedom to assert itself, and its foreign policy should suit its national interests[1]. When G. Bush arrived, the 9/11 attacks presented a foreign policy challenge. In an address to the nation on the evening of September 11, Bush stated his resolution of the issue by declaring that "we will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."[2]

It was Charles Krauthammer who explained and highlighted in 2001, that 'Bush Doctrine' is the word that identifies different foreign policy options, which were adopted by the former President of the United States George W. Bush[3]. Bush prioritized a doctrine of prevention through unilateral military action and regime change to bolster security. This strategy, implemented over the subsequent seven years, was credited with preventing further terrorist attacks on U.S. soil during that

period. The main elements of the Bush Doctrine are:

- **Preemptive War**: One of the most significant aspects of the Bush Doctrine is the idea of preemptive strikes. This means that the U.S. would take military action against a threat before it fully materializes, particularly against nations or groups that are perceived to be developing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).
- **Unilateral Action**: The doctrine emphasizes the right of the U.S. to act independently in international affairs, even without the support of allies or international organizations. This was particularly evident in the decision to invade Iraq in 2003.
- **Promotion of Democracy**: The Bush Doctrine advocates for the promotion of democracy and freedom around the world, especially in the Middle East. The belief is that democratic nations are less likely to harbor terrorism and engage in conflict.
- **Counterterrorism**: A core element of the doctrine is a strong focus on combating terrorism. This includes not only military action against terrorist groups but also efforts to disrupt their funding and recruitment.
- **Defense of American Interests**: The doctrine asserts that the U.S. has the right to defend its national interests and security against any threats, which can justify military intervention.
- **Coalition Building**: While the doctrine supports unilateral action, it also recognizes the importance of building coalitions with other nations to address global threats, particularly in the fight against terrorism.

George W. Bush's strategy is based on two important assumptions. Number one was because of its unique position in the world; America should do away with any constraint on its actions imposed by its allies, as America cannot rely on others for its defense[4]. The second rationale was that US should confront and go after any threats posed to its National Security out of its borders and neutralize them rather than waiting for the threats to materialized[5]. Finally, and most importantly, US defense industrial complex have consistently pushed the US government to launch a prolong intervention in Afghanistan. They consider Afghanistan as the gate way to Central Asia and Caspian region which are rich in oil and gas resources[6].

The President had made up his mind to punish who harbors terrorists and the perpetrators. The Secretary of State's Collin Powel who had just came back from Peru said: 'We have to make it clear to Pakistan and Afghanistan, "this is a Showtime". Taliban were the ruling party in Afghanistan at that time, they were extreme fundamentalists which came to power in 1996, and were harboring AlQaeda terrorists in return of financial support by Ossama Bin Laden. Pakistan's powerful intelligence service the ISI had a major role in creating and keeping the Taliban in power[7].

On 17 September 2001, Bush had authorized the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to pay one billion dollars to the leaders of the northern alliance, and conduct a clandestine war against the Taliban with the support of special operation forces from the pentagon[8]. President Bush signed a "top secret" document that

outlined the administration's plan to invade Afghanistan and topple its government [9]. This option, however, could not bring the desired results which the US had strategically planned to achieve by hitting the Taliban and Al Qaeda. When all the option failed, Bush ordered to start the bombing on Afghanistan on 7th October 2001.

1. Phases of the War and Evolving Strategy

The conflict in Afghanistan unfolded through several distinct phases, marked by evolving strategies, leadership changes, and shifts in the geopolitical landscape. These phases reflect the changing priorities, lessons learned and external pressures that defined the U.S.'s twenty-year engagement.

1.1. Initial US Intervention and 'Light Footprint' Strategy (2001-2009)

The American military launched the war on October 7th, 2001, with a focus on limited special operations and airpower after the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan refused to hand over Osama bin Laden. Early operations included airborne attacks on Mullah Omar's compounds and the destruction of political targets and air defense infrastructure, which unfortunately led to civilian casualties. By November 13th, US special operations and paramilitary advisors, alongside Northern Alliance indigenous forces and airpower, marched into Kabul after defeating the Taliban and its al-Qaeda allies[10]. The initial strategy was a 'light footprint' approach, aiming to avoid a Soviet-like defeat. This meant fewer troops and troop concentrations near population centers, and reliance on airpower, which resulted in many civilian deaths. This strategy persisted until 2009, partly because the US diverted resources to the war in Iraq.

