



## You can leave Afghanistan, but will Afghanistan leave you?

by Ian Bond and Luigi Scazzieri, 19 August 2021

**The Taliban's victory is a disaster for Western policy, but it is not the end of the story. The West must now work hard to mitigate the fallout.**

The news from Afghanistan is grim: diplomats burning embassy archives before fleeing to the airport; desperate Afghans trying to get out of the country; and reports of the Taliban assaulting women and executing people who worked for the old government or Western organisations. Western leaders will want to draw a veil over this huge policy failure as soon as possible. US President Joe Biden's August 16<sup>th</sup> [broadcast](#) to the American people – which blamed the Afghan authorities for the defeat and described America's involvement as “a military action that should have ended long ago” – was clearly intended to mark a break with 20 years of intervention. But it would be morally bankrupt and strategically foolish for Western leaders to turn their backs on Afghanistan. They need to assist Afghans (particularly refugees); prepare for regional instability; and persuade partners and adversaries alike that the West will recover from this setback.

The first priority should be helping those Afghans who have worked with Western governments, or with foreign aid agencies, NGOs or media organisations, to leave the country if they want to. Some (such as former interpreters for Western forces) will be more exposed, but despite some [reassuring noises](#) about women's rights and pardons for opponents, all are vulnerable to the Taliban's revenge. The speed of the Taliban's victory has prevented Western governments from completing planned evacuations. Flights out will be possible as long as Western military forces hold Kabul airport. But Western countries will need to negotiate safe passage for departing Afghans with the Taliban, and speed up the issue of visas to priority groups.

Next, Western governments and donor organisations including the EU will have to decide what kind of relations to have with the Taliban, and what kind of humanitarian and economic development programmes to run in and for Afghanistan. Before 2001, the Taliban never controlled the whole of Afghanistan. Western governments hedged their bets, and maintained contacts with the opposition Northern Alliance. This time, there seems little doubt that the Taliban will control the whole country, at least nominally. Western governments will have to deal with them as Afghanistan's *de facto* government, and engage with them when providing aid.

Over the past 20 years, Afghanistan has been [the single largest beneficiary](#) of EU development funding in the world. Internally displaced people will be in considerable need, particular as winter approaches. Western countries should continue to provide generous humanitarian aid to the Afghan people, but decisions on longer-term development assistance should depend on how the Taliban rule. The degree to which the Taliban will facilitate some aid projects is still unclear, especially those promoting female education, reproductive health or independent media. They might be more open to general health projects, though they have [reportedly](#) banned COVID-19 vaccination in at least one province – a problem given that less than three percent of Afghanistan’s population has been vaccinated. Western governments have limited leverage to shape the Taliban’s behaviour. But they should do what they can to push the group to respect human rights, by conditioning longer-term development assistance for Afghanistan on the Taliban pursuing moderate policies. It would not be right for the West to bankroll the Taliban, even indirectly, without evidence of better behaviour. The West may also have to consider sanctions to deter Taliban human rights abuses, although measures would have to be targeted to avoid harming Afghanistan’s people.

Third, the Taliban’s return to power is likely to have negative effects on regional and international security. Before the collapse of the Afghan government, the US [assessed](#) that there was a low probability of a terrorist attack against the West launched from Afghanistan in the next year; that judgement may now have to be reviewed. The West will want to prevent parts of Afghanistan becoming ungoverned spaces in which terrorist groups can flourish. The Taliban promised Donald Trump in February 2020 that in return for US withdrawal they would not allow Afghanistan to be used to threaten the security of the US or its allies; but al-Qaeda and ISIS terrorists are already in Afghanistan, and it is unlikely that the Taliban will put much effort into constraining their activities. Western leaders say that they still have the capacity to fight terrorism in Afghanistan. But in practice, with no presence on the ground and limited local intelligence, Western countries will find it harder to identify and strike terrorists. The Taliban’s success is also likely to provide a large boost to the morale and recruitment efforts of violent extremist movements in other regions, benefitting jihadi groups ranging from al-Qaeda in the Maghreb to Boko Haram in Nigeria.

The Taliban’s comprehensive victory will make it harder for Afghanistan’s neighbours and other regional powers to interfere in the country – though it will not stop them trying. In the 1990s, countries including India, Iran, Russia and Uzbekistan supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. This time, countries in the region will be watching anxiously to see how the Taliban use their power, but will have less influence over events. Despite (Shia) Iran’s historic hostility towards the (Sunni) Taliban, in recent years Tehran has helped the group against the US. With the Americans gone, Iran’s main concerns are likely to be refugee flows and Taliban persecution of the Shia Hazara minority in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan will want to ensure that the Uzbek minority in Afghanistan is safe, but also that there is no resurgence of the radical extremist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which the Taliban sheltered before 2001. For India, the Taliban’s return to power is a strategic setback, because of the group’s close ties to its adversary Pakistan. Western countries may find themselves working with all of these countries (even Iran) to contain or influence the Taliban. Only Pakistan – whose intelligence service helped to protect the Taliban in 2001, and which seemed to be co-operating with the Taliban even when allied with the US in the ‘Global War on Terrorism’ – will be pleased about the developments, as long as the Taliban do not destabilise the Pashtun areas inside Pakistan.

