

Srdja Trifkovic

AFGHANISTAN: HYBRID WARFARE VICTORIOUS

ABSTRACT: The victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan in August 2021 marked the end of an extended and successful exercise in hybrid warfare by the Taliban and by its Pakistani mentors. Their strategy provides an example of Sun Tzu's ideal of "winning a war without fighting". The Taliban outlasted their opponents politically and psychologically, while avoiding battle with the U.S. and Coalition forces and refraining from terrorist attacks abroad. Their task was facilitated by the absence of a clear U.S. strategy, intelligence failures, by the misguided order of battle of government forces, and by the chronic corruption at all levels of Afghan officialdom. More significant in terms of Asian geopolitics was Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan, a complex and successful hybrid warfare operation in pursuit of Islamabad's strategic objectives. The key question – what is America's objective in Afghanistan, how does its military go about reaching it, and how does it measure success or failure in doing so – remained unanswered until the end. Finally, the end-game in Kabul in August 2021 also illustrates the gap between the desire of a segment of America's elites to promote "progressive" social and moral norms around the world, and the reality of the Muslim world which, overwhelmingly, finds those norms unacceptable.

KEYWORDS: hybrid warfare, Afghanistan, War in Afghanistan, Afghan National Army, Taliban

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Dr Srdja Trifkovic is professor of international relations and geopolitics at the University of Banja Luka and foreign affairs editor of *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*. He can be reached at trifkovic@netzero.com*

THE TALIBAN STRATEGY

In the opening decades of the 21st century, in Afghanistan, we witnessed the latest episode in an ironic reversal of the roles and objectives of the leading foreign powers of their time in a far-away land of which we know less than we imagine. Britain's profitless involvement in the country (1839–1919) started disastrously yet nevertheless it ended in a stable solution of sorts; but that is ancient history by now.¹ More recently, the Soviet military intervention (1979–1989)² and America's "longest war" (2001–2021), had both started without a clear political objective, and both had ended in strategic failures.

The end-game in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 was the climax of a long-drawn-out and singularly successful exercise in hybrid warfare by the Taliban and – more significantly in geopolitical terms – by its Pakistani abettors. The Taliban strategy since 2018 (or even 2015) provided us with a textbook exercise of Sun Tzu's ideal of "winning a war without

¹ See e.g. Steward, J. *On Afghanistan's Plains: The Story of Britain's Afghan Wars*. London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 2011.

² Cf. a highly authoritative account of the Soviet intervention and its aftermath is provided by Coll, S. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. London: Penguin Books, 2004.

fighting,” which is but one early variant of the definition of hybrid warfare.³ A numerically inferior irregular force without advanced weaponry, the Taliban managed to survive for two decades of the U.S.-led and financed *Operation Enduring Freedom*. And then – suddenly and surprisingly to most Western media experts, U.S. military commanders in the field, and intelligence analysts – it proved capable of mounting a bid for rapid dominance in May 2021. Within three months, its superior operational art resulted in the total rout of the Afghan National Army and police force.

The Taliban strategy entailed capturing border crossings to the former Soviet Central Asia, to Iran and (of course) Pakistan, at the outset of the offensive. What followed in the first phase of the onslaught was securing the ethnically diverse north and west of the country – a challenge successfully solved – and marching unopposed south and east to Pashtun heartland, finally taking Kabul even before the U.S. could complete evacuation. How could this happen?

Following the rapid fall of its regime before the invading U.S. forces in the fall of 2001, the Taliban adopted a hybrid warfare strategy *par excellence* by aiming to win by not losing: to outlast the Americans politically and psychologically. Rather than carry out major operations, their focus was fourfold:

- to maintain the coherence of the group’s core cadre,
- to undermine political stabilization of Afghanistan,
- to safeguard its support in the Pashtun heartland in the south; and
- to expand it gradually northbound.

A measure of the Taliban’s political success is that they were able to co-opt thousands of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and Hazaras, whom they were unable to control fully – let alone rely upon as allies – when they were in power between 1994 and 2001.⁴ They were also able – unknown to the wishfully-thinking American officials and military officers – to establish informal lines of communication with the Kabul government officials and field commanders, and to convince or else intimidate them into accepting the allegedly inevitable end-game.

