

Retreat of an Empire or End of an Era; Aftermath of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

The United States (US) president declared 'end of an era', during which Washington has been engaged in changing the regimes and putting democratic governments in place. Making Australia, United Kingdom, United States (AUKUS) after withdrawing from Afghanistan without wasting any time illuminates that economic, political, and strategic advantages attained by China in last two decades are game changing and the US is struggling to handle it unilaterally. While when the US retaliated the September 11th incident it did not give much importance to the international institutions or protocols showing that the US, being the most powerful state, would like to act unilaterally. With spending twenty years and billions of dollars, the US could change little in Afghanistan, as soon as the US withdrew, the Afghan government, institutions and security forces just vanished, providing an easy entry to the Taliban. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan is an important event, some would argue to denote it as retreat, it has implications on the future political scenario, and it shows reasonable shift in the current world political balance as well. Afghanistan, in its entire history, has never been a self-sufficient state, it has always been the battle ground of external actors, its future does not seem to be different. New actors will be spreading their cards on the sands of Afghanistan. The former players will be trying to find the ways to spoil the party of new players. In the games being played in Afghanistan, Afghans are the most irrelevant. This research analyzes the 20 years' status of the United States after 9/11 with the support of international relations theory of Realism followed by future prospects.

Keywords: End of an era, AUKUS, Unilateralism, Battleground, Power Transition, Actors, Game, Irrelevant, Afghans.

To cite this article: Khan .M,I Irfan, A & Khan,A,W. (2021). Retreat of an Empire or End of an Era; Aftermath of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan. Competitive Social Science Research Journal (CSSRJ), 2(3),92-105

INTRODUCTION

“End of an era” vis-a-vis “either you are with us or against us”, statements of two US presidents show swing in US foreign policy - but do they really? ‘The event of September 11th, 2001 has changed the world for ever’ this line is found in so many academic writings after 9/11, that almost everyone believes in it. Looking at the security measures adopted by the states after September 11th incident, we see drastic changes, but how this event changed the policies of the states, especially of US, is contentious. On the other hand, the events took place in August-September 2021, - US withdrawal and Taliban’s recapture of Afghanistan - are not less important, but have they changed the policies of US towards the world, will be seen in the days to come. Nevertheless, the formation of AUKUS (Australia United Kingdom United States) in a haste, does tell that there are some urgent matters to be addressed.

Both the events influenced the world but in contrary to each other. The most obvious change that took place at international level, after September 11th attack was the US unilateralism. The invasion of Afghanistan was thought to be approved by the United Nations’ Security Council resolution¹, however, it was not the interpretation of resolution which paved the way to attack Afghanistan, rather, it was the statement ‘Either you are with us or against us’ by the then US president Gorge W Bush which, in the view of Noam Chomsky was “virtually declaration of war against much of the states of the world” (Chomsky, 2001) which made the other states to join the US.

Another sign of this attitude was seen at the time of attacking Iraq in 2003. The narrative to attack on Iraq was founded on false information (rather fabricated stories) of Iraq’s possession of Weapons of Mass Destructions (WMD)². Not many people, including academics and politicians around the globe, were convinced that Iraq had the WMD, what was obvious however, was the US goal of regime change, the removal of Saddam Husain from power by any means. Anti-War demonstrations, criticism, and cautious response from well-known scholars of all over the world could not hold the US back and it led the attack on Iraq, supplementing the notion of US behaving like an Empire.

The US displayed its military might, killed thousands of opponents, engaged tens of thousands of its own and coalition solders for twenty years, spent huge sum of money in building institutions and infrastructure in Afghanistan (Rhodes, 2021. p.26). But as soon as they decided to leave Afghanistan and packed up their bags, all that was built in twenty years, proved fragile and gone in about twenty days. For last few years, the US negotiated with the Taliban, the main points they agreed on, was that the Taliban will ‘not attack on withdrawing coalition troops, will not allow to use their soil to be used by any other groups or individual against US’ the future of Afghanistan was left for the Afghan government, people and of course for the Taliban to settle³.

