

The US Lost in Afghanistan. But US Imperialism Isn't Going Anywhere

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The United States suffered grave losses in Iraq and Afghanistan, just as it did in Vietnam. But we shouldn't mistake revisions of US military strategy after calamitous failures for a turn away from US imperialist ambitions.

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The debacle of the US-sponsored Afghan puppet government has inspired countless obituaries of American imperial might. These obituaries are premature.

The antiwar movement should be under no illusion that the era of US imperialist warfare has come to an end with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. What is taking place is no more than a reload and update of the lessons that were drawn from Vietnam, with a view to achieve smarter management and higher cost-effectiveness of US military engagements — not back away from the global dominance of US imperial power.

The United States' defeat in Vietnam, concluded by the withdrawal of US troops in 1973, led to a major revision in military strategy that prepared the United States for the wars of the digital age. The domestic impact of Vietnam was enormous, especially the massive aversion to war that developed among the US population, particularly the youth. Imperialist warmongers called it "Vietnam syndrome," seeing a disease in what was actually a very healthy public wariness toward the power elite's inclination to launch imperial expeditions.

After Vietnam, it became imperative to avoid another protracted war ending in failure against a backdrop of antiwar mobilization at home. The United States' post-Vietnam strategy was honed during the Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush years, but it was largely disregarded in the era after 9/11, with the result that the United States repeated many of the same mistakes in George W. Bush's "war on terror."

Now Joe Biden is signaling a return to the post-Vietnam strategy. It may mean fewer ground troops, but don't mistake that for the end of US imperial aggression.

A Revolution in Military Affairs

Post-Vietnam military strategy was framed by two factors: the termination of the draft in 1973, and

the “revolution in military affairs” during the Reagan and Bush Sr years.

The end of conscription and the shift to an all-volunteer professional army meant a massive reduction in personnel. In proportion to the American population, active-duty personnel are today less than half what they were in 1973 (though they are still the fourth-largest body of troops in the world, after China, India, and North Korea). Ronald Reagan tried to compensate for the military’s reduction in size with the most impressive surge in military expenditure in the absence of war that the United States ever witnessed. Military spending peaked at 7 percent of the GDP during Reagan’s second mandate. The strategic aim of this massive expenditure was to research, develop, and produce a new generation of sophisticated weapons that would highly increase the “destructivity” of US weaponry to compensate for the reduction in US personnel.

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This “revolution in military affairs” went along with a new military doctrine elaborated during those years. Its main designers included Dick Cheney and Colin Powell, two officials in the Reagan and Bush Sr administrations who would later play a leading role in the advent of the post-9/11 wars. The core of the new doctrine was that the United States should avoid the kind of gradual engagement, called “escalation,” that had gotten it bogged down in a politically costly, protracted war in Vietnam. Instead, it should only wage time-limited wars from a position of “overwhelming superiority” after having built up the necessary force near the theater of operations. In doing so, it should aim at zero deaths among US personnel by minimizing the involvement of troops in clashes on the ground and resorting instead to remote warfare, accompanied with light-footprint ground operations when necessary.

The 1991 war against Iraq in reaction to its invasion of neighboring Kuwait was the United States’ first large-scale war since Vietnam, and it was a textbook illustration of the post-Vietnam doctrine. The United States waited several months until it built up an impressive military force in the proximity of Iraq and Kuwait. It then launched a devastating bombing campaign that targeted not only Iraqi troops but also Iraq’s civilian infrastructure — a fact that, combined with the severe embargo inflicted upon Iraq for twelve years after the war, led to a death toll of genocidal proportions (an excess mortality of ninety thousand per year, according to UN figures). The fighting itself lasted less than six weeks.

It is amusing to read in hindsight Colin Powell’s [praise of the 1991 Iraq war](#), knowing the ignominious role he was later to play, as George W. Bush’s secretary of state, in justifying the occupation of Iraq:

The Gulf War was a limited-objective war. If it had not been, we would be ruling Baghdad today — at unpardonable expense in terms of money, lives lost and ruined regional relationships. . . . [W]e can examine the assertion of those who have asked why President Bush did not order our forces on to Baghdad after we had driven the Iraqi army out of Kuwait. . . . Would it have been worth the inevitable follow-up: major occupation forces in Iraq for years to come and a very expensive and complex American

proconsulship in Baghdad? Fortunately for America, reasonable people at the time thought not.