Particularly noteworthy was the Taliban’s systematic avoidance of clashes with the remaining U.S. forces after 2015 and the group’s discreet arrangements with other foreign troop contingents (most notably Germans and Italians) to refrain from attacking them in return for cash payments.⁵ Avoiding battle with the U.S. military and their Coalition helpers, and strictly refraining from terrorist attacks abroad, was an integral part of the Taliban

³ A more precise translation of the famous maxim is, “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting”. Quoted in: Jackson, E. “Sun Tzu’s 31 Best Pieces Of Leadership Advice”. *Forbes*, May 23, 2014. www.forbes.com/sites/ericjackson/2014/05/23/sun-tzus-33-best-pieces-of-leadership-advice/?sh=61e459f95e5e, Accessed November 14, 2021.

⁴ Bezhan, F. “Ethnic Minorities Are Fueling the Taliban’s Expansion in Afghanistan”. *Foreign Policy*, June 15, 2016. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/15/ethnic-minorities-are-fueling-the-talibans-expansion-in-afghanistan>, Accessed on 2 November 2021.

⁵ For the Italian and German contingents’ local deals with the Taliban amounting to de facto truces, see e.g. Amies, N. “Paying for peace”. *DW*, 10. 19. 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/allegations-of-taliban-bribery-stoke-debate-on-afghan-engagement/a-4804047> and “Germans in the Taliban Stalingrad – Fighting the Kunduz Insurgency”. In Steinberg G. *German Jihad: On the Internationalization of Islamist Terrorism*. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2013. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.7312/stei15992-012/pdf>, both accessed on 15 November 2021.

strategy in the years preceding August 2021.⁶ Ironically, the absence of attacks plotted from within Afghanistan was presented in the U.S. as an encouraging sign that the mission was not a failure after all.⁷

At the same time the Afghan National Army and police, which outnumbered the Taliban by at least three to one as late as July 2021, were subjected to operational-level isolation: cutting off garrisons from their bases of support, pinning them down and preventing reinforcement. Attempts by the government in Kabul to control territory with checkpoints and fortified outposts – an approach suggested and approved by the U.S. military – played right into the Taliban’s hands. The roads were easily cut, airlifted supplies proved insufficient, and isolated garrisons were not able to provide reinforcement to each other.

Demoralized by hunger, lack of pay, shortage of ammunition and no prospect of relief, government soldiers were both unwilling to fight and unable to offer sustained resistance. At the same time, the Taliban activated a second line of effort: tailored propaganda and information operations to further undermine morale and cohesion:

“The insurgents flooded social media with images that offered surrounded Afghan security forces a Hobson’s choice: Surrender and live – or die and wonder if the Taliban will kill your family next. More than 70 percent of the Afghan population has access to cell phones... As outposts crumbled, the Taliban sustained its momentum on the battlefield using captured military equipment not only to resupply its forces but also to exploit images of the surrender for additional propaganda.”⁸

All along, by contrast, a new generation of highly motivated Afghan youths – many of them indoctrinated in Pakistan’s madrassas – provided the influx of fresh recruits to the Taliban. The focus was on the quality of the recruits – their wholehearted acceptance of the Caliphate narrative and readiness to die for it – rather than quantity. Slowly but steadily, they created a countrywide network of sleeper cells and village-level local authorities, even in areas seemingly under government control.

This task was facilitated by the absence of a clear U.S. strategy, intelligence failures, by the misguided order of battle of government forces, and by the venal Afghan officialdom, rotten from the presidential palace down to the humblest local clerk and village police officer: everyone wanted a piece of action, but nobody wanted to die for Ghani or “democracy”. When South Vietnam fell in 1975, dozens of senior officers killed themselves. None in Afghanistan.

The Taliban were all too happy to promise clemency to those who surrender with their weapons and equipment undamaged, but at the same time, they threatened death to resisters and their families. This proved to be an extremely effective form of hybrid warfare, as evidenced by senior members of President Ghani’s government surreptitiously advising

⁶ At most 128 U.S. and Coalition soldiers were killed in action in Afghanistan between January 2015 and September 2021. (See “Number of fatalities among Western coalition soldiers involved in the execution of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001 to 2021”. Statista. Last updated on Sept 30, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262894/western-coalition-soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.) This was treated by the U.S. as a sign of progress and made withdrawal feasible.