¹ UN Security Council passed two resolutions, 1368 and 1373 just after 9/11; details can be found at [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1368\(2001\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1368(2001)) and [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1373\(2001\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1373(2001))

² “There were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq” The Guardian, 7th October, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/oct/07/usa.iraq1>

³ Details of US Taliban agreement available at; <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/29/810537586/u-s-signs-peace-deal-with-taliban-after-nearly-2-decades-of-war-in-afghanistan>

Afghanistan now, at the time of writing, is in the hands of Taliban, the speed by which they swept across Afghanistan has stunned everyone.

During last two decades regional and international dynamics have changed enormously. Pakistan, a neighbor, and the front-line state during the War on Terror (WoT) faced unprecedented challenges. It lost thousands of lives in terrorist attacks, confronted political and social turmoil, faced economic difficulties, some experts were predicting its collapse, but it bounced back by successfully crushing the terrorist networks. India, a regional power, has been working in Afghanistan along with the US like hands and glove, is now facing a dilemma after the US withdrawal. China at the time of September 11th attacks was not much expressive, at international political issues and it was not thought to be playing much significant role, it was a growing regional power, but now it has proved itself a real competitor to the US, politically, economically, and technologically. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan, has left a mess behind which provides the opportunity to the regional and international actors to involve in Afghanistan.

This article is an attempt to contribute to understand the implications of US attack on Afghanistan, as well as its withdrawal from it. It concentrates on economic, strategic and structural aspects of both the events. The essay sets out to answer three main questions, first, how can someone analyze the motives behind sidelining the international institutions by the US, after the event of September 11th? Second, how can we assess the twenty years' engagement of US in Afghanistan and its implications on US status? And the last one why Afghanistan can never be left alone? The article will evaluate the events from 2001 till 2021 within the framework of international relations theory of Realism.

UNILATERALISM

The scenario was vague; when the War on Terror (WoT) was declared. Was it a war against a state, a group or a regime or all of them? Bush and Blair were convinced that they were acting responsibly, however not everyone was convinced what they were doing or up to. Walker (2002) put it 'thankfully, not all (responses) have been as crude as those used to justify the military action taken by the Bush, Blair...nor...has it been easy to attain credibility by articulating crude indictments of these governments' violent responses to violence' (Walker, 2002, p.111).

He further explained:

“hegemonic” states, those states who were more equal than other states, and with more responsibility for maintaining some semblance on international order... “revolutionary” states, those states which sought to impose their own values more widely as a condition of their own hoped-for hegemonic status. The obvious danger of both hegemonic states and revolutionary states, of course, is that in seeing themselves as more equal, and more righteous, than other state, they see themselves in terms of empire rather than of system of states” (Walker, 2002, p.117).

The statement of George W Bush, “either you are with us or against us” expressed the US as an empire rather than a democratic state who abides by the international law, institutions, and norms. Noam Chomsky explained American mindset that in their eyes

no legal (international law, or norms) issue arises if the US respond to any challenge which arises to its power or position (Chomsky, 2005, p.8).

The UN Security Council passed two resolutions within two weeks, resolutions 1368 urged the states to cooperate and “to work together urgently to bring to justice the perpetrators, organizers and sponsors of these terrorist attacks⁴”. Resolution 1373 called upon the states that they should “Cooperate, particularly through bilateral and multilateral arrangements and agreements, to prevent and suppress terrorist attacks and take action against perpetrators of such acts⁵”.

None of these resolutions clearly asked or allowed any state to attack on any state, however it was interpreted by the US administration that it allows to attack the state which was protecting Osama Bin Ladin, the main culprit and mastermind of the September 11th attacks. The US attacked Afghanistan on 7th October 2001, because the Taliban refused to hand over Osama Bin Ladin to them. There is no shortage of events or references that prove that the US in 2001 acted unilaterally, like an empire, I chose following events, because they have relevance with other issues being discussed in this essay.

