



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY



INFORMATION SERIES

HON. DAVID J. TRACHTENBERG, *Editor*
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Issue No. 502

September 11, 2021

Deterrence Implications of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

David J. Trachtenberg

David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy and former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.



The author at the Pentagon days after the September 11, 2001 attacks



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Twenty years ago, I was sitting in my Capitol Hill office when a colleague rushed in. “Turn on your TV,” he said. “You have to see this.” The attack on America had begun.

Over the next few hours, we were evacuated from the Capitol grounds as confusion reigned over which target might be the terrorists’ next. Weeks earlier, I had been offered a job as the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, but my transition from a House staffer to a Pentagon official was delayed. In retrospect, the delay was propitious, as the Pentagon absorbed the next terrorist blow. Three days after I arrived at the Pentagon for my new assignment in October 2001, Operation Enduring Freedom—the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan—began.

The events of twenty years ago left an indelible mark on me and many of my generation. Twenty years later, the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the ignominious U.S. withdrawal are bitter pills to swallow. Not simply because they reflect a failure of American leadership but because the U.S. withdrawal will likely have negative and long-lasting repercussions for U.S. credibility and deterrence well into the future.

There is no question that the U.S. military performed with exemplary skill and bravery under dangerous circumstances in the final weeks of the Afghan withdrawal. And the thirteen valorous American service personnel who lost their lives helping others to escape Taliban oppression in those final days must never be forgotten. Also never to be forgotten are the haunting images of desperate Afghan refugees plunging to their deaths from an airborne C-17 while seeking frantically to escape Taliban rule—an iconic image eerily reminiscent of those who tragically jumped to their death from the World Trade Center as the buildings burned and collapsed around them. The previously unimaginable reality is that hundreds of Americans and other foreign nationals who supported the United States effort in Afghanistan are still stranded in a country now controlled by the very people the United States removed 20 years earlier. Around the world, allies have criticized and enemies have celebrated the apparent U.S. weakness in allowing this reality to emerge.

President Biden has blamed the Afghan army for an unwillingness to fight, despite the fact that Afghan forces suffered more casualties in fighting the Taliban than anyone. He blamed Americans remaining in country for failing to leave, though many who wanted to leave were unable to reach the Kabul airport with their families safely. And he blamed his predecessor for negotiating a deal with the Taliban, despite statements by Trump Administration officials that the February 2020 deal was conditions-based and had repeatedly been violated by the Taliban. Indeed, no American had died in Afghanistan since the 2020 agreement was signed, U.S. forces there were at an historic low, and their mission was to support the Afghan National Army—not to engage in fighting a civil war.



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There is no question that the long-term effects of this debacle will reverberate for years to come. And its impact on U.S. deterrence of adversaries and assurance of allies will be felt well beyond Afghanistan's regional borders.

U.S. allies and coalition partners have looked aghast at America's retreat, complaining that they were not consulted about the U.S. withdrawal and that their protestations fell on deaf ears. The "special relationship" with America's strongest and most reliable ally, Great Britain, has been shaken, with former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair calling President Biden's decision "tragic, dangerous, and unnecessary" and his rhetoric of ending America's "forever wars," "imbecilic."¹ As one French parliamentarian put it: "We thought America was back, while in fact, America withdraws."² French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire declared, "Let's open our eyes, we are facing threats and we cannot rely anymore on the protection of the United States."³ The chairman of the foreign relations committee in the German Bundestag called the U.S. withdrawal "a serious and far-reaching miscalculation [that]...does fundamental damage to the political and moral credibility of the West."⁴ A candidate running to succeed Chancellor Angela Merkel called the U.S. action "the greatest debacle that NATO has experienced since its foundation."⁵ Czech President Milos Zeman said that "by withdrawing from Afghanistan, the Americans have lost their status of global leader."⁶ Other allies are reportedly "thinking more about a future untethered to the [United States]."⁷ Indeed, the European Union reportedly is now considering creating its own military rapid reaction force that could be deployed independent of the U.S.-led NATO alliance.⁸

The transatlantic relationship is now under extraordinary stress. While it is true that political relations with European allies were strained under the Trump Administration, European defense spending increased substantially as a result of Trump's insistence that NATO do more in its own defense.⁹ Burden sharing became more of a reality than a catchphrase under Trump. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated in 2019, "The accumulated increase in defense spending by the end of 2024 will be 400 billion U.S. dollars. This is unprecedented progress."¹⁰

Yet, the Afghanistan debacle now threatens not only to upend America's leadership role in the Western alliance, but to undermine the credibility of its deterrence commitments—including the extended deterrent guarantees the United States provides to allies and partners abroad. The consequences of this heighten, not lessen, the risk of conflict. This may be a legacy of the precipitous retreat from Afghanistan.

