The Ghani Visit: Time to “Write Off” Afghanistan?
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Many aspects of the situation in Afghanistan remain fluid and uncertain. The fact remains, however, that the time has come to write off Afghanistan. There are no signs that a strong, unified, and effective Afghan government is emerging.

Most of the U.S. withdrawal will be complete by the time the U.S. celebrates the 4th of July, and there has not been one substantive meeting with the Taliban to define a future peace, Afghanistan’s future structure of government, security, or development. Afghan forces are clearly losing the war, and they are years away from being able to stand on their own. The economy – to the extent there is one – survives only through outside aid and the export of narcotics.

Brutal as it may be to say so, it is simply too late to reverse the departure of U.S. and allied forces that the Trump Administration planned as part of its original peace initiative. The U.S. has already withdrawn and closed too much. Too many forces and bases are gone, too many capabilities are lost, and the Taliban has already made too many gains.

There are no substantive peace plans as yet, and there is no schedule even for meetings to develop – much less implement – such plans. In many ways, the Biden Administration has inherited the wind. There is too little left to build upon, and there is no leader in a deeply divided Afghan central government that is strong enough for the U.S. to rely on.

Measures like keeping small numbers of U.S. military advisors in or near Afghanistan, finding some way to keep military contractors in the country, providing limited advisory and maintenance support from the outside, boosting intelligence cadres in Kabul and near Afghanistan – and all the other “forlorn hope” approaches to provide support after September 1, 2021, are token measures that at best provide a political cloak for withdrawal.

Worst case scenarios for U.S. and allied withdrawal are possibilities, but exaggerating those possibilities as part of an effort to preserve some kind of U.S. security role in Afghanistan does not mean they are probabilities. Any Taliban government that does emerge – or any post U.S. and NATO withdrawal that divides the country and ends in an ongoing ethnic and sectarian violence – will certainly have a major impact on Afghans.

But, it is far from clear that a Taliban ruled Afghanistan will become a major center of international terrorism. The Taliban’s tolerance of al-Qaeda before 9/11 has never been linked to some intent to attack the U.S., and it is unclear that any Taliban leadership that emerges in a form of power in Afghanistan will risk supporting an extremist or terrorist movement that could trigger outside sanctions, blocs to trade and transport, some form of Chinese or Russian intervention, or serious confrontation with neighboring states.

It is also unclear that the Taliban can really “win” in the sense of creating a stable future government. The Taliban has not won a victory in a major population center. If it does win its future major battles and take control of most of the country and most population centers, its ability to form a lasting, functional government is unclear – as is its ability to defeat all various factions and power brokers in the North even if it can take Kabul.

The more extreme elements of the Taliban’s ideology scarcely lend themselves itself to effective governance and development. The Taliban is the kind of revolutionary movement whose belief structure may well be too dysfunctional to stay in power. Like every so-called “communist”
revolution before it, the Taliban may well end up becoming yet another authoritarian state whose leaders cloak themselves in the ideological equivalent of a Halloween costume. Moreover, virtually none of the members of the Taliban that more or less governed the country before now are still active, and it is far from clear that it has cadres that can create a stable structure of governance or some form of functional economy – particularly without major outside aid.

A “write off” also does not mean doing nothing. The U.S. should continue to try to find some way that real peace negotiations can emerge. It should not cut off financial aid and other forms of limited outside support to the Afghan government and forces as long as it is clear that U.S. support is being used with some degree of honesty and effectiveness and that there is some chance they can help create a more successful peace or outcome after U.S. and NATO withdrawal. The U.S. should certainly offer the Afghans that risked their lives to directly support U.S. forces far more effective programs that will allow them to find sanctuary in the United States.

The U.S. should not, however, re-engage in any form of low-level combat or nation building or exaggerate the threat to the U.S. and its strategic partners posed by some form of Taliban victory unless such a threat actually emerges – in which case the post-withdrawal political, military, and financial options will be very different and be tailored to the threat that actually emerges.

The U.S. should also begin to prepare for the fact that – regardless of what happens to the central government and the Taliban – the U.S. is likely to face a post withdrawal Afghanistan that will be all too similar to what is happening in many other “fragile” developing states in the post-COVID world. The post-withdrawal Afghan Taliban government is all too likely to be incapable of controlling its own extremist factions or splinter groups and will be unable to create a unified and effective form of governance and police, internal security, and legal system.

An already crippled Afghan economy may implode in the face of the new government’s inability to manage and develop in the face of major population increases, youth unemployment, and trade imbalances. Cost, corruption, and incompetence will make outside development aid too limited and ineffective, and humanitarian aid will simply prolong problems without solving any.

Far too many Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and Latin American states also have this character – as World Bank, IMF, UN, U.S. State Department, and NGO reporting on their governance and economy make clear. The extremist and terrorist threat the U.S. has concentrated on in Afghanistan over the last two decades may only be the prelude to a future where country after county has some extremist elements, but the core problem is that the entire state is incapable of dealing with the broader causes of national instability.

A post-U.S. withdrawal government in Afghanistan may well be even less capable than the present government – and Libya, Iraq, Mali, Venezuela, Syria, Myanmar, and Somalia are only a few examples of other cases in point. As a result, the real challenge the U.S. faces is not writing off the current Afghan government over the next four months, it is rather having to deal with a fragile world over the next four years.