First, invasion of Afghanistan; Though many of the academics were hoping that the US policy makers would sit back and try to find the causes of these attacks on September 11th before taking any explicit actions against those who were responsible for planning and carrying out those bloody attacks, but that remained a mere hope (Suganam, 2002, pp.3-13). The decision to attack Afghanistan was made by Bush administration, unilaterally, however it was adopted as bandwagon by some other states to comprise an alliance.

Second, the attitude of an empire was also evident from the US treating the people who were captured from Afghanistan. Patrick Thornberry explained that the states depend on international norms and institutions that makes the structure of the world, the western democratic states claim ‘ethic of responsibility’ by which they are supposed to abide by the international norms, but ‘the manner of keeping the UN Security Council on the sideline...the US (had) been ploughing a path that may serve to weaken international norms’ (Thornberry, 2002, p.49). He further explained that there were many options available within the framework of international law, which could be adopted to capture the accused and tried under the law, but that was never any priority and international norms were set aside when the combatant captured from Afghanistan were not treated as Prisoners of War (POW) and they were kept at Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Third, pulling out of Kyoto Protocol, on climate change, provided another evidence. Bush administration pulled out of Kyoto Protocol in 2001, another act of unilateralism. The protocol proposed the US to cut 5% of the carbon emission while it was producing quarter of the whole of carbon emission in the world, but the US pulled out of it and

⁴ Complete text of UN Security Council Resolution No.1368 Passed on 12th September 2001, can be found at, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1368\(2001\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1368(2001))

⁵ UN Security Council Resolution No.1373 Passed on 28th September 2001, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1373\(2001\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1373(2001))

showed determination to pursue a fossil fuel economy⁶. In the words of Andrew Dobson this made it evident that the US had the luxury of acting unilaterally on issues which required collective and coordinated actions at global level (Dobson, 2002, p.57)

Fourth, invading Iraq. The US invaded Iraq in 2003, on the grounds that it had Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and had links with Al-Qaida. Those weapons were never found and never used, the only use of those WMD was to invade Iraq and kill thousands of people. The link with Al-Qaida was not found either, however regime was changed, Iraq was captured, and its oil and gas fields were given to the US oil companies who did not have the access to Iraq oil before⁷.

The point being made here is that US acted like an empire. States were bullied, international institutions were put aside even allies were left wondering. However American unilateral or imperial conduct did not start with the event of 9/11, but it became obvious with the reaction to it. The question is whether the attitude of US change after twenty years? If it has, how can we analyze that change? This will be discussed in the last part of this discussion.

TWENTY YEARS IN AFGHANISTAN

US in Afghanistan

After the September 11th attacks, US declared that Al-Qaida -a terrorist organization- was behind that, which was headed by Osama Bin Ladin, who was hiding in Afghanistan which was then ruled by Taliban.

The twenty years stay of US in Afghanistan started on 7th October 2001, they used B-52 bombers for carpet bombing⁸, that destroyed everything which could be seen. Afghanistan under Taliban did not have well established infrastructure, or installations, whatever they had was dismantled in just a few days without any resistance. Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban groups which was holding about 10% of the Afghan territory, was cornered to the north of the state, at the time of the US invasion, was supported by the Americans⁹. Within two months Taliban were removed, from power, many of them were killed and captured while remaining fled the country, on the other hand, leaders of the Northern Alliance became members of the new government.

The removal of Taliban, capturing the suspected terrorists and putting a new government in place was not the only aims of the US, however it was the easiest part. There were economic, strategic, and structural aims, which if achieved, would have far reaching implications.

Ahmed Rasheed claimed that 9/11 provided the immediate reason but actual goal to control Afghanistan was defined months earlier than that attack took place (Rasheed, 2002, p.145-146). That makes the theory of realism relevant here. The US defined its

⁶ Find details of US leaving Kyoto Protocol on; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03gj1ql>

⁷ Details are found in CNN Report, available at; <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/19/opinion/iraq-war-oil-juhasz/index.html>

⁸ “US steps up strikes by carpet-bombing Taliban”, The Guardian, November,1, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/nov/01/afghanistan.terrorism6>

⁹ Details available at; <https://www.britannica.com/event/Afghanistan-War#ref1081481>

national interests in the region and decided to attain those, by attacking Afghanistan which has very important geostrategic position. We can find some other aspects of the US attack on Afghanistan.