With the reemergence of great power competition, American attention is properly focused on China as the "pacing threat" to U.S. security and interests. Yet, as a result of our Afghanistan withdrawal, this threat has arguably increased as our deterrent credibility has waned. Indeed, China is now openly threatening Taiwan with war, arguing that Afghanistan shows the United States is unlikely to come to the island's defense. A recent editorial in the Chinese Communist



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Party's official propaganda organ, *Global Times*, noted, "Once a cross-Straits war breaks out while the mainland seizes the island with forces, the US would have to have a much greater determination than it had for Afghanistan, Syria, and Vietnam if it wants to interfere.... Washington [will] pay a huge price.... From what happened in Afghanistan, [Taiwan] should perceive that once a war breaks out in the Straits, the island's defense will collapse in hours and the US military won't come to help."¹¹ The paper's editors warned that Taiwan "should start now to mobilize people for war."¹² As the editor of *Global Times* stated, "Whoever dares to cross China's redline on the Taiwan question is seeking its own death."¹³

Instead of the United States seeking to strengthen deterrence of a Chinese attack on Taiwan, the Chinese leadership has apparently processed the U.S. defeat in Afghanistan as an opportunity to enhance its own deterrence of U.S. involvement in any conflict involving Taiwan. To say this likely increases the risk of escalation and conflict is an understatement.

Prior to the U.S. departure from Kabul, Japanese officials had expressed solidarity with the United States in its commitment to defend Taiwan. As Japan's Defense Minister recently commented, "The defense stability of Taiwan is very important, not just for Japan's security, but for the stability of the world as well."¹⁴ China's reaction was to threaten Japan with nuclear attack: "When we liberate Taiwan, if Japan dares to intervene by force, even if it only deploys one soldier, one plane and one ship, we will not only return reciprocal fire but also start a full-scale war against Japan. We will use nuclear bombs first."¹⁵

China views the United States as a power in decline, noting that Afghanistan "has dealt a heavy blow to the credibility and reliability of the U.S."¹⁶ Is it reasonable to believe that China will be less belligerent in its threats and more cautious in its actions now?

The United States has given security assurances to more than 30 other countries, including extending its "nuclear umbrella" of protection to others. While some have questioned whether the United States would escalate to nuclear conflict to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of an ally, those assurances are increasingly frayed in light of the Afghanistan departure. In the mid-1990s, Chinese general Xiong Guangkai reportedly questioned the credibility of U.S. security assurances to Taiwan, saying that after watching U.S. actions in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia, Americans "don't have the will" to defend Taiwan, stating, "You [Americans] care a lot more about Los Angeles than Taipei."¹⁷ Is there any reason for China to believe that American will has been strengthened after Afghanistan?

To friends, America's Afghanistan moment is a warning. To enemies, it is an opportunity. Russia, Iran, and others who may wish the United States ill can only wonder whether the United States is indeed, as Mao Tse-Tung famously proclaimed, a "paper tiger."¹⁸ Indeed, the head of the Lithuanian Armed Forces' Strategic Communications Department has cited an



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active campaign in the wake of the Afghanistan withdrawal to convince his countrymen that the United States is no longer a reliable security partner.¹⁹

The potential negative implications of America's departure from Afghanistan for Western security and U.S. credibility are stark and will likely take years, if not decades, to overcome. In the meantime, the United States is likely to be challenged more aggressively on multiple fronts by adversaries who see weakness, a lack of American resolve, and — like sharks that smell blood in the water — an opportunity to strike out against U.S. interests, as well as by allies and friends who see themselves as more vulnerable and less certain of American security guarantees.