1.2. Obama Administration's Shift and Counterinsurgency (2009-2014)

During his campaign, Obama portrayed Afghanistan as the 'noble war' and vowed to shift focus from Iraq to fight terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He emphasized demanding greater accountability from Pakistan, recognizing Northwest Pakistan as a stronghold for al-Qaeda. The 2008 Democratic Party platform also committed to assisting Afghans in education and economic development. Upon taking office in March 2009, Obama aimed to disrupt and dismantle al-Qaeda while strengthening the Afghan government through a comprehensive civilian-military strategy. This involved deploying an additional 21,000 troops, quadrupling US diplomats and aid personnel, and increasing civilian aid by $2 billion between 2009 and 2010[11.] Despite military leadership pushing for a civil-military counterinsurgency strategy, Obama had reservations. Escalating violence and public disillusionment by late 2009 led to a reconsideration of the US commitment. In autumn 2009, Obama sought an exit strategy, instructing General Petraeus to use the term 'target, train and transfer' instead of counterinsurgency. On May 1st, 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed by US Navy SEALs in Abbottabad, Pakistan. A year later, Obama signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement (BSA) with President Hamid Karzai, outlining future relations after the departure of American forces in 2014 [12].

1.3. International Withdrawal and Taliban Resurgence (2014-2020)

By the end of 2014, the international alliance significantly reduced its military presence to 20,000 soldiers, ceding security duties to the Afghan

administration. The Taliban directly confronted Afghan troops and expanded their reach. They employed sophisticated governance tactics, establishing Sharia courts and co-opting internationally funded services, which further legitimized their rule. Conversely, the foreign-backed Afghan regime suffered from widespread corruption, eroding public confidence. By 2018, the Taliban had encircled all major urban hubs and operated freely across much of the rural areas. In February 2020, direct talks between the United States and the Taliban sidelined Afghan Republic representatives, leading to an accord for American forces to depart in exchange for counterterrorism assurances and dialogue with the Republic. However, as US forces began their pullout, internal Afghan discussions faltered, and combat escalated [13].

Secondly: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

America's exit from Afghanistan was the result of several big choices made by different presidents. This pullout was shaped by earlier military actions, peace talks, and changes in Afghanistan's government, all of which had major effects on the area. In terms of methodology, the analysis applies a process-tracing procedure with the Afghanistan withdrawal as a critical case that exemplifies the end of the liberal interventionist era all interpreted through the lens of an offensive realist framework. It argues that in an anarchic world, major nations are driven to continuously maximize their power and security. The framework is chosen because it interprets U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as a strategic rational recalibration, not as decline. This realist logic to the American withdrawal, which has been often analyzed through humanitarian or idealist perspectives, reveals Washington’s next phase reorientation to great-power competition.

Furthermore, in the context of the Afghanistan withdrawal, cognitive psychology, specifically the Dunning‑Kruger effect helps explain why U.S. decision-makers might have overestimated the sustainability of the Afghan government and security forces, or underestimated the speed of the Taliban’s resurgence, despite decades of investment and intelligence. By integrating this cognitive dimension, the research not only clarifies the power‑based motives behind the retreat but also illuminates the perceptual gaps and overconfidence that can accompany great‑power decision‑making, even within a realist framework.

Thirdly: Context and Path to Withdrawal

On February 29, 2020, in Doha, the US-Taliban agreement was formalized between Zalmay Khalilzad and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a Taliban deputy leader. Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, and several international observers were present. This accord pressed the Afghan government to start negotiations with the Taliban without preconditions. The US committed to reducing its troop presence from 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days and completing a full withdrawal within 14 months[14]. Further terms included a prisoner exchange between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and the lifting of US sanctions against the Taliban by August 27, 2020, provided intra-Afghan talks began. The Taliban also pledged that Afghan territory would not be used by Al-Qaeda or other insurgent groups to attack

US forces or allies. Michael Pompeo indicated that senators would have access to confidential annexes, though some argued for their classification[15]. Despite the agreement, Afghanistan's security situation did not improve, with ongoing acts of terrorism prompting the US to suspend some financial aid.

Fourthly: Analysis of Withdrawal Consequences

After establishing the decision- making process and context behind the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the following section is devoted to analyze the consequences of the withdrawal. This latter is examined across three essential dimensions: the immediate damage to American credibility and alliances, the subsequent regional geopolitical realignment, and the profound domestic repercussions within the United States.