First, Caspian Sea basin, the biggest untapped oil reserve in the world, located in the states north to Afghanistan. To get access to that reserve Afghanistan could play pivotal role along with Pakistan. Oil pipeline from Central Asian states via Afghanistan could reach to the Gwadar port in Pakistan, (the same port which is going to be the hub for China Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC). It is worth mentioning here the name of corporate BRIDAS (or Bidas) an Argentinean oil company, which proposed that oil pipeline during the 1996-2001 Taliban government but could not materialize it (Rasheed, 2002, p.160). The same project was taken up by UNOCAL (Unocal) an American oil company which merged in Chevron in 2005¹⁰. And it is here where at least one of the hidden aims of attacking Afghanistan could be traced.

Second, US has been engaged in so many states in changing regimes, in the name of developing institutions and humanitarian support after the second World War. These involvements do not necessarily mean that all the resources of those states were to be taken in the hands of US, rather in many ways its tactic has been not to allow other regional or international powers to have access to those resources¹¹. Staying in Afghanistan demonstrated such kind of strategies. Whether the Americans were to build oil pipeline from Central Asian states to Gwadar or not, if they were in Afghanistan none of the other states, especially China or Russia were able to work on that project. Thus, American presence in Afghanistan was also serving strategic as well as economic purpose.

Third, building Afghanistan on western standards, having political, financial and security institutions would provide base on which US could promote these changes to Central Asian states. US engaged Central Asian states from 2002 to 2007 and had three dimensional plans, economic, security and institutional developments (Mayer, 2008, p.102). These objectives could only be achieved if Afghanistan became stable, peaceful and secure. However the leadership of most of the Central Asian states were, autocratic so despite the fact that some democratic movements became active in Central Asian states, they were dealt with iron hands and crushed which blocked any of such efforts.

Fourth keeping an eye on the regional actors (China, Russia and Iran) would have been another aim, so that they could not grow out of control. Doing so US stay in the region must be long, and other regional allies should be taken on board by giving advantageous position. India being a competitor of China perfectly fulfilled the requirements of such an ally. The Northern Alliance was a pro-Indian entity, putting them in power means giving Indians a free hand in Afghanistan as well as in the region. India was handy, as it was eager to keep her 'born enemy' Pakistan out of Afghanistan so it was willing to invest in Afghanistan. The Indian investment to build infrastructure and institutions in Afghanistan would lessen the financial burden on US

¹⁰ Details of UNOCAL projects available at; <https://www.chevron.com/investors/archives/legacy-unocal>

¹¹ Find details about US policies towards other states in "Noam Chomsky on the Long History of US Meddling in Foreign Elections" <https://chomsky.info/20170119/>

(Constantino, 2002). So instead of analyzing the invasion of Afghanistan a mere reaction of the 9/11 incident, it should also be examined on strategic and economic aspects.

Pakistan Factor

Being a hegemon, the US arrived in Afghanistan facing no resistance from the world or in the words of English School, 'International Society', however, to achieve long term objectives it required help from the regional states, especially from Pakistan and India. US used both, but in different ways. Pakistan was used to 'clear the fields' and India was to 'sow the seeds of new crop'. Pakistan was declared a non-NATO ally for War on Terror and her task was to catch or kill the terrorists from Pakistan especially from its bordering regions which was so often mentioned as safe haven or breeding ground for the terrorist groups. While determining the future setup in Afghanistan, Pakistan was considered an outsider. Doing this 'cleaning' job Pakistan was always under pressure to 'do more' while, becoming an ally on War on Terror, it had to pay a price. The ousted Taliban and their sympathizers in Pakistan and Afghanistan, were of the view that being ally of US, Pakistan has betrayed them. Hence, Pakistan had to face an unprecedented challenge from terrorism. The groups like Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) caused serious threat to its governance, politics economy and security.