Lessons Learned and Unlearned

The strategic legacy of the Reagan and Bush Sr era was completely disregarded and overturned under George W. Bush, with the paradoxical participation of two of its designers: Powell himself and Cheney.

The new administration, until the middle of George W. Bush's second term, acted in the neoconservative-infused spirit of the Project for the New American Century, the warmongering think tank to which most of the administration's prominent members belonged. The September 11, 2001, attacks provided a golden opportunity for this group to unleash their hubris.

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Their primary target was Iraq, which Donald Rumsfeld, as secretary of defense, wanted to invade straightaway after the attacks. The option of starting with Afghanistan, defended by Powell for the obvious political reason that it was Al-Qaeda's base, eventually prevailed.

The rationale for the bulk of the war effort launched in the wake of 9/11 had little to do with even the "war on terror" that it used as a banner. It was a war for a new American century, a war for the expansion and consolidation of US imperial reach.

Beyond the suppression of Al-Qaeda's base there, Afghanistan was, above all, an opportunity to get hold of a strategic military position in Central Asia. Extended by way of military facilities in neighboring former Soviet Republics, it was a position conveniently located between Russia's European mainland and China, the two potential "peer competitors" against whom [US post-Cold War military planning](#) had been designed.

For Iraq, the interests were much more obvious: a country with huge oil reserves located in the heart of the highly prized Gulf region. Domination of the region had been a post-Cold War priority of Washington for both the strategic importance of controlling access to its hydrocarbon resources and the economic importance of securing the flow of its petrodollars in purchasing US weaponry as well as US Treasury bonds.

The difference between the strategic interests in Afghanistan and Iraq determined two quite different types of war. The war in Afghanistan started in a way that seemed to be still in conformity with post-Vietnam lessons: in 2002, the first year of the US war in Afghanistan, [only 9,700 US troops](#) were deployed in that country (as well as 4,800 other foreign allied troops). Washington secured base sites and mostly relied on local anti-Taliban fighters of the Northern Alliance to fight the Taliban on the ground.

The United States disregarded one key post-Vietnam lesson, however, by pursuing a goal of state-building. This inevitably involved an “escalation” in trying to secure control of the country by the puppet government that the United States installed in Kabul. Still, the number of US troops deployed in Afghanistan was less than twenty-five thousand in 2007, six years after the beginning of operations.

Compare this to the [number of troops deployed in Iraq](#) from the onset: close to 142,000 in 2003, a level that was maintained more or less until Barack Obama’s first year as president, after which the numbers decreased over the next two years in order to complete the withdrawal scheduled for the end of 2011.

Washington was in fact hardly capable of sending significantly more troops into Iraq: the Pentagon had warned Rumsfeld that controlling Iraq would require no less than double the numbers that were sent there in 2003 — an effort that would have dangerously stretched US military capabilities and been unsustainable beyond a short period. But the Bush administration’s tenors stubbornly stuck to the view that [US troops were going to be “greeted as liberators” by most Iraqis](#).

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This extreme level of self-delusion and wishful thinking led them to conduct the occupation of Iraq in full violation of the post-Vietnam lessons: Powell’s 1992 description of “major occupation forces in Iraq for years to come and a very expensive and complex American proconsulship in Baghdad” reads like an accurate description of what happened after the 2003 invasion.

Iraq quickly turned into a quagmire for US troops. Insurgents resorted extensively to suicide attacks and acted mainly among a sympathetic Arab Sunni population. The quagmire morphed into a disaster in 2006, when US occupation troops found themselves involved in a sectarian civil war.

The failure in Iraq had become blatant, and the US ruling class blew the whistle. A bipartisan commission of Congress devised an exit strategy based on a radical change of tactics, and Rumsfeld was forced to resign.

The “surge,” as it was called, consisted of a temporary sharp increase in US troops (up to 157,800 in 2008) to deal Al-Qaeda a heavy blow in tandem with Arab Sunni tribes, whose allegiance was bought for this purpose. Since this coincided with the sectarian strife, the perception of US troops as acting in favor of the Arab Shia majority gave way to a view of them as a shield for the Arab Sunni minority. This only increased pressure by the dominant Iran-backed Shia forces to bring the presence of US troops to an end. Thus, although the “surge” proved successful in defeating and marginalizing Al-Qaeda (meanwhile renamed Islamic State of Iraq), it was no longer possible for Washington to maintain its combat presence in that country.