1. Alliance/ Credibility Effects

The withdrawal of the Western military powers from Afghanistan has profound consequences for the U.S. on a global and regional scale. This departure concluded a 20-year military operation that resulted in over 22,000 American military casualties and an estimated $144 billion spent on rebuilding and security initiatives[16]. When analyzing why America pulled its forces from Afghanistan, specialists highlight numerous factors, none of which tie into President J. Biden's assumption of office. The dominant opinion suggests the troop departure stemmed from a broad agreement between the two major U.S. political parties that it was time to exit Afghanistan, even after a two-decade-long conflict against the Taliban ended in defeat. In giving the order to withdraw troops, J. Biden acted within the framework of the policy of his predecessor. It was about the departure of the Americans and the return of the Taliban to power, and not about the establishment of peace.

In Afghanistan, the issue wasn't that the U.S. had committed to a nation-building campaign. Instead, the problem stemmed from the absence of a unified effort. The coalition and various U.S. government departments pursued fragmented, uncoordinated initiatives. This lack of direction, coupled with an inability to influence political reforms and an excessive focus on military action, allowed the Taliban to not only retain but significantly bolster their power [17].

Reaching an agreement on the Afghan war's lessons in the United States appears unlikely. The Department of Defense and the State Department focused on deflecting blame rather than identifying core issues. Only Ryan Crocker, a former U.S. Ambassador to several Middle Eastern countries, explicitly stated that President J. Biden was accountable for the pullout's fallout. According to Crocker, the decision to execute D. Trump's withdrawal plan from Afghanistan was an error. He views it as a concession by the Biden administration to the Taliban's long-held demand to negotiate solely with the U.S., not with the "puppet regime" in Kabul. This move by the White House stripped the Afghan government and its security forces of their legitimacy, setting in motion their eventual collapse and the Taliban's return to power[18].

According to experts who evaluated President Biden's initial year of foreign

policy, they contend his second mistake was his refusal to keep a small U.S. counterterrorism force in Afghanistan, along with a few thousand NATO troops. Such a presence, they argued, would have given the United States leverage in peace negotiations with the Taliban. Third, the Biden administration mishandled the withdrawal process itself. They suggested the abrupt pullout of all American troops and 16,000 contractors at once occurred without a clear plan for safely evacuating Americans and their Afghan partners. Furthermore, President Biden reportedly rejected any discussions about the Afghan army's capacity to defend the nation once U.S. military support was removed [18].

While the U.S. grapples with the resurgence of groups like al-Qaeda, who continue to pose a significant terrorist threat. The states in close geographic proximity to Afghanistan, as well as other external powers, notably Russia and China, have interests in how the transformation of the regional security environment occurs. Numerous American specialists voice this concern. For instance, *Foreign Affairs* magazine suggests that following the U.S. departure, Russia and China are attempting to diminish any remaining American influence that could aid in creating a new Afghanistan. However, this perspective overlooks the distinct reasons behind the swift [19].

2. Regional Power Dynamics

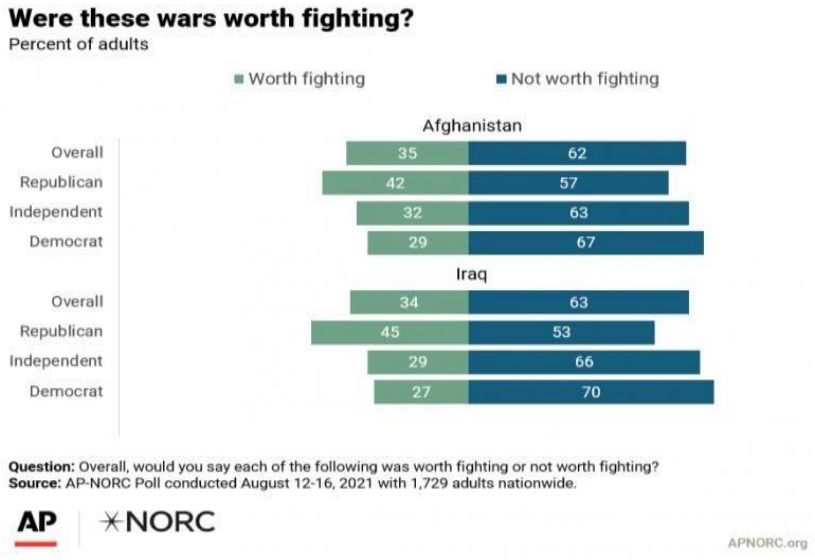
The pullout of the United States from Afghanistan has profoundly reshaped its international reputation, largely fostering an impression of unpredictability and missteps in its diplomatic strategy. This sudden departure created a power void, paving the way for the Taliban's return to power. The aftermath has been a severe humanitarian emergency, coupled with growing worries about the administration and safeguarding of human rights within Afghanistan. Moreover, the U.S. disengagement has eroded its strategic leverage in a critical geopolitical zone, an area where it once counterbalanced the ambitions of nations such as China and Russia. As a result, the U.S. is now confronted with the task of restoring its trustworthiness and sway, as its dedication to combating terrorism and promoting regional stability appears to be undermined.