India, as mentioned above, was given favorable position by US in Afghanistan who saw a great opportunity after decades, to influence and mold Afghan politics and society in her favor. It started investing hugely, including building her own embassies in many cities of Afghanistan. Northern-Alliance in government, Indian direct involvement in all affairs of Afghanistan, all this framed and endorsed by US was appalling for Pakistan. Preferring India over Pakistan, by US while determining future of Afghanistan, was a setback for Pakistan. It was not unexpected, nor it happened for the first time to Pakistan, it has been a part of US policies, revealed many times in the past, whenever there is a situation to choose from India and Pakistan for any regional issue, India has always been the priority (Markey, 2013, p. 165,185).

US-Pak relations are an excellent example of states preferring their national interests over mutual trusts. Enormous challenge from terrorism, loosing interests in Afghanistan, bitter rival gaining extraordinary advantage in its western neighbor, and being forced to fight a war which it thought was not in its benefit, provides a typical scenario which can be analyzed through the lens of Realism. Pakistan was to fight for its survival. While the US was to achieve its aims from Afghanistan, so doing, India was a bigger and more useful partner than Pakistan. India was to be used in countering the Chinese influence in the region, while Pakistan was useless in that respect. Thus apparent allies, US and Pakistan remained engaged in all kind of activities to gain their own national interests. During its struggle to survive, Pakistan pretended that it is putting all its efforts possible on the war on terror but US realized that Pakistan is not doing what is asked, rather some groups are still getting support from Pakistan. It is important to note that the US had credible evidence that Pakistan was supporting some groups, like Haqqani network, which were creating problems in Afghanistan, but US did not choose to engage in direct conflict with Pakistan.

From Pakistan's perspective it was an advantage to have political, economic, strategic and diplomatic authorities in a single hand. Parvez Musharraf being head of the state as well as army chief was controlling all matters of state including the Afghan policy from the start of the War on Terror, in other words it was Pakistan's military establishment that was handling all its issues.

The US brokered a deal between Parvez Musharraf and Pakistan People's Party (Condoleezza Rice, 2011, 238). This deal eventually removed Musharraf and new democratically elected government as well as the opposition in Pakistan were aligned with the US policies. These two governments, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) 2008-2013 and Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) 2013-2018, took the stance that the Pakistan's armed forces were not doing what US wanted.

Differences between political elite and security institutions over Pakistan's Afghan policy after Musharraf was an open secret. However the expectations from Pakistan's democratic governments changed into frustrations, it was Pakistan's security establishment which remain successful in controlling the Afghan affairs, thus from 2008 onward US took actions without informing Pakistan (Markey, 2013, p.168) and Pakistan not trusting US, was adopting its own way to get influence in Afghanistan.

To deal with the challenge of terrorism in its own territory Pakistan carried out many operations including the one in Karachi. With the loss of about seventy thousand lives, it eventually became successful in eradication the terrorism. Pakistan's Struggle for survival became successful, it came out of the danger of being declared as failed state, though it took the risks of annoying the US (Markey, 2013, p.142). Thus, the US could not get from Pakistan what it expected. The relations with Pakistan deteriorated as US stay in Afghanistan elongated and it seemed apparent that new setup in Afghanistan would not last long if US withdraws from Afghanistan.

In any new political setup in Afghanistan, Pakistan seems to be playing very important role, the role if it was given by the US after removing Taliban in 2001, the situation of Afghanistan would have been different. How different? No one can say it for sure.

What has changed in Twenty Years?