⁷ O’Hanlon, M. E. “5,000 Troops for 5 years: A no drama approach to Afghanistan for the next US president”. <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/5000-troops-for-5-years-a-no-drama-approach-to-afghanistan-for-the-next-us-president>, Accessed on 8 November 2021.

⁸ Jensen, B. “How the Taliban did it: Inside the ‘operational art’ of its military victory”. *New Atlanticist*, August 15, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-the-taliban-did-it-inside-the-operational-art-of-its-military-victory>, Accessed on 2 November 2021.

provincial governors and field commanders to surrender, perhaps after a choreographed pretence of a battle. In the event most decided to give up without any such charade.

THE KEY ROLE OF PAKISTAN

Essential to the Taliban victory was the continuous and barely concealed military, technical, logistic, and intelligence assistance by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). It also included vital provision of safe havens in the Northwest Province, out of reach of the U.S. and allied forces, and covert diplomatic support abroad.

Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan was in itself a striking example of a complex, long, and eminently successful hybrid warfare operation. It was directed directly against the U.S. and its allies, and indirectly against India, in pursuit of Islamabad's geostrategic objectives. All along, the pretence of partnership with the U.S. was successfully maintained due to the inexplicable and utterly self-defeating willingness of American officialdom to pretend that all was well, even after the killing of Osama bin Laden. The brazenly open (one is tempted to say triumphant) presence of the Pakistani ISI chief, Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed, in the final stages of the military operation in Panjshir was followed by the new Taliban government formation. It was packed with figures from the Haqqani Network, which the U.S. Joint Chief of Staff Mike Mullen described as a veritable arm of the ISI. In the end-game the Pakistani GHQ in Rawalpindi felt it did not need to hide its fingerprints any more.⁹ They had won.

All along, a notable feature of the new, ISI-directed Taliban *modus operandi* was to maintain a regular schedule of suicide bombings and complex terrorist attacks against schools, hospitals, mosques, and non-compliant media outlets – mostly in Kabul but also in other cities. It is noteworthy, however, that the execution of such attacks was entrusted mostly to foreign jihadist volunteers. Unsurprisingly, the attacks contributed to a permanent atmosphere of fear and instability, as intended; yet the foreign origin of many attackers provided the Taliban with the option of plausible denial.¹⁰ The Taliban's own terrorist attacks focused on killing individuals – including prominent civil-society activists, senior army officers, and especially air force pilots at their homes; but usually this was done without openly claiming credit. This was an effective approach. After more than four decades of foreign intervention and chronic insecurity, many Afghans came to long for stability, which the government was patently unable to provide.

Among major state actors, Pakistan is clearly the biggest winner of the Afghan finale. The new Taliban Mark 2 government is a client regime of Islamabad. It provides a welcome north-western strategic depth to Pakistan's narrow corridor to the Chinese border in the Himalayas. It increases the value of Pakistan to China's geostrategic designs, including a safe link to the port of Gwadar.

It is arguable that Pakistan, rather than the Taliban, provides an important case study of hybrid warfare. It is a long story of hunting with Western hounds and running with jihadist hares, from General Zia ul Haq in the late 1970's onwards. The most significant fact about

⁹ Mukhopadhaya, G. "In Afghanistan's Collapse, a Win for Pakistan's 20-Year Long Covert, Hybrid War". <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/afghanistan-collapse-win-for-pakistan-20-year-long-covert-hybrid-war-4205126.html>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.

¹⁰ This technique applied even to the attack at Kabul's international airport, attributed to foreign ISIS terrorists, when it was almost all over.

the killing of Osama Bin Laden was that Pakistan's ISI had been sheltering him for years. Over two decades after 9/11 the open question is no longer whether the ISI had been helping Al Qaeda, but rather whether Al Qaeda was in fact a project of the ISI – in other words whether Pakistan is literally a terrorist state, a major promoter of state-sponsored terrorism.