In 2008, Bush made an agreement with Iraq’s pro-Iran government (itself the result of elections imposed upon the occupier by a massive Shia mobilization in the second year of occupation): US troops would evacuate Iraq’s cities the year after and evacuate the whole country by the end of 2011. Proud of his opposition to the occupation of Iraq in 2003, Obama gladly fulfilled that

commitment. But there was no mistaking it: the United States had suffered a new heavy defeat.

Twin Debacles in Afghanistan and Iraq

The US defeat in Iraq had huge consequences. It powerfully revived the “Vietnam syndrome” and hugely affected Washington’s “credibility.” Rather than deterring its opponents, the United States had actually emboldened them, especially in the Middle East: Iran vastly expanded its regional military involvement after 2011; the Islamic State of Iraq, turned Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), rebuilt itself in Syria and from there invaded a huge part of Iraq’s territory in 2014; and Russia intervened massively in Syria starting in 2015.

Afghanistan had developed into a Hobbesian war-of-all-against-all involving three camps: the Kabul government backed by US forces, the Taliban, and IS-K.

Compared to that, the defeat in Afghanistan is much less important, despite being much more spectacular. Obama thought that he could extricate the United States from that country with a remake of the Iraqi “surge.” He more than doubled the number of US troops in his first year as president to 68,000, bringing it to a peak of 90,000 in 2010–2011. He then brought it down from 60,000 in 2013 to 29,000 in 2014, after having decided in 2013 that US troops would no longer engage in combat operations and would restrict themselves to assisting the US-fostered Afghan governmental forces.

In parallel, his administration started talks with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar’s capital. The next year, Obama announced a timetable for the withdrawal of most US troops by the end of 2016. In 2015 and 2016, there were no more than 7,000 US troops left in Afghanistan.

The factor that brought the US military back to Iraq and into Syria in 2014 is the same that prolonged the US involvement in Afghanistan beyond 2016: the Islamic State, whose Central Asian franchise, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K), emerged in Afghanistan. In the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, Obama had seen the war on terror’s “mission accomplished,” permitting a withdrawal from Afghanistan without losing face. The surge of IS-K canceled that pretense.

This explains the otherwise incomprehensible decision of Donald Trump to increase again the number of US troops in Afghanistan, doubling it to 14,000 during the first two years of his mandate, despite his “isolationist” rhetoric and repeated pledges to end ongoing US wars. That was Trump’s “surge” after Obama’s, with the aim of securing conditions for a final troop withdrawal. He then reduced the number of US troops back to 8,500 in 2019, while intensifying the Doha talks with the Taliban.

After concluding an agreement with the latter in February 2020, Trump brought the number of US troops further down with a pledge to complete their withdrawal by May 1, 2021. As part of this agreement, he forced the Kabul puppet government to release 5,000 prisoners, as demanded by the Taliban — a major boost to them. In November, the outgoing Trump administration decided to further reduce the number of US troops in Afghanistan to the bare minimum of only 2,500 on the eve of ceding the White House to Biden in January 2021.

Meanwhile, IS-K had increasingly become a major focus of US attention in Afghanistan. When Trump, three months after his inauguration, dropped “[the mother of all bombs](#)” (the United States’ most powerful non-nuclear bomb) in Afghanistan, it wasn’t against the Taliban but against IS-K. Afghanistan had developed into a Hobbesian war-of-all-against-all involving three camps: the Kabul government backed by US forces, the Taliban, and IS-K. In this catch-22 situation, the United States even [executed strikes in support of the Taliban’s fight against IS-K](#). This was reflected in the recent allusion of the Trump-nominated chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley, to future [coordination between the United States and the Taliban](#) for strikes in Afghanistan against IS-K or similar groups.

On the other hand, the gradual retreat of US troops from Afghanistan proved that the US-fostered Afghan forces were no match for the Taliban. As in 1996 when they first took over, it wasn’t difficult for the Taliban to contrast their puritanism with their rivals’ corruption. Between 1992 and 1996, Afghanistan had been ruled by mostly corrupt warlords busy fighting among themselves. The Kabul government that the Bush administration entrusted Hamid Karzai to form was likewise highly corrupt, and under a foreign thumb, moreover. A government with such little credit [can’t motivate troops](#) to risk their lives enough to keep it in power.