3. America's Afghan Exit: Ramifications for Domestic Standing

The withdrawal has turned on discussions within the U.S. concerning military involvement and the efficacy of interventions abroad, potentially eroding public confidence in governmental choices and defense plans.

4. Fading Support for the War in Afghanistan: A Public Perspective

Unlike the conflict in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan initially garnered significant domestic acceptance within the U.S., largely seen as a justified and lawful endeavor to preempt future terrorist acts. In the early months of the fighting, support for the war at times topped 90 percent. A November (2001) *Washington Post*/ABC News poll found 71 percent of Americans supported sending large numbers of troops into Afghanistan. However, this public backing has dramatically waned. An August (2021) poll by AP/NORC found that 62 percent of Americans thought the war in Afghanistan wasn't worth fighting. Both Republicans (57 percent) and Democrats 7(67 percent) shared this view. In addition, a NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll found that 71 percent of American adults thought the war was a failure. Similarly, a poll from Pew in late August found that 69 percent of Americans didn't think the United States achieved its goals in Afghanistan [20].



(Source: AP-NORC (2021)

To be the case, there were widely held views attribute the drop in support of the American war in Afghanistan. First, it was due to a poorly executed communication strategy by political leaders ranging from counterterrorism to counternarcotics, humanitarianism, nation-building, women's rights, aiding allies, and safeguarding Western values. It's argued that a clearer, simpler rationale focused solely on counterterrorism would have been far more effective. While the evidence on this point is mixed, as most politicians consistently employed multiple rationales, it's likely that this varied approach hindered efforts to boost public support.

Second, early analyses showed how casualties affected U.S. support for foreign interventions, such as those by John Mueller, depicted a public highly sensitive to losses, quick to abandon costly overseas missions. Despite post-9/11 commentary in U.S. media about European timidity, it's often overlooked that in the 1990s, Americans were perceived as more casualty-reluctant. For instance, when Belgian forces pulled out of Rwanda after a small number of deaths, the UN Secretary- General worried they were surrending to "American syndrome: pull out at

the first serious sign of trouble."

Third, starting in 2006, the Taliban's resurgence caught both the American public and news media off guard, prompting a rapid revision of their optimism for the war's success from a perceived victory to a potentially losing battle. For example, the summer and early fall of 2009 further intensified public pessimism regarding Afghanistan's prospects. This included widely reported fraud and violence during Hamid Karzai's re-election, and, most notably, the McChrystal Report. This report explicitly warned that "failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near term (next 12 months)... risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible." [21]

5. Strategic Realignment Vs. Decline

The departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan has drawn censure from both major political parties, largely stemming from the perceived shortcomings of the exit plan and the ensuing decline in regional stability. Moreover, it has sparked a debate on whether it signifies a strategic realignment or a decline in U.S. influence. On the one hand, opponents contend that the military approach implemented by the Obama administration failed to adequately ready the Afghan government to assume authority, resulting in a surge of violence and instability after 2014, which could undermine U.S. security interests[22]. On the other hand, analysts argue that the withdrawal, framed as a necessary step to refocus resources, may ultimately enhance U.S. capabilities to combat radical Islam by avoiding entanglement in protracted conflicts[23]. In fact, Afghanistan, after all, serves as a crucial geopolitical arena for major global powers. The ambitious state-building initiatives launched after 2001, which sought to establish democracy in Afghanistan, ultimately languished mainly due to insufficient resources allocated compared to other post- conflict nations, and significant obstacles faced by Afghan governance[24]. This blend of strategic errors and insufficient aid has led to a shared understanding that the withdrawal was not only premature but also poorly managed; thereby imperiling the advancements achieved over two decades.