(SELF) DECEPTIVE INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

The root cause of America's defeat in Afghanistan was the failure of successive national security teams to pay heed to Sun Tzu's famous advice from *The Art of War*: "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat... If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle." "Knowing the enemy" was absent in Afghanistan because no intelligence at odds with the claims of progress was welcomed by politicized generals, greedy contractors, mediocre career diplomats, corrupt aid workers, and their Afghan partners in crime. Their claims of "progress" were a substitute for coherent, reality-based analysis. Chronic deceit of the military-political apparatus in Kabul distorted the perception of reality at all levels of authority. It meant that *the enemy* remained an enigma to most key American decision-makers until the end, even more so than to their Soviet predecessors.

The Afghan-related IM by four successive U.S. administrations is worth contrasting with some historical precedents. Starting around 1800, France was the pioneer in the field of systematic collection, processing, and presentation of information to the public.¹¹ It is remarkable, however, that even with the change of Bonaparte's fortunes – after the rout in Russia in 1812 – the press as a whole, even the official *Le Moniteur* and *La Gazette de France*, continued to report accurately the shifting military lines and political landscape.

In the First World War, Great Britain used a mix of deceitful propaganda and accurate news reporting. In early 1918, the British government established the Ministry of Information (MOI), the first body of its kind in the world. When the MOI was re-established in 1939, it was agreed that the truth should be told whenever possible.¹² This applied even during the darkest days of 1940–1942, including the fall of France and the surrender of Singapore.

During World War II, the German High Command issued regular bulletins about the situation on all fronts. They had a triumphalist tone in 1940 when France fell, and in 1941 when it looked like the Red Army would collapse, but the core information remained reliable throughout the war. The *Wehrmachtberichten* adopted a sober tone after Stalingrad, and deceptive euphemisms were used about "ordered withdrawals to previously prepared positions," and even after Normandy, they did not lie about the actual position and shifts of the front lines.

Shortly after Midway, President Roosevelt created the Office of War Information (OWI), to manage the news and to enthuse the American public for the war effort. Unlike its British counterpart, however, while refraining from directly *lying* to the public, the OWI routinely

¹¹ See Matthews, T. "Napoleonic Era Newspaper Collection". Historic Newspapers. Last updated on 14 December 2021. <https://www.historic-newspapers.co.uk/blog/napoleonic-era-newspaper-collection>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.

¹² Welch, D. *Persuading the People: British Propaganda in World War II*. London: British Library Publishing, 2016.

blended news with politically slanted commentary. During the Cold War, the U.S. covertly funded institutions and publications which had the objective of discrediting the communist ideology in general and the Soviet system in particular. The effort was subtle and successful.

No such sophistication was deemed necessary, however, when it came to selling wars of choice to the American public, let alone the world, after the end of the Cold War. Its particularly egregious road marks were the neocon-invented Iraqi WMDs; the fabricated myths of massacres to justify the intervention in Bosnia and the Kosovo war; and of course the entire Afghan operation. That long war by itself, rather than any specific incident, was marked by a massive and deliberate campaign of disinformation and deception.

The material known as the *Afghanistan Papers* demonstrated, in December 2019, that successive administrations had deliberately and systematically disinforming the nation about the nature of the conflict, its course, and its prospects.¹³ The White House and Pentagon would spin the news to the point of absurdity, according to a senior NSC official: “Suicide bombings in Kabul were portrayed as a sign of the Taliban’s desperation, that the insurgents were too weak to engage in direct combat. Meanwhile, a rise in U.S. troop deaths was cited as proof that American forces were taking the fight to the enemy”.¹⁴ According to Daniel Ellsberg, the leaker of the Pentagon Papers, the Vietnam dynamic was present half a century later: “The presidents and the generals had a pretty realistic view of what they were up against, which they did not want to admit to the American people”.¹⁵ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John F. Sopko was more succinct: “The American people have constantly been lied to”.¹⁶

Military leaders stuck to the same script for years. Gen. John Abizaid told reporters in 2005 that Afghanistan had shown “interesting progress”.¹⁷ In 2007, it was Gen. Dan McNeill’s turn to mouth the phrase “significant gains and great progress”.¹⁸ In 2010, Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez told reporters in Kabul, “We are steadily making deliberate progress”.¹⁹ That year his commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, used the “P” word three times in a single statement.²⁰ Gen. David Petraeus kept repeating the Progress mantra after he took

¹³ Whitlock, C. *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021.

