**The Real Nightmare: Afghanistan a Failed State**

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Bucharest, Romania: In thinking about Afghanistan, pick a date over the next four or five months. That could well be when it became absolutely clear that the Taliban were incapable of governing Afghanistan and its 38 million people. The immediate symptoms: electricity, water, food, medical supplies and money became vanishing commodities. Other signs of failure included the insurgency that started in the north, spreading to desperate Afghans who had no future and no operation under Taliban rule except revolt.

The political and military wings of the Taliban remained in direct conflict. The former knew that a “kinder, gentler” version of sharia law was vital to unblocking sanctions, monetary reserves, and restarting the flow of foreign aid without which Afghanistan could not survive as a functioning state. The latter refused to abandon long-standing tribal customs about the role of women; strict adherence to sharia law; and Pashtunwali, the code in which honour, hospitality and revenge are dominant.

The Islamic State or Daesh and its Khorasan affiliate along with other extremist groups began an increasingly bitter jihad against the Taliban. Tribal leaders and the recrudescent Northern Alliance likewise began recapturing lands once controlled by the Taliban. Neighbouring states cut off access and egress from and to Afghanistan. Initially, Iran and Pakistan tried to work with the still-nascent Taliban government in Kabul.

But bitter Shia-Sunni differences metastasised making Tehran increasingly hostile to the Taliban. In Pakistan, extremist groups supporting the Terek-i-Taliban led to a slew of terrorist attacks killing civilians and security forces inside the country. China relearned the lesson when, several years ago, after its personnel were attacked in a copper mine it acquired south of Kabul, Beijing withdrew all its people. Hence, China would decide not to re-engage in Afghanistan.

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Russia and the “stans” that bordered much of the northern tier of Afghanistan shut down border crossings fearful that Islamist terrorism would spread as rampantly as Covid-19 did. India realised that the chaos was not worth exploiting in its feud with Pakistan. And the West stood by helplessly as Afghanistan’s descent into chaos accelerated

The Biden administration was caught on the horns of an intractable dilemma. After the final retreat from Vietnam in 1975, the North Vietnamese were quite able to govern and the US assumed no responsibility. Even after the second Iraq war where the US and coalition still maintain a presence, a governing structure was in place.

But in Afghanistan, the US could choose to support the Taliban government on the humanitarian basis that cutting off assistance would unduly harm innocent Afghans. So, as it negotiated with the Taliban to end its presence in Afghanistan and the West evacuated Kabul, the White House and IMF released funds based on ensuring some degree of oversight. As the oil for food program in Iraq after the first Gulf War in 1991 empowered Saddam as he controlled where the food went, Biden was attacked by both sides of the aisle for giving support to the Taliban. Members in Congress have asked and will ask how can you deal with an enemy that you were trying to kill and now are providing relief.

The Biden administration believes and assumes that the Afghan crisis will pass. The elections are fourteen months away. If Congress passes at least an infrastructure bill and even a watered-down version of the massive $3.5 bill, that will be taken as a huge victory. Democrats running for the House should be able to use that passage to advantage in seeking re-election. Covid will be important and will dominate the news regardless of whether the pandemic diminishes or continues to spread.

As the Biden administration failed to anticipate and plan for the stunning collapse of the Afghan government and security forces, it cannot repeat that folly if or when the Taliban likewise cannot govern. That incompetence will drive that country into chaos. What should the Biden administration do now?

Because of domestic politics and the enormous backlash the Biden White House will face, largely but not entirely from Republicans, it needs a subtle strategy. The obvious choice for the lead is the UN. The administration now should begin a behind the scenes effort to build support for a UN General Assembly and Security Council resolutions that pledge funds and assistance overseen by a UN task force to address all the humanitarian aspects of the crisis. Otherwise, there will be no way of avoiding the moral consequences of this tragedy.

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