The Taliban’s success will be greeted with mixed feelings in Moscow and Beijing. The West’s humiliating retreat after two decades of failed state-building in Afghanistan offers both Russia and China strategic advantages. Afghanistan’s Central Asian neighbours, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, are already increasing

their security co-operation with Moscow and Beijing. Other partners of the West will be asking themselves whether they would be abandoned in a crisis, as Afghanistan was; and Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping will see opportunities to exploit these splits and present Russia and China as more reliable allies than the US or the EU. The impact could be particularly strong in the Middle East, given the US's stated intention to de-prioritise the region, and Russia and China's growing involvement there. Defeat in Afghanistan will probably also make Western public opinion even more hostile to foreign military entanglements, potentially giving Moscow and Beijing the chance to increase pressure on Ukraine and Taiwan, in the belief that the US and its allies will not respond militarily. The West needs to signal, for example by stepping up military exercises and other forms of defence co-operation, that what happened in Afghanistan does not mean that its resolve to support allies and partners facing external aggression has diminished.

But there are also downsides of the Taliban victory for Moscow and Beijing. Russia, which has already held official meetings with Taliban representatives, will be concerned about both Islamist extremist groups and opium – a major revenue source for the Taliban – spreading northwards from Afghanistan, destabilising the Central Asian states and creating trouble in Russia itself. And China – whose foreign minister met Taliban leaders in July – will want to ensure that they stick by their [promises](#) not to allow Afghanistan to be used as a base for terrorist attacks in China's Xinjiang province: before 2001, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, responsible for violence in Xinjiang, had ties to the Taliban.

Fourth, Afghanistan is likely to be a source of many more refugees and economic migrants in the near future. Past history suggests that Afghanistan under the Taliban will be a dangerous place, not only for Afghans with direct connections to Western governments and NGOs, but to those that benefitted from the more liberal atmosphere of the past 20 years – women, sexual minorities, journalists, artists and the like. Afghanistan's economy is also likely to suffer from the loss of foreign assistance and the spending power of Westerners.

Many migrants will stay in the region, as they did after the 1979 Soviet invasion and during the civil war after Soviet withdrawal. Others will make their way to Europe. But the migration crisis of 2015-16 may not be repeated, as countries near Afghanistan are likely to harden their borders this time. Iran is already hosting around 800,000 Afghan refugees; and while it is preparing for more arrivals, Iranian officials say they expect refugees to go home when the situation improves. Meanwhile, widespread anti-immigration sentiment in Turkey means that Ankara is likely to try to prevent Afghans from entering its territory.

Nonetheless, Europe cannot and should not rely on third countries to absorb migration from Afghanistan on their own. Instead, EU countries and the UK should be generous in ensuring that refugees are safe, providing direct resettlement routes to Europe for those that are most vulnerable to Taliban oppression. European states should also provide generous funding to humanitarian agencies in countries that host Afghan refugees. And European leaders should prepare for greater numbers of Afghans arriving. Most will have valid asylum claims but even those that do not will end up staying, as most member-states will be unwilling to deport people to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Many right-wing political parties will seek political advantage from the arrival of large numbers of Afghans in Europe. But if European leaders undertake logistical preparations now and develop a communications strategy stressing the work that refugees have done for Western organisations, and the threats they are fleeing, they can keep migration orderly and mitigate the political impact of a large increase in numbers. By being prepared, European leaders can also ensure that their countries will be more resilient in the face of adversaries like Belarus exploiting desperate refugees [to put pressure on the EU](#).

Finally, there will be some harm to transatlantic relations and NATO from the Afghan debacle: many European politicians have made clear their disagreement with both Trump's original deal with the Taliban and the subsequent US withdrawal – including British ministers, who do not usually criticise the US publicly. There appears to have been little consultation between the US and its European allies as the situation deteriorated. But as long as the US shows that it stands by its commitment to deterrence and defence in Europe, the damage can be repaired.

In the medium term, however, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to reinforce a sense of European powerlessness and strengthen calls for Europe to increase its 'strategic autonomy' – the capacity to act militarily when Washington will not. Europeans proved unwilling to remain in Afghanistan on their own, even though the UK tried to put together a coalition to do so. Even if they had wanted to remain in Afghanistan, it would have been difficult for Europeans to do so without US help, including surveillance capabilities and air support. The evacuation of Kabul would have been even more challenging without US troops there to deter the Taliban from interfering. More broadly, America's withdrawal drives home the reality that the US is reducing its footprint in the Middle East and potentially other areas in ways that threaten Europe's security, and that Europeans need to take on more responsibility.

Despite the cliché, Afghanistan is not 'the graveyard of empires': though defeat in Afghanistan contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was a relatively minor factor, compared with the Soviet system's internal problems; and many other empires outlasted defeats in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the global standing of the US and its allies will be harmed by the Taliban's victory. Having suffered a defeat, at such a high human and financial cost, Western leaders need to ensure, first, that the damage is geographically contained, and that violent extremist groups elsewhere cannot copy the success of the Taliban; and, second, that the West itself does not turn inward and allow other powers, hostile to democracy, to fill the resultant vacuum. Leaving Afghanistan will be less of a challenge than getting over the after-shocks of defeat there.

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