¹⁴ Quoted in the newspaper feature article which provided the basis for the subsequent book: Craig Whitlock, “The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War”. *The Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.

¹⁵ Shephard, A. “Why the Media Is Ignoring the Afghanistan Papers?” *The New Republic*, December 13, 2019. <https://newrepublic.com/article/155977/media-ignoring-afghanistan-papers>, Accessed on 14 November 2021.

¹⁶ Glasser, J. “Special Inspector General for Afghanistan: ‘The American People Have Constantly Been Lied To’”. *CATO Institute*, December 9, 2019. <https://www.cato.org/blog/special-inspector-general-afghanistan-american-people-have-constantly-been-lied>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.

¹⁷ Szoldra, P. “Here’s how top military leaders have described ‘progress’ in Afghanistan”. *Task & Purpose* online, August 23, 2019. <https://taskandpurpose.com/code-red-news/us-military-progress-afghanistan>, Accessed on 14 November 2021.

¹⁸ NATO Joint Press Conference with General Dan McNeill, Commander of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and Ambassador Daan Everts, NATO Senior Civilian Representative. <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2007/s070912a.html>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.

¹⁹ This assertion has been extensively sourced and subsequently quoted with gusto, e.g. by Maureen Callahan in “Lying by Bush and Obama over Afghanistan is this era’s Pentagon Papers”. *The New York Post*, December 14, 2019. <https://nypost.com/2019/12/14/lying-by-bush-and-obama-over-afghanistan-is-this-eras-pentagon-papers>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.

²⁰ Baker, F. W., III. “McChrystal notes progress in Afghanistan”. *U.S. Central Command news*, February 5, 2010. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/883991/mcchrystal-notes-progress-in-afghanistan>, Accessed on 15 February 2021.

over in 2011.²¹ In 2015, future Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, assured us that the progress was indeed continuing. In 2016, the new commander in Afghanistan, John W. Nicholson, had some good news for the American people: progress, it was happening. The list goes on and on, literally *ad nauseam*. The mantra, fanatically parroted, had a distinctly Soviet-era quality to it.

Deception continued to the bitter end. It was eloquently summarized in President Joe Biden's telephone call to his soon-to-be-deposed Afghan colleague Ashraf Ghani on July 23, which was reported by a major news agency and not denied by the White House, yet ignored by the corporate media. "I need not tell you the perception around the world and in parts of Afghanistan ... is that things are not going well in terms of the fight against the Taliban," Biden told Ghani. "And there's a need, whether it is true or not [sic!], there is a need to project a different picture."²²

UNCLEAR OBJECTIVES AND MEASUREMENT OF "PROGRESS"

So much for knowing the enemy. "Knowing thyself" proved even more problematic for the U.S. This cardinal failure made the triumph of hybrid warfare in Afghanistan possible. To Sun Tzu's disciples it is of course inconceivable that you could go to war without defining your strategic objectives, therefore without having a clear tactical doctrine related to your capabilities in the field, and without a clear measurement of success or failure...

That is exactly what happened to the U.S. Army in Afghanistan. Upon arrival there, brigade and battalion commanders were given the same basic mission: to protect the population and defeat the enemy in their sector. "So they all went in for whatever their rotation was, nine months or six months, and were given that mission, accepted... and executed that mission," according to Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, a veteran of multiple tours in Afghanistan as an intelligence officer who in 2017 briefly served as President Donald Trump's national security adviser. "Then they all said, when they left, they accomplished that mission. Every single commander. Not one commander is going to leave Afghanistan," Flynn said, "and say, 'You know what, we didn't accomplish our mission' ... So the next guy that shows up finds it [their area] screwed up... and then they come back and go, 'Man this is really bad.'"²³

The *progress*-obsessed top brass chose to pretend that all was well. Bob Crowley, the retired Army colonel who served as a counterinsurgency adviser in Afghanistan in 2013 and 2014, told U.S. government interviewers in 2015 that "truth was rarely welcome" at military headquarters in Kabul.²⁴ Career-minded officers in the field soon grasped that much, and acted accordingly. The ensuing culture of senior military officers' self-deception went hand-in-hand with the government-approved campaign of disinforming the public back home.

