



A deadly exodus: Five trends to watch for in the evolving Afghanistan crisis

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Summary

- US failure to consult allies has created a new rift with Europe.
- The transatlantic rift will be bridged, because every side has an interest in repairing the damage.
- The Afghanistan debacle has demonstrated Europe's virtual nonexistence as a standalone strategic actor in the security domain.
- It is a reminder that the EU needs to develop its strategic autonomy and a fully functioning common asylum system.
- Europe will focus on working with key neighboring countries, applying leverage as an economic and development aid superpower to extract conditionality.
- There are many losers, and only a few clear winners.
- Pakistan, Turkey, China and Iran emerge as main winners from regime change in Afghanistan, but not without a significant downside.
- Radical Islam and Jihadi movements have gained a landmark victory.
- Taliban II are no less zealous in their religious obscurantism than Taliban I.
- The Taliban will be under strong external pressure to crack down on exportable terrorism.
- The Taliban are unlikely to be able to establish an effective central government and will lack complete control of the land.
- The desperation of thousands of people struggling to leave is a potent symbol both of the West's impotence and of the power of its values.
- The West retains its universal aspirational potency. So do versions of radical Islam, reverberating throughout the Muslim world as a liberation theology.
- A lesson in humility might well be the West's most precious takeaway from Afghanistan's chaotic fall.

Afghanistan's unfolding tragedy continues to shock the world. The harrowing images of desperate people clinging to the hope of escaping along with a retreating superpower will not easily fade. A deadly attack at the Kabul airport is a stark reminder that terrorism has not been defeated. A twenty-year US presence in Afghanistan makes this chaotic final act an historic milestone. We shall take stock of five aspects of this evolving crisis.

“Exit was inevitable. But its implementation has been widely proclaimed a disaster.”

1. The exodus has opened up a rift between the US and its allies, but the rift will be bridged

The US exodus had been announced and was expected. Yet its disastrous implementation, heir to the Trump administration's flawed “peace and withdrawal” deal with the Taliban, will leave a lasting impact.

A continuation of the US presence in Afghanistan was politically untenable, and like all untenable situations, it eventually had to come to an end. **Rarely has there ever been such a powerful bipartisan consensus within the US foreign policy establishment in support of focusing on the US's “core interests” (read: China) and within US society against America's “forever wars”.** US priorities had already begun to shift away from the greater Middle East. Disengagement from the broader region, and a reversal of the interventionist legacy of the 1990s and 2000s, is the new foreign policy norm. Biden had no choice but to complete the US disengagement as rapidly and decisively as possible.

Biden made a convincing, albeit simple, argument: if 20 years hadn't brought change to Afghanistan, another year (or ten) would not make a difference. **Exit was inevitable. But its implementation has been widely proclaimed a disaster.** Unrealistic expectations that Afghan government forces would withstand the Taliban for longer ended up leaving thousands of Afghan allies stranded with no way out.

“The transatlantic rift will have to be bridged sooner rather than later, because every side has a powerful interest in repairing the damage.”

A broad multinational alliance joined the US in its war in Afghanistan. But in planning for exit, the Biden administration acted alone, taking its allies by surprise. These same European allies will now also be exposed to both the security implications and the refugee exodus from Afghanistan. **The failure of the US to warn its allies or heed their demands has created a new rift with Europe, a gaping breach of trust just as the Biden administration was doing its level best to demonstrate its transatlantic commitment.** Numerous European officials and public commentators have openly questioned whether the US can be trusted to stand by its foreign security commitments in the future. [Germany's former ambassador to the UN](#) lamented that Washington has “demonstrated profound disrespect in simply ignoring partners who stood at their side after 9/11”. In the British House of Commons, Tory MPs lambasted the way in which the UK was left in the dark and Afghan allies were left behind.

The severity of this breach of trust cannot be overstated. However, its potential longevity should not be exaggerated. The transatlantic rift will have to be bridged sooner rather than later, [because every side has a powerful interest in repairing the damage](#). While Afghanistan is not strategically important enough for the US to justify continuing a costly war, maintaining a strong and viable transatlantic alliance remains a priority.

The transatlantic commitment is ideologically embedded in the new Biden administration, a conviction held consistently across time by its foreign and security leadership team and unlikely to give away. The [main exponents](#) of the Biden administration's foreign policy are seasoned [supporters both of the US's transatlantic](#)

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[ties](#) and of [a US foreign policy for the middle class](#), the latter necessitating a greater attuning of foreign policy endeavors with the concerns and economic well-being of middle America. But while the chaotic and unilateralist exit which paid short shrift to allied concerns smacks of an “America First” disregard for the international implications of the superpower’s actions, such comparison would be unjustified.