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The situation created in Kabul by the collapse of the Afghan government was compared to Saigon in 1975, with its infamous images of the evacuation from the US embassy by helicopter. But the South Vietnamese puppet regime actually had more roots of its own than the Kabul government, as it was the continuation of a regime whose existence preceded the 1965 US intervention. The South Vietnam regime resisted for two years after the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973 against a formidable people’s army that the United States had not been able to subdue with more than half a million troops — an enemy that had, at that point, more foreign official and popular support than the Taliban ever did.

The closest situation to the debacle of the Kabul government forces was the debacle of the US-built, -trained, and -armed Iraqi governmental forces in the face of ISIS’s offensive in the summer of 2014. The Nouri al-Maliki government in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq was as corrupt as Kabul’s in addition to its sectarian Shia character: not only were Arab Sunni soldiers not willing to risk their lives fighting against the anti-Shia ISIS, but Shia soldiers, too, were not willing to risk theirs under a corrupt leadership and in defense of the Sunni-majority areas targeted by ISIS. Nothing resembles the Taliban’s recent parade with US equipment seized from the Kabul government’s forces more than ISIS’s parade with similar equipment seized from routed Iraqi troops in 2014.

The Follies of US Empire, Repeated

This is the background against which Joe Biden decided to respect the agreement concluded by his predecessor, only extending its deadline by four months until the end of August. He couldn’t hide his contempt for Washington’s Afghan allies, putting all the blame on them, as well as his implicit

contempt for Afghans in general and his reluctance at the prospect of allowing more of them to [seek refuge in the United States](#). From the start, Afghan women, once hypocritically used as a convenient pretext to justify the perpetuation of US intervention in Afghanistan, have actually been [victims of the Taliban as much as of the US government](#).

But Biden spoke the truth when he said, in his August 31 [allocution](#), “We faced one of two choices: Follow the agreement of the previous administration and extend it to have . . . more time for people to get out; or send in thousands of more troops and escalate the war.” His use of the Vietnam-related term “escalate” was no accident. Biden’s whole speech was based on the post-Vietnam strategic lessons. The follies of the George W. Bush administration in both Iraq and Afghanistan cruelly showed the US empire how costly it was to ignore them.

The post-Vietnam strategic revision was not meant to inaugurate a pacifist new era in US global policy. It was only meant to adjust US imperialist expeditions to what is militarily most effective and politically least costly.

This brings us to a final and crucial point: the post-Vietnam strategic revision was not meant to inaugurate a pacifist new era in US global policy. It was only meant to adjust US imperialist expeditions to what is militarily most effective and politically least costly.

Barack Obama conformed to post-Vietnam rules in his [very extensive resort](#) (much more than George W. Bush) to remote warfare in the form of drones. Trump treaded the same path, and, on top of it, he made the [use of drones more unaccountable](#). Remarkably, both Trump and Biden inaugurated their presidency with long-distance missile strikes in Syria to show their willingness to engage in remote uses of force.

This is, indeed, what Biden pledged in his above-quoted allocution:

We will maintain the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and other countries. We just don’t need to fight a ground war to do it. We have what’s called over-the-horizon capabilities, which means we can strike terrorists and targets without American boots on the ground — or very few, if needed.

More than ever, this is what US imperial actions will consist of in the future: strikes on various scales, from drone individual assassinations to pinpoint missile or air strikes, as a regular pattern, along with a permanent readiness to exert “overwhelming superiority” in destroying a country as Iraq was destroyed in 1991 — without getting involved in state-building.

With the “Vietnam syndrome” reloaded, there is a strong mistrust against large-scale foreign expeditions among the US public, [including the US military](#). But there is much less attention and action on the part of the antiwar movement when it comes to the rampant massacres perpetrated by the United States through drones and pinpoint strikes. The antiwar movement must consider such actions for what they plainly are: acts of war — and mobilize against their continuation as well as against more massive imperialist expeditions.

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 09.04.2021:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/09/afghanistan-iraq-war-vietnam-withdrawal-terror>

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