²¹ See e.g. "Petraeus positive about US Afghanistan progress". BBC News, March 15, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-12748852>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.

²² Roston, A. and Bose N. "Exclusive: Before Afghan collapse, Biden pressed Ghani to 'change perception'". Reuters, August 31, 2011. <https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-call-before-afghan-collapse-biden-pressed-ghani-change-perception-2021-08-31>, Accessed on 14 November 2021. One can only speculate what the mainstream media would have made of a similar statement had it been made by Donald Trump.

²³ Flynn's "Lessons Learned" interview, as quoted by Whitlock (2019).

²⁴ Ibid.

The key question – what is America’s objective in Afghanistan, how does its military go about reaching it, and how does it measure success or failure in doing so – remained unanswered for all of twenty years. Was it to defend America from future attacks, to punish the Taliban for 9/11? To eradicate it altogether, or to deny their protégés a base? Or was it to unify the Afghan nation, to bring human rights to the hills of Tora Bora, and democracy to the Panjshir valley? Was it to make Afghan schools safe for girls? To bring women into legislative chambers? To make the streets of Kandahar safe for LGBTQ+ pride parades?²⁵ All of these appeared to be America’s objectives at varying times, as stated by different officials. The ill-defined mission led to failure and an unwinnable conundrum for those charged with its execution.

America’s failure to accomplish its fluid and elusive objectives in Afghanistan, which provided the Taliban with an opportunity to conduct and win a hybrid war, was not due to the presence of a mighty enemy in the field, or to the lack of resources, let alone a lack of war-fighting experience. The failure was due to shortcomings of U.S. policies themselves: “The inconsistencies, contradictions, gaps, and poor policy implementations of various U.S. administration policies that have entrenched the nation in prolonged wars against terrorism and undercut the prospects of ending the conflicts responsibly over the last two decades”.²⁶

GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a realist perspective, a rational reason for the long and costly U.S. military and political engagement in Afghanistan could have been the need to maintain a foothold in Central Asia and control future pipelines connecting the oil and gas rich Caspian Basin to the Indian Ocean. To that end, however, rather than establish and keep propping up a corrupt and dysfunctional central authority in Kabul, it would have been necessary to make a series of local agreements with the tribal leaders, especially in the north of the country. It would have meant spreading the rich cake of U.S. taxpayer largesse more evenly, and refraining from flying the rainbow flag from the roof of the U.S. Embassy, most recently last June. After all, in the years before 9/11 Washington was happy to keep quiet about Taliban founder Mullah Omar’s massive violations of human rights while it seemed that a pipeline deal was still possible.

China is now likely to take over that unfinished job in pursuit of the strategic objective of strengthening its overland connection to the Middle East. It is also vitally interested in having a stable security situation along the developing transport and pipeline China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connects China’s south-western border in the Himalayas with the Pakistani port of Gwadar on the Gulf of Oman. (U.S. efforts to sabotage it will fail.)²⁷ This link bypasses the maritime choke point in the Straits of Malacca and provides China with long-term access to a deep seaport well to the east of the Strait of Hormuz.

²⁵ See e.g. Roth, B. F. “U.S. Military Holds LGBT Pride Event In Kandahar, Afghanistan”. KPBS, June 28, 2013. <https://www.kpbs.org/news/military/2013/06/28/military-lgbt-pride-kandahar-afghanistan-video>, Accessed on 14 November 2021.

²⁶ Azizian, N. “Easier to Get into War Than to Get Out: The Case of Afghanistan”. Harvard Kennedy School: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, August 2021. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/easier-get-war-get-out-case-afghanistan>, Accessed on 14 November 2021.

²⁷ See e.g. “US sabotaging China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Imran Khan’s aide,” Press Trust of India, Last Updated on October 24, 2021. https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/us-sabotaging-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-pakistan-pm-s-aide-121102400262_1.html, Accessed on 15 November 2021.