Fifthly: Repercussions and Geopolitical Realignment

The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan has a domestic and diplomatically effects because it produced profound repercussions for American prestige and power. Globally, it precipitated a broader geopolitical realignment creating a vacuum that neighbors and competitors are eager to fill. The following section assesses the implications of both phenomena

1. Domestic Repercussions: Erosion of Public Trust and the "Forever War" Narrative

The uncoordinated nature of the withdrawal significantly eroded public confidence in military interventions, as individuals struggled with the perceived betrayal of Afghan partners and the emotional impact of the evacuation endeavors, extensively disseminated across social media platforms[25]. A combination of heavy

loss, changing political justifications, and the impact of the unpopular Iraq War drew strong comparisons to the Vietnam War and underscoring the enduring difficulties inherent in such engagements [26]. Despite initial triumphs in dislodging the Taliban, the inability to establish a stable and credible Afghan government, coupled with the Taliban's return to power, underscored the boundaries of military might in securing lasting political order. These combined elements led to increasing public disillusionment with military interventions, prompting questions about their effectiveness and moral implications.

2. Geopolitical Repercussions: Regional Powers in the Post-Withdrawal Vacuum

The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan marked a pivotal moment. Nations like China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia began to navigate the altered environment, each with their own objectives and concerns. We will examine the interests of two major global players in Afghanistan: China and Russia.

- **China's Strategic Calculus**

The withdrawal of the USA from Afghanistan means the removal of one of the most important obstacles in front of China regionally. China's new target will be to make various investments in Kabul, which was included in the Belt-Road Project in 2017. While this allows China's regional influence to spread over a wider area; it will also allow access to mines resources in Afghanistan which worth more than 1 trillion dollars. However, Beijing also expresses unease over the ongoing strife and radicalization within Afghanistan. The instability and power vacuum, an unwelcome legacy of the U.S. exit, create an environment conducive to terrorist groups. To manage the uncertainties in Afghanistan, China has cultivated positive relationships with both the Kabul administration and the Taliban. A contributing factor to China's support for the Taliban is the perception that the group's actions forced the U.S. to retreat and damaged its international standing [27].

- **Russia's Strategic Calculus**

Russia desired the U.S. to become bogged down in Afghanistan and to depart under challenging circumstances. Allegations of Russian support for the Taliban reinforce this perspective. Moscow is also seen as backing any peaceful initiative that would lead to a U.S. pullout because, from Russia's point of view, many Asian problems have stemmed from foreign interventions. With military interventions consistently failing to yield positive outcomes, U.S.-led operations became an impediment to Russia's expanding influence since 2010. While a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan presents a significant strategic opening for Russia, the increasing activity of terrorist groups in the region poses a considerable concern. Moscow, in its support for peace initiatives, aimed to mediate between the Kabul administration and the Taliban, hosting various meetings to that end. Ultimately, Russia endorsed peace talks to resolve issues in the heart of Asia, a region increasingly asserting itself against the West, as well as to bolster its immediate security [28]. However, It can be argued that regional and global actors, who possess the capacity to disrupt the peace

process in Afghanistan by instigating conflicts, have refrained from doing so because they stand to gain more from a U.S. withdrawal and subsequent stabilization.

Sixthly: Implications and Conclusions

The chaotic withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 has sparked a significant debate about the implications for American global influence and its commitment to international stability. The stark images of desperation during the withdrawal, from civilians rushing the airport to tragic incidents, vividly underscored the disarray of the U.S. exit and its failure to cultivate a stable democracy. Consequently, this withdrawal is widely prompting critical questions about the extent of U.S. global influence and whether it signifies a broader decline.

The way in which America withdrew from Afghanistan has been extensively quoted as a dent to its international prestige. The sudden fall of the Afghan government, which was sustained by the U.S. for twenty years, left a perception of strategic defeat and untrustworthiness [29]. Critics point to the apparent abandonment of Afghan allies, which may make it more difficult in the future to form alliances with the U.S., since other countries might be leery of committing themselves to partners if America is not [30]. The chaotic airport scenes with civilians frantically attempting to escape further highlighted the chaos and reinforced the image of a chaotic withdrawal, eliciting unfavorable comparison to that of Saigon's fall[31]. The implications of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan for the United States are manifold and can be summarized as follows:

1. Abandonment of Allies

The disorderly and precipitate nature of the withdrawal, particularly the abandonment of Afghan partners (interpreters, translators, government officials, women's rights advocates), deeply damaged the image of U.S. reliability. The case has been made that it reflected a non-matched commitment policy towards those who trusted in American pledges, perhaps preventing further alliances from being formed.