If a focus on the assertive rise of China is the organizing principle of US foreign policy, the US cannot afford to go it alone. Addressing America’s top strategic priority--the China challenge--requires actively engaging with European partners and persuading them to align their interests with the US. A similar policy, though on a lower scale, would be needed when it comes to dealing with Russia, another Biden administration priority which will require close coordination with the US’s European partners. **Following the breach of trust over Afghanistan, one should expect the Biden administration to, sooner or later, follow up with initiatives aimed at dispelling the bad blood and reaching out to the allies.** The botched withdrawal provides the US with an incentive to make up for its reputational damage at the first available opportunity.

2. The crisis has exposed Europe’s fundamental weaknesses once again, painfully highlighting the importance of strengthening EU strategic autonomy

The argument for mutual transatlantic interdependence holds even more strongly for the European Union. If anything, **the fall of Afghanistan has painfully demonstrated Europe’s virtual nonexistence as a standalone strategic actor in the security domain.** The US will remain the indispensable partner both for Europe’s security aspirations and, still more so, for the broader agenda of European multilateralism spanning climate change, global trade, and rules-based cooperation.

This is just the latest of numerous wake-up calls for greater EU cohesion in foreign and security policy. Internal European coordination was an evident challenge on the ground. Actors in Afghanistan noted the difficulties European forces faced coordinating their actions not only with the US but also among themselves. These included [a lack of interoperability between national security forces from different EU countries](#), deficits in intelligence sharing, and different national cultures serving as obstacles to effectiveness and cohesion. The difficulties encountered when addressing even challenges such as these suggests that **strengthening EU strategic autonomy both within and outside the NATO structures will be a tall order.**

Managing the refugee exodus is an even more urgent challenge. The European reaction was a classic “not in my backyard” response: the member states agreed to pressure others into accepting refugees. This is not 2015. Both Germany and France are heading for elections, and the last thing they need is a new migration crisis. The EU-Turkey agreement on migration remains the main game in town, and it has been given a new boost, with the Afghan crisis bringing the two sides closer together. Heeding lesson learned last time round, Greece has reached an understanding with Turkey to limit migration flows.

The Afghanistan crisis is a painful reminder that the EU needs a fully functioning common asylum system, at a time when the only available plan for working towards a common response (the New Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed by the European Commission) is encountering powerful opposition from the member states.

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The EU has proclaimed its willingness to work with neighboring countries to address the humanitarian crisis unfolding on the ground. An estimated 3.7 million internally displaced people, mostly women and girls, will require active support. If Europe’s humanitarian reflexes remain commendable, its ability to translate them into political action is far less admirable. The narrative of a “fortress Europe” took just days if not hours to prevail as a common denominator. Walls are going up all over Europe (and Turkey), as governments compete as to which is best equipped to fend off refugees. Not exactly liberal Europe’s finest moment. But understandable, given the sociopolitical challenges faced domestically.

The EU has a time-honored tradition of tidying up the mess others have made. As the world’s largest humanitarian donor, Europe will focus on what it does best: working with key neighboring countries, applying its leverage as an economic and development aid superpower to extract some (minima of) conditionality. Afghanistan’s dire financial situation, coupled with its ongoing drought and the pandemic, suggest that Europe’s leverage will not be negligible. Europe will formulate its conditionality, both for granting official recognition to the regime and extending developmental assistance to it in the future; it has already frozen €1 billion earmarked for Afghanistan, which will not be paid until sufficient guarantees are provided.

The war in Afghanistan began 20 years ago as an enterprise to root out terrorism, but evolved into a giant nation- and institution-building exercise. **Institution building requires both the long-term commitment of resources and strategic patience.** The US invested the resources but ended up running out of patience. The EU has good intentions but can match neither resources nor patience. **In the light of Afghanistan, some Europeans are already demanding that the EU withdraw from conflict zones of its own, such as Mali.** A spillover of the Afghanistan debacle into other areas would add further injury to the insult.

“...the Western allies, China, Russia, and even Turkey have a shared interest in stability and containing the export of terrorism and migrant flows.”

Europe will continue to call for the multilateral engagement of all relevant actors involved. One can only admire Europe’s multilateral mindset; if only other actors were equally willing to engage. [Mario Draghi’s call, at the 24 August G7 meeting](#), for the G20 to get involved was a reminder of the interdependency of the West with the Rest when it comes to crises with global implications.