Afghanistan is an enigma, and no one yet has reached to the key which may resolve it. Who so ever tried to resolve it, lost his/her own prestige? It is said to be 'the graveyard of empires and the examples given in this regard are of British and Soviet empires. Americans now have started counting the damage after spending two decades there. The British, while in India, tried to capture the areas which now comprise Afghanistan in 1850's and then in 1880's but failed. The British changed their strategy, as they didn't want the Russians to capture that area (which is sometimes called The Great Game) so they decided to create a buffer state between themselves and the Russian Empire. Hence, with the understanding of both the empires these unruly tribes, were given a state called Afghanistan¹². The existence of Afghanistan was serving the interests of both the Empires, they didn't want to have territorial link with each other,

¹² "The Great Game and Afghanistan" a detailed account of British intentions explained , <https://www.loc.gov/ghe/cascade/index.html?appid=a0930b1f4e424987ba68c28880f088ea&bookmark=Treaty%20of%20Peshawar>

so they continued supporting Afghanistan financially. After Bolshevik revolution, Tzarist Russia was replaced by Soviet Russia. The British left Indian subcontinent in 1947, and the United States became a world power, both new powers – US and USSR - continued supporting Afghanistan financially till late 1950's (Ahmed Rasheed, 2002, p.13). Only after losing its financial support from the West, Afghanistan leant towards the Soviets, which ultimately sought military help from Soviets, causing the so-called Jihad in Afghanistan 1979-88. After leaving Afghanistan, USSR was so exhausted financially that it crumbled, communism could not provide remedy, and it lost its grip on many areas allowing them to become independent states. Most Afghans proudly claim the credit of causing the breakdown of USSR, however, as the USSR left, in the words of Ahmed Rashed, Afghanistan was 'abandoned like an orphan' because there was no more Jihad against USSR supported by US (Ahmed Rasheed, 2002, p.207). Afghanistan had no reasonable institutions, infrastructure, or social cohesion. There were no political parties only armed groups who only knew how to fight and had no idea how to run a state, so Afghanistan went in the hands of warlords, until Taliban captured Kabul in 1996 and they were removed by US.

Twenty years' stay of US have not brought much change in Afghanistan. The argument is that the Afghanistan has never been a self-sufficient state in the past and the US stay in Afghanistan has not changed it enough. As there are, first, no civil institutions that could hold the Afghan society together. Second, same as before American invasion, there is no sense of social or political togetherness which could provide a platform to Afghan people to settle their differences. Third, there is no leadership upon which the public could trust that they will sit together and plan, rather it remains a battle ground of local and external forces. Fourth, economically it will be still dependent on foreign aid, and the states providing aid like past practices, will also be playing important role in determining its internal as well as foreign policies. However, the change that took place in Afghanistan in last twenty years, was in infrastructure. Some roads, hospitals, airports and some schools were built, which may not last long if conflict among different groups erupts.

While US remained busy in Afghanistan, China kept growing. On one hand China has become an economic giant on the other, it has become a real challenger to the west in technology. The third, rather bigger, challenge which China posed to the western powers is that it is getting stronger without adopting the political, social and economic norms of the west. So, the prime beneficiary of Afghan war or war on terror, is China.

The impact of twenty years' 'war on terror' on the US itself requires a complete essay. Too much attention and resources committed to the counterterrorism activities compromised the liberal and democratic ideals of the US (Miller, 2021, p.56). The American image became under question. As the narrative of counter terrorism mainly directed towards Muslims so anti-immigration waves and Islamophobia flourished during last two decades. In the year 2020, after the death of George Floyd a campaign of 'Black lives Matter' raised the concerns over the issues which were addressed after a long struggle during the civil-right movements in the 1960's. Even greater concern was raised with the incident of 6th January 2021, where far-right elements attacked the US capital. It did not happen just because of unprecedented claims of rigged elections by a sitting US president, it developed upon the mindset evolved after the 9/11

incident, when queasy claims of ‘Americanism under threat’ provided the thriving ground to the white supremacist. Thus, twenty years of US has not changed Afghanistan much or the region around it, it provided enormous advantage to China to grow and it has dragged the US back at a stage where it seems struggling to rebuild its own image, credibility and prestige (Ben Rhodes, 2021, p.31).

US WITHDRAWAL - END OF AN ERA?