The Taliban-2 government will almost certainly rely on China both because it is the only likely source of substantial funding and because its Pakistani mentors are keen to see it happen. In return, the Taliban has announced that it would cut all links to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement in Xinjiang, a minor jihadist outlet which is merely an irritant to the Chinese. It is nevertheless an important symbolic gesture for the new government in Kabul.

One potential weakness of the developing Chinese position is that it has to rely on the presumed pragmatism of the Taliban leadership, which should not be taken for granted in perpetuity. Beijing is aware, of course, that the Taliban is a millenarian Islamic movement, which does not regard permanent peace with the infidel as legitimate or even possible. For the time being, however, the benefits of geopolitical expansion outweigh the risks. The Chinese will rely heavily on Pakistan to keep the Taliban in check, and both sides have a vested long-term interest in keeping India locked out of Central Asia. It is by no means certain, however, that this will make India more inclined than before to become the south-western pivot in a U.S.-led effort to contain China in the Indo-Pacific. Modi is well aware that the Americans cannot help him if the Chinese increase the pressure along the disputed Himalayan border.

Afghanistan is now reverting to its usual state of Islamist unpleasantness. That melancholy yet predictable fact will not affect the rest of the world much. The return to the strictures of a Sharia-based society was certain after the August 2021 debacle. It was a testimony to the failure of every level of the U.S. establishment – politicians, generals, intelligence agencies, think-tank analysts, diplomats, journalists – to understand the workings of a traditional Muslim society. To wit, the surrender of Afghanistan’s National Army – lavishly armed, equipped, and trained by the U.S. for years, to the tune of almost a hundred billion dollars – had been quietly negotiated and arranged under the noses of those same American officials who kept telling us that Kabul would be no Saigon, and that Ashraf Ghani’s regime would not be in any danger of collapsing in the immediate aftermath of American withdrawal.

CONCLUSION

Some events can change not just the balance of causal forces operating, but “the very logic of their consequences”.²⁸ They can bring about such historical changes “in part by transforming the very cultural categories that shape and constrain human action”. This is an important insight. Over two decades after 9/11, and following the triumph of jihadist hybrid warfare in Afghanistan, the task of America defining what it really stands for in today’s world – Sun Tzu’s “knowing thyself” – increasingly appears as a prerequisite to the West’s civilizational survival. Restraining the ongoing march of irrational, wantonly destructive “wokedom” at home is the non-negotiable precondition of defeating jihad abroad.

The end-game in Kabul in August 2021 illustrates a yawning and growing gap between the real world and the aspiration of a segment of America’s coastal elites to promote a “rules-based global order” which includes a host of bizarre and – especially to the Muslim world – repulsive social norms (exemplified by the rainbow flag on the roof of the U.S. embassy in Kabul a month before the collapse). It would be in the American interest, and to

²⁸ On the significance of events as the building blocks of history, see Sewell, W. H. Jr. “Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation”. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

