**[Lessons of a losing strategy](https://www.dawn.com/news/1608739/lessons-of-a-losing-strategy)**

IT is not just the long war in Afghanistan that the US with all its military power has been unable to win. A new and insightful book argues that Washington’s long game in the Middle East has similarly been in vain. Titled Losing the Long Game by Philip H. Gordon it critically examines America’s controversial regime change strategy and shows how disastrous it has been.

As President Joe Biden crafts his foreign policy the book’s insights offer important lessons from a region that is pivotal not just for Washington but for international peace and security. In his first [foreign policy speech](https://www.dawn.com/news/1605568) Biden set out broad contours of policy focusing on China, Russia and repairing relationships with traditional allies. He also pledged to re-engage with the international community.

However, the most significant reversal of his predecessor’s policy related to the Middle East. Biden announced an end to American support for Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen which he depicted as a “humanitarian and strategic catastrophe”. The decision to review some arms sales to Saudi Arabia and recalibrate relations may produce a chill in relations with Riyadh, which Biden criticised on several grounds in recent years. Especially if he makes good on his pledge to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal, cavalierly abandoned by president Trump. His administration has formally announced its readiness for talks with Iran but the path to re-entering JCPOA is expected to be arduous and will take time.

For Philip Gordon the underlying premise of Trump’s abrogation of this deal was the undeclared policy of regime change in Tehran. Encouraged by hawks in his national security team, Trump expected the Iranian government to be swept away by a popular upheaval due to the tough US policy of sanctions, covert actions, isolation and coercion. That policy failed. But, writes Gordon, it made him think anew about the US track record of regime change efforts over the years “replete with cautionary tales of hubris, overreach and magical thinking”. From the first intervention in Iran in 1953 (“the original sin” of Mosaddeq’s overthrow) to 70 years of clandestine US actions across the Middle East there has been “no case of clear success, some catastrophic failures, and universally high costs and unintended consequences”.

What is laid bare is the folly and failure of Washington’s regime change policy.

Gordon brings his long experience in dealing with the Middle East to a book that narrates a series of failed regional strategies. He served as special coordinator to the Middle East under president Obama and has returned to government as deputy national security adviser to Vice President Kamala Harris. What he calls his direct experience with regime change in the Obama administration informs his views.

He dealt with policy to stabilise two countries where the US engineered regime change, Iraq and Afghanistan, and with unsuccessful attempts at political change in Syria, Libya and Egypt. The outcome in Iraq was violence and instability and in Afghanistan, “the Taliban in greater control and a weak and corrupt government in Kabul”.

The opening sentence of Gordon’s introduction to the book is telling: “Since the end of World War II the United States has set out to oust governments in the Middle East on an average of once a decade.” These interventions, justified on varied grounds, have been tempting for many administrations but have inevitably gone wrong according to him, “failing badly” in the long run despite deceptive early ‘success’. The lessons he draws from this policy include the following: it is much easier to remove an undesirable regime than to put a better one in its place; the security vacuum that follows engenders bloody power struggles and regional competition; “liberators” invite rejection as money and military force are not enough; and unintended consequences prove to be detrimental.

The two chapters on Afghanistan will be of special interest for readers in Pakistan. Their conclusions have added significance as the Biden administration undertakes a review of Afghan policy. Although Biden told the recent Munich conference that he supports the diplomatic process under way to end the war, indications are that Washington may extend the deadline for a complete military pullout from Afghanistan committed under the Doha agreement with the Taliban. That will postpone not reverse the American withdrawal but can risk a collapse of the Doha deal.

While Bob Woodward’s book Obama’s Wars had detailed the heated internal debates that led to the 2009 military surge, which Biden opposed as vice president, Gordon deals with the Afghan conundrum from a longer perspective, from 1979 to the present. He describes Washington’s covert war to roll back the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, how the original goal to “bleed the Russians” and deter further aggression escalated and the deleterious consequences that ensued. He casts this as a pyrrhic victory for the multiple problems it later created for the US and Afghanistan. He does not mention Pakistan in this context and ignores the fact that the country had to struggle for decades to deal with the multifaceted destabilising consequences of that war. However, he cites prime minister Benazir Bhutto telling George Bush during her 1989 visit: “I am afraid we have created a Franken­stein monster that could come to haunt us later.”

In the chapter about America’s post-9/11 prosecution of the war in Afghanistan he describes the confusion over US goals, initially, as well as over the next 20 years, under different administrations. He argues that declarations of victory, ‘new approaches’ and rosy assessments by American politicians and generals proved illusory when the situation only continued to deteriorate. His brief account of the Trump policy leading to the Doha accord is informed by the view that the US entered these negotiations from a position of weakness when its intention to pull out had been made apparent. The conclusion he draws from two decades of war is that the US made a “costly mistake” to have tried “to turn Afghanistan into something it had never been before”.

Some references in these chapters are gratuitously critical of Pakistan — a default option when some Western writers find other explanations inconvenient. Nevertheless, the book is worth reading for its compelling account of the folly of Washington pursuing regime change at the cost of its own long-term interests.