The declaration of ‘end of an era’ described the shift in US foreign policy which cannot be taken as a decision made without realizing the future necessities and responsibilities of a hegemonic power. Withdrawing from Afghanistan does not mean leaving Afghanistan or the region alone. Afghanistan is the territory which invites temptation, because if you control it, regional economic, political and strategic matters can be controlled or at least interrupted. The US cannot afford to leave Afghanistan as long as it is a world power and wants to maintain that status. So, US would hope, if not practical then its tactical presence should continue in Afghanistan. On the other hand, in a very unlikely scenario, if US decides to leave Afghanistan for good it is a sign of weakening the grip on the matters and a retreat from a hegemonic status. In that case it would be assumed by the other actors that the region is open to grab, and they can plot their own strategies.

The most obvious and awful implication of US withdrawal is that the Taliban are back. All reports, expectations, claims, intentions and predictions about the abilities and capacities of Afghan government proved completely flawed. The elected president Ashraf Ghani fled Afghanistan to save himself, along with him gone the pride and prestige of a hegemon. A few months ago, the same government, due to its utter arrogance or severe miscalculation, was not giving any importance to Taliban rather, was unhappy with the US’s negotiations¹³. So, after a pause of twenty years, Afghanistan is in the hands of Taliban again and world is wondering what to do with them and Afghanistan?

Regional actors must deal with the Afghan government, so it is extremely important who has control over Afghan territory. The US could have better chance to continue its regional influence, if Ashraf Ghani’s government could hold on to the power. By capturing whole of Afghanistan Taliban halted the US or Indian impact. If Taliban are in control Pakistan, China, Russia and, to some extent Iran, would have better maneuvering over Afghanistan. Hence, these regional actors, will be manipulating, if not controlling, Afghanistan’s internal issues, foreign relations and economy. The tactical presence of US in the region may continue, and that may be in the form of regional actors especially through India. Like in the last twenty years, India is likely to remain US’s most trusted and handy partner in the region. However, as the control over Afghanistan is no more in the hands of Northern Alliance, Hamid Karzai or Ashraf Ghani, India is in hot water to deal Afghanistan. Yet again, India could play pivotal role in the region as well as at international level. If it does not align with

¹³ “The Afghan government objected ... the historic peace deal between the United States and the Taliban” Washington post, March 1, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghan-government-questions-aspects-of-us-taliban-peace-deal/2020/03/01/0a973228-5a68-11ea-8efd-0f904bdd8057_story.html

China against the status quo, which is the most likely scenario, then it is unlikely that it would be given any importance in Afghanistan by the rival actors. On the other hand if it remains neutral, it may get some role as a chip. At the time of writing this article, it looks that US has not abandoned rather lost Afghanistan. If other actors, especially China could get good grip on Afghanistan via the government sitting in Kabul, it would be a big blow to the twenty years' engagement of US.

China knows it has far less influence at diplomatic front as compared to the western powers, so if it has to become a superpower, backing from the Asian powers, at least, is a must. Russia already on board, bridging the gap with India is difficult but possible. Nevertheless, it looks improbable that China and Japan could overcome the baggage of history and build cordial relations, but strange things have happened in the world. Thankfully for the 'status quo', apprehending the real challenge posed by China, US has become active and the formation of AUKUS – Australia, United Kingdom and United States – is one of the measures to stop its influence¹⁴. Will that be enough to cover the gap of twenty years? will be seen in how China would make its moves to get support from the region.

Retreat of an Empire?

We put questions at the end of the first part of discussion; did the attitude of US change after twenty year? If it has, how can we analyze that change? To answer these, we rephrase it; Has the US retreated from its hegemonic or imperial position which it held in 2001? Analyzing US policy statements, we can find the answer.

First, the announcement of “ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries”¹⁵ itself manifests the hopelessness of such an action in the future. It is a position 180 degree from the position of announcing. ‘either you are with us or against us’. So the self-claimed restraint can be understood a step backward from an imperial mindset.