the benefit of the rest of the world, that this gap be recognized, and if possible pragmatically bridged, before the U.S. considers another intervention in a far-away country of which we know little.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amies, N. “Paying for peace”. *DW*, 10. 19. 2019. <https://www.dw.com/en/allegations-of-taliban-bribery-stoke-debate-on-afghan-engagement/a-4804047>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.
- Azizian, N. “Easier to Get into War Than to Get Out: The Case of Afghanistan”. Harvard Kennedy School: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, August 2021. <https://www.belfer-center.org/publication/easier-get-war-get-out-case-afghanistan>, Accessed on 14 November 2021.
- Baker, F. W., III. “McChrystal notes progress in Afghanistan”. U.S. Central Command news, February 5, 2010. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/883991/mcchrystal-notes-progress-in-afghanistan>, Accessed on 15 February 2021.
- Bezhan, F. “Ethnic Minorities Are Fueling the Taliban’s Expansion in Afghanistan”. *Foreign Policy*, June 15, 2016. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/15/ethnic-minorities-are-fueling-the-talibans-expansion-in-afghanistan>, Accessed on 2 November 2021.
- Callahan, M. “Lying by Bush and Obama over Afghanistan is this era’s Pentagon Papers”. *The New York Post*, December 14, 2019. <https://nypost.com/2019/12/14/lying-by-bush-and-obama-over-afghanistan-is-this-eras-pentagon-papers>, Accessed on 2 November 2021.
- Coll, S. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. London: Penguin Books, 2004.
- “Germans in the Taliban Stalingrad – Fighting the Kunduz Insurgency”. In Steinberg G. *German Jihad: On the Internationalization of Islamist Terrorism*. New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2013. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.7312/stei15992-012/pdf>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.
- Glasser, J. “Special Inspector General for Afghanistan: ‘The American People Have Constantly Been Lied To’”. *CATO Institute*, December 9, 2019. <https://www.cato.org/blog/special-inspector-general-afghanistan-american-people-have-constantly-been-lied>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.
- Jackson, E. “Sun Tzu’s 31 Best Pieces Of Leadership Advice”. *Forbes*, May 23, 2014. www.forbes.com/sites/ericjackson/2014/05/23/sun-tzus-33-best-pieces-of-leadership-advice/?sh=61e459f95e5e, Accessed on 14 November 2021.
- Jensen, B. “How the Taliban did it: Inside the ‘operational art’ of its military victory”. *New Atlanticist*, August 15, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-the-taliban-did-it-inside-the-operational-art-of-its-military-victory>, Accessed on 2 November 2021.
- Matthews, T. “Napoleonic Era Newspaper Collection”. *Historic Newspapers*. Last updated on 14 December 2021. <https://www.historic-newspapers.co.uk/blog/napoleonic-era-newspaper-collection>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.
- Mukhopadhyaya, G. “In Afghanistan’s Collapse, a Win for Pakistan’s 20-Year Long Covert, Hybrid War”. <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/afghanistan-collapse-win-for-pakistan-20-year-long-covert-hybrid-war-4205126.html>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.
- NATO Joint Press Conference with General Dan McNeill, Commander of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and Ambassador Daan Everts, NATO Senior Civilian Representative. <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2007/s070912a.html>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.

- “Number of fatalities among Western coalition soldiers involved in the execution of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001 to 2021”. *Statista*. Last updated on Sept 30, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262894/western-coalition-soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.
- O’Hanlon, M. E. “5,000 Troops for 5 years: A no drama approach to Afghanistan for the next US president”. <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/5000-troops-for-5-years-a-no-drama-approach-to-afghanistan-for-the-next-us-president>, Accessed on 8 November 2021.
- “Petraeus positive about US Afghanistan progress”. *BBC News*, March 15, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-12748852>, Accessed on 15 November 2021.
- Roston, A. and Bose N. “Exclusive: Before Afghan collapse, Biden pressed Ghani to ‘change perception’”. *Reuters*, August 31, 2011. <https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-call-before-afghan-collapse-biden-pressed-ghani-change-perception-2021-08-31>, Accessed on 14 November 2021.
- Roth, B. F. “U.S. Military Holds LGBT Pride Event In Kandahar, Afghanistan”. *KPBS*, June 28, 2013. <https://www.kpbs.org/news/military/2013/06/28/military-lgbt-pride-kandahar-afghanistan-video>, Accessed on 14 November 2021.
- Sewell, W. H. Jr. *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Shephard, A. “Why the Media Is Ignoring the Afghanistan Papers?” *The New Republic*, December 13, 2019. <https://newrepublic.com/article/155977/media-ignoring-afghanistan-papers>, Accessed on 14 November 2021.
- Steward, J. *On Afghanistan’s Plains: The Story of Britain’s Afghan Wars*. London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 2011.
- Szoldra, P. “Here’s how top military leaders have described ‘progress’ in Afghanistan”. *Task & Purpose* online, August 23, 2019. <https://taskandpurpose.com/code-red-news/us-military-progress-afghanistan>, Accessed on 14 November 2021.
- “US sabotaging China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Imran Khan’s aide,” Press Trust of India, Last Updated on October 24, 2021. https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/us-sabotaging-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-pakistan-pm-s-aide-121102400262_1.html, Accessed on 15 November 2021.
- Welch, D. *Persuading the People: British Propaganda in World War II*. London: British Library Publishing, 2016.
- Whitlock, C. “The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War”. *The Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.
- Whitlock, C. *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021.