A mindset like this, inimical to zero-sum worldviews, can discern the converging interests: the Western allies, China, Russia, and even Turkey have a shared interest in stability and containing the export of terrorism and migrant flows.

3. Many losers, very few clear winners

As massive a loss as this is for the US and its allies, there are very few clear net winners. There can be no doubting the *schadenfreude* of China and Russia over the humiliation of the US. But this is not necessarily a zero-sum game. **The decline in regional stability and security will have broader--and shared--negative implications.**

Yes, **Pakistan has emerged as a main winner.** The victory of the Taliban, nurtured and protected over the years by Pakistan, increases the latter’s bargaining power. The new friendly Afghan regime [will help Pakistan counterbalance India’s influence in the region](#). But the Taliban could turn out to be an uncontrollable force, radicalizing militants and sowing chaos within Pakistan itself.

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Iran, the other theocracy in the neighborhood, [should be a multiple gainer from the regional rebalancing of power](#), reaping significant [economic benefits](#), as well; but it will not find it easy to overcome past grievances, including the massacre of Hazara Shiites by the Taliban.

Yes, **China was quick to find a modus vivendi with the Taliban and now has an opportunity to exploit Afghanistan’s vast mineral resources** in exchange for technology, investment and cash. But the Taliban links with the Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang are a concern, while regional instability and terrorist threats could also threaten Chinese investments in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan.

Turkey is emerging as a major beneficiary of the regime change in Afghanistan. Turkey’s sphere of influence is expanding, as is its bargaining power over Europe, from whom it can now demand more money and concessions in exchange for keeping Afghan migrants out. [Turkey was among the first countries the Taliban turned to for support](#) after taking over. But the heightened volatility of the region, plus the pressure on Turkey’s borders from the refugee flows, also represent a challenge for the Erdoğan regime.

Russia, for its part, has maintained a working relationship with the Taliban. However, the Taliban’s fundamentalist theocracy represents both a diametrically-opposed world view and a terrorist threat. It also raises [valid concerns about Islamist radicalization](#) both in neighboring countries within Russia’s orbit, such as Tajikistan, and within Russia itself.

Radical Islam and Jihadi movements have gained a landmark victory, establishing a regional stronghold and humiliating the West. The implications could reverberate well beyond the region.

4. The Taliban are what they are; export of terrorism will be the crucial test

“The external incentive structure will put pressure on the Taliban regime to reinvent itself as a more moderate version of its previous, brutal, real self.”

Since their victory, the Taliban have presented mixed images. On the one hand, they have tried hard to demonstrate a modicum of self-restraint and keep their side of the deal they made with the US, making [public statements indicating a more moderate stance](#). On the other hand, their standard brutality has been hard to conceal. Countless attacks, including revenge killings of opponents and dissidents, [have reportedly taken place since the US withdrawal](#), and a lot more will certainly go unreported as international media departs.

Taliban II are [no less zealous in their religious obscurantism than Taliban I](#). However, they are more determined to establish a viable regime and certainly more aware of the external constraints, including the importance of rooting out exportable terrorism.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will need some degree of official recognition and integration into the international system, even if it is initially ostracized by the Western community and is left primarily dependent on China and its close neighbors, notably Pakistan.

The external incentive structure will put pressure on the Taliban regime to reinvent itself as a more moderate version of its previous, brutal, real self. [They will want to consolidate their regime, achieve recognition and receive foreign aid](#). Upon assuming power, all fundamentalist movements tend to split between the die-hard purists and the

“pragmatists” (using the word with multiple pinches of salt). **The composition of their government will provide a first indication of intentions and internal balances.**

The Taliban regime will be under heavy pressure from their neighbors and potential partners to deliver on cracking down on exportable terrorism.

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Afghanistan is one of the countries most affected by terrorism worldwide, according to the 2020 [Global Terrorism Index](#). During the period of their rule in Afghanistan (1996-2001), the Taliban supported al-Qaeda in many ways. After 2001, the Taliban were responsible for the majority of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, using terrorist tactics and primarily bombing police and military forces. **Apart from the Taliban, the second most active terrorist organization in the country is the ISIS local affiliate, the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISIS-K)**, responsible for the deadly attack at the Kabul airport on August 26.