Second, as mentioned at the start of the discussion US pulled out of Kyoto Protocol in 2001 and gave no importance to the international cooperation on the issue of climate change. Later during Obama Administration it joined the Paris Agreement – a refined version of Kyoto Protocol- on climate change but pulled out by Trump in 2017. Now, Biden's rejoining it¹⁶ and pledging to focus on environmental issues cannot be taken as just the difference of republican and democrat mindset. The enthusiasm shown by the Biden administration pronounces the fact that it wants to take lead or ownership of something for collective good. Something by which US could make a point that it cares about the humanity, future generations, and collectiveness.

Third, to hegemonies the values and norms on which the status que powers unite is a primordial part of being a hegemon. The norms of today's status que powers are democracy, liberalism, human rights, and equality among all sections of society. The

¹⁴ BBC reports on formation of AUKUS and French concerns on it, available at; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58604677>

¹⁵ The official statement of President Biden issued by White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>

¹⁶ “The United States Officially Rejoins the Paris Agreement”, US Department of State, February, 19, 2021 <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-officially-rejoins-the-paris-agreement/>

surge in Far-Right or White-Supremacists and direct involvement of former president in it is a big blow to the image of a superpower. This change did not take place in a day, it is a manifestation or consequences of policies adopted two decades ago to manage the world in American way. So, to put its own house in order is bigger challenge for the US than maintaining its authority at international level. Division on the racial lines is a weakening sign of a nation and damage has already been done, the invasion on Capitol Hill on 6th January 2021 may be mentioned in the history of US not less damning than the 9/11¹⁷.

Lastly, keeping focus on same line – War on Terror- for too long cost the US its status (Rhodes, 2021, p.22). It looked that policy makers closed their eyes of other changes that taken place in the world in that era. Nullification of changes put forth during Obama Administration made the stagnation in foreign policy obvious. It looks, now, they are in a hurry to manage China, realigning in Europe and readjusting in Asia. So, they are awaking and trying to manage many things at the same time. They have realized that the hegemonic status of US is no more for granted. They have to work hard to maintain it. And that would depend on other states especially the EU states how they realign themselves with the US. So, the US seems no longer to decide and act unilaterally at international level, the cooperation of other allies is a must, which indicates that twenty years have changed the US from a unilateral hegemon to cooperation seeker ally.

CONCLUSION

The implication of the US involvement in Afghanistan are three dimensional. As far as Afghanistan itself is concerned, the US was able to dismantle the terrorist network in Afghanistan, killed the mastermind of 9/11, Osama Bin Ladin and because of this the attacks like 9/11 are unlikely. It also looks plausible that Afghanistan in future may not provide base for the terrorist organizations to breed and evolve into another threat to world peace. Some may argue that as Taliban are controlling Afghanistan, they will provide the space to terrorists as they did in the past, it is also main concern of the world today. Given the fact that Afghanistan is always dependent on the external powers to survive and external actors, especially China, would not help Afghanistan if Taliban follow the same lines what they adopted in 1996 till 2001. So we maintain that Taliban will not risk their existence by providing the space for such groups.

However, it is evident from the unprecedented chaotic scenes of Kabul airport during the last weeks of August 2021 that Afghanistan is far from being a stable and peaceful state. So, institution building, infrastructure development and peace building process in Afghanistan proved flawed, incompetent, and fragile.

Second aspect of US involvement in Afghanistan is its role as a hegemonic power. As far as its militaristic capabilities are concerned, it still enjoys the same status very much as it had in 2001, however its economic and technological supremacy is seriously challenged. China in the last twenty years has emerged as a big economy and has developed its technology enormously, hence poses a great challenge to US

¹⁷ To find details of attack on the US capital see; <https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-Capitol-attack-of-2021>, Also see details of capital riot inquiry, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57978407>

hegemony, which underpins the fact that the US as well as other actors will behave differently at international level.

Third aspect is its status as a leader of liberal and democratic values. This aspect has been dented by the surge of far-right politics on its own soil. Its grave example was the election of Donald Trump as US president, his managing the matters at world level and his defiance after losing the elections, which caused the event of 6th January 2021. Thus there seems no easy rides for the hegemon anymore and it all is due to its long engagement in Afghanistan.

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