2. Foreign Policy Effectiveness and Domestic Support Questions

The outcome in Afghanistan spawned a reconsideration of U.S. foreign policy, including nation-building and intervention. It is maintained by analysts that the failure to create a stable and legitimate Afghan government, despite all that was expended, highlighted the boundaries of the power of military might to give lasting political stability [30-31]. This has increased public cynicism within the U.S. towards long-term foreign interventions, with extensive numbers of fatalities and constantly shifting explanations for the war that have promoted skepticism regarding the utility and moral value of military intervention [31]The argument now is whether America can continue to wage a foreign policy of distant interventions and "social engineering" abroad, especially as the world system becomes increasingly multi-polar in orientation[31].

While much of the mainstream coverage tends to focus on the perceived dip in American supremacy after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, a few analysts offer counterarguments or emphasize points that indicate that the U.S.'s overall power has

not essentially collapsed. These arguments tend to position the withdrawal as a strategic realignment that was long overdue, as a show of pragmatism, or as a redirection toward more pressing geostrategic issues.

3. Necessity of Withdrawal and Limits of Intervention

Another contention is that withdrawal was unavoidable as a result of structural change in the international system and the inherent failings of nation-building enterprises. It has been contended by experts that the "unipolar moment" during which the U.S. could afford to pursue a foreign policy guided by the principles of liberal international order, i.e., "social engineering" in other countries, is over. As the world system grows more multipolar, a realist policy based on power and influence balancing is ever more plausible. In this perspective, the withdrawal was a realistic acknowledgment of these new realities and not an indicator of decline[32].

The argument here is that the U.S. was not going to be able to achieve its long-term objectives in Afghanistan, either if it exited slowly or quickly. Decades of engagement had illustrated the difficulties of establishing a stable and legitimate Kabul regime which would be in U.S. interests[33]. Therefore, staying longer would have only prolonged a costly and ultimately unsustainable effort at the expense of depleting resources which would have been better utilized elsewhere. The pullout, as ugly as it was, is a realistic acknowledgment of the limits of American power to shape deeply ingrained local forces and a necessary action in order not to continue to erode further. US chooses to act as a realistic power by prioritizing survival, power, and national interests over moral or ideological concerns.

4. Enduring Strength and Flexibility

While the optics of withdrawal are unfavorable, the proponents of enduring American dominance turn to America's inherent strengths that remain constant:

• Unparalleled Military Capabilities: America's military still has unparalleled technological dominance, worldwide reach, and large bases and alliances networks, which remain significant deterrents and tools for power projection. While Afghanistan demonstrated there were counter-insurgency constraints, none were imposed on conventional or nuclear capabilities in their essentials.

• Economic Resilience and Innovation: The US economy is the hub of global innovation, and a global leader in international trade and finance. This economic dominance underpins diplomatic influence and strategic investment.

• Resilient Alliance System: Despite complaints by some allies regarding the withdrawal, overall the base U.S. alliance system (NATO, Indo-Pacific alliances) remains robust. The U.S. has made an effort to revalidate these alliances and assuage partners by reshaping and rediverting efforts and resources toward their security interests[34].

• Soft Power and Cultural Influence: American schools of education, scientific researches, and cultural goods are exceptionally appealing to the rest of the world and play a role in a form of influence beyond military or economic might.

Lastly, this perspective contends that the Afghanistan withdrawal, painful

though it was, was a deliberate withdrawal from a single, nasty war, not an instance of systemic collapse foreshadowing American retreat from global leadership. It allowed for a shift to more pressing strategic goals, affirming the U.S.'s capability to pivot in a changing world.

Conclusion

This study argues that the American withdrawal from Afghanistan constituted a strategic recalibration rather than a sign of declining power. It addresses a gap in the prevailing discourse, which often focuses narrowly on the war's humanitarian and international relations impacts. Instead, this analysis posits that the withdrawal was a necessary reorientation of U.S. grand strategy toward countering rising global powers, principally China and Russia. Consistent with the Dunning-Kruger effect, wherein limited knowledge in a domain leads to overconfidence, the U.S. initially overestimated its capacity to shape outcomes in Afghanistan, a region historically resistant to foreign intervention. Conversely, the decision to withdraw aligns with core tenets of International Relations theory. In a multipolar world marked by assertive regional powers, effective statecraft requires a unified "whole-of-government" approach that meticulously integrates economic, diplomatic, and strategic instruments. This paradigm demands more than military alliances; it necessitates revitalizing the art of coalition-building for the sustained work of conflict prevention, development, and diplomatic engagement, objectives that a protracted military presence in Afghanistan ultimately hindered.

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