The main terrorism-related risks relating to the [return of the Taliban](#) are:

- the possible reorganization of al-Qaeda, and the rebuilding of a base in the country;
- an amplified activation of ISIS-K in the country, which could be strengthened with the arrival of foreign terrorists/fighters from the Middle East;
- terrorist attacks from ISIS-K against the Taliban, given that the two organizations have been hostile for years;
- the Taliban’s evolution into a terrorism-supporting movement in government;
- an alliance between the main Islamist terrorist organizations, which could turn Afghanistan into a terrorist hub.

“A litmus test for the possible evolution of terrorism in Afghanistan is the potential concentration of foreign terrorist fighters from different regions, and mainly from the MENA region.”

In both cases, the implications for both regional and global security will be important. A litmus test for the possible evolution of terrorism in Afghanistan is the potential concentration of foreign terrorist fighters from different regions, and mainly from the MENA region.

Another sector where the return of the Taliban could have serious implications is Islamist radicalization. Afghanistan has played a key role in the global jihadist narrative following the appearance of the modern Mujahedin as part of the resistance against the Soviet invasion. The return of the Taliban could work as a trigger event for:

- a [further radicalization of young people wanting to travel to Afghanistan and join the Taliban regime as fighters](#); they could form the new jihadist generation;
- the enhancement of online propaganda, with war stories from the victory against the West linked to messianic propaganda relating to the final battle against the West and the rise of the Caliphate;
- [jihadist groups elsewhere to be inspired to escalate their terror campaigns](#) or for lone actors to be radicalized and commit attacks.¹

Cracking down on terrorism will be a tall order, even if the Taliban regime are serious

¹ I owe this section on terrorism to Akis Karatrantos.

“The crucial element determining the extent to which it is accepted by Western powers and institutions is how far the Caliphate will go in refusing to provide a base for al-Qaeda and ISIS.”

about trying. Afghanistan, a vast and fragmented country, presents near-insuperable governability challenges; indeed, establishing effective central government was where both the Soviets and the Americans failed – the latter despite a [nearly 2 trillion USD investment](#) over two decades. **The Taliban are therefore unlikely to be able to establish an effective centrally organized government and will lack complete control of the land.**

The crucial element determining the extent to which it is accepted by Western powers and institutions is how far the Caliphate will go in refusing to provide a base for al-Qaeda and ISIS. There is no question that both groups are there and regrouping in Afghanistan, as the ISIS-K attack at the Kabul airport demonstrated. **Whether the Taliban allows them to flourish and export terrorism beyond Afghanistan’s borders, or manages to contain them, will make a huge difference.**

5. So where does all this leave Western liberal values?

The West tried to embed its values and institutions in a part of the world which is historically and culturally inimical to them. **It is easy to call this attempt a failure, and it undoubtedly is one.** Government institutions failed. Foreign aid created vast opportunities for rent-seeking and corruption. When the last Western airplanes leave, it will be over.

Yet this is only one part of the story. Younger generations of Afghans have lived their lives free of the Taliban theocracy for the last twenty years. Millions of [Afghan girls and women were able to access education](#) and independent paid work. Malala, the girl who was shot in the head by the Taliban for going to school, became a symbol of female empowerment in the Muslim world. Millions of Afghans were able to enjoy basic human rights and civil liberties, and to dream of opportunities – the same rights and opportunities the Islamic Emirate is now sure to deprive them of. The magnitude of the desperation of those tens of thousands of people struggling to board that airplane out of Kabul is a potent symbol both of the West’s impotence and of the power of its values and way of life.

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In the face of the Afghanistan debacle, the “West” (whatever one makes of it today) retains its universal aspirational potency. Ironically, so do various versions of radical Islam, which reverberate throughout the Muslim world as a liberation ideology. The brutal truth is that the Taliban prevailed because it was they who ultimately “won the hearts and minds” of a sizeable portion of the Afghan people, who saw them as righteous and effective compared with the corrupt US-protected Afghan government officials. This is a truth the “West” is often unwilling to confront, believing instead in false dawns that end in tears – the Arab Spring being a case in point.

Both the West and Islam continue to inspire people across the Arab and Muslim worlds, from Afghanistan to Belarus, Russia to Hong Kong. **Afghanistan now serves as the symbol both of the West’s aspirational values and of the depressing limits on what the West can do to heed the call.** It is also a harsh reminder of old-style Great Power expansionism, or forces historians would recognize as imperialism and colonialism in their most contemporary guise. **A lesson in humility might well be the West’s most precious takeaway from Afghanistan’s chaotic fall;** together with a determination to maintain a functioning, multilateral, rules-based international order, in which its values and acqius can be more effectively sustained.