There are those who believe this to be an overly pessimistic assessment and that the widespread negative reaction to the chaotic U.S. departure from Afghanistan will only strengthen American determination and commitment to prove the naysayers wrong. But deterrence depends on what others believe, not on what we think they should believe, and it is difficult to imagine that others see Afghanistan as a shining example of U.S. resolve.

This is the dangerous legacy of the withdrawal from Afghanistan; a legacy that need not have been. It will take a prolonged and concerted effort — backed by an unwavering commitment to strengthen U.S. defenses — to restore American leadership and credibility in an increasingly dangerous and uncertain world. Let us hope we will recognize the need and find the wisdom to do so.

¹ George Bowden & Lauren Turner, "Afghanistan: Tony Blair says withdrawal was driven by imbecilic slogan," *BBC News*, August 22, 2021, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-58295384>.

² Rebecca Klapper, "U.K., French, German Leaders Blast Biden Over Afghanistan: 'We Thought America Was Back'," *Newsweek*, August 19, 2021, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/uk-french-german-leaders-blast-biden-over-afghanistan-we-thought-america-was-back-1621228>.

³ "Afghanistan a wake-up call for Europe on defence, leadership — France," *Reuters*, September 4, 2021, available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/afghanistan-wake-up-call-europe-defence-leadership-france-2021-09-04/>.

⁴ Linda Qiu, "FACT CHECK: Biden's Inaccurate Claims in Defending Afghanistan Withdrawal," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2021, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/20/us/politics/biden-afghanistan-fact-check.html>.

⁵ Guy Taylor, "Wary Europe looks to its own defenses after U.S. Afghan debacle," *The Washington Times*, September 8, 2021, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/sep/8/wary-europe-looks-its-own-defenses-after-us-afghan/>.

⁶ Klapper, op. cit.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Taylor, op. cit.



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⁹ David Reid, “Europe’s defense spending nears \$300 billion as experts say Trump’s pressure is paying off,” CNBC, October 31, 2019, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/01/european-defense-spending-to-hit-300-billion-by-2021-analysts-say.html>.

¹⁰ Reuters Staff, “NATO moves towards spending goal sought by Trump, Spain lags,” *Reuters*, November 29, 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-summit-stoltenberg/nato-moves-towards-spending-goal-sought-by-trump-spain-lags-idUSKBN1Y31UD>.

¹¹ “Afghan abandonment a lesson for Taiwan’s DPP: Global Times editorial,” *Global Times*, August 16, 2021, available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231636.shtml>.

¹² “Why the US will abandon island of Taiwan eventually: Global Times editorial,” *Global Times*, August 18, 2021, available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231877.shtml>.

¹³ Hu Xijin, “The better China is prepared for war, the more it can crush US-DPP collusion,” *Global Times*, August 28, 2021, available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1232679.shtml>.

¹⁴ Eryk Bagshaw, “Japan calls on Australia to lead resistance to China’s regional sway,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 12, 2021, available at <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/japan-calls-on-australia-to-lead-resistance-to-china-s-regional-sway-20210811-p58hrr.html>.

¹⁵ Adam Cabot, “China’s Nuclear Threat Against Japan: Hybrid Warfare and the End of Minimum Deterrence,” *RealClear Defense*, August 6, 2021, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/08/06/chinas_nuclear_threat_against_japan_hybrid_warfare_and_the_end_of_minimum_deterrence_788893.html.

¹⁶ Jesse Johnson, “China trumpets U.S. decline, but Asia’s lessons from Afghan chaos hard to discern,” *The Japan Times*, August 17, 2021, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/08/17/asia-pacific/china-us-afghanistan-taiwan/>.

¹⁷ Barton Gellman, “U.S. and China Nearly Came to Blows in ‘96,” *The Washington Post*, June 21, 1998, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/06/21/us-and-china-nearly-came-to-blows-in-96/926d105f-1fd8-404c-9995-90984f86a613/>.

¹⁸ Mao Tse-Tung, “Imperialism and All Reactionaries are Paper Tigers,” *Quotations from Chairman Mao TseTung* (Peking, China: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), pp. 72-81.

¹⁹ Jacqueline Feldscher, “U.S. Afghanistan Withdrawal Becomes Ammo For Disinformation Attacks,” *DefenseOne*, September 9, 2021, available at <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2021/09/failed-us-afghanistan-withdrawal-ammo-disinformation-attacks/185229/>.

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