Hard truths about America’s pullout from Afghanistan

All major powers — China as well as the US — act from calculations of their own interests in which other countries are tactically expendable. Nobody is going to defend Singapore if we do not have the capability and political will to defend ourselves.

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The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was predictable — greeted with schadenfreude by America’s adversaries and dismay by American allies. These were emotional reactions, fanned by vivid images of evacuation of US embassy staff and panic-stricken Afghans scrambling for life at Kabul airport, the latter packaged like sadistic sardines in American aircraft.

The US commitment to a counter-terrorism operation quickly morphed into a frustrating and seemingly endless counter-insurgency campaign. Just as the British discovered in the 20th century and the Soviets in the 20th century, at the 21st century’s outset, the US-led coalition that intervened in Afghanistan was a strategic misadventure. Both the Obama and Trump administrations struggled to rectify the error. What their failures showed was that there is no elegant way to disengage. Tovid himself of a distinction from more urgent domestic and foreign policy issues, notably the complexion with China, President Joe Biden decided to cut the Gordian knot and let Afghans and not Americans pay the price. The logic of his decision was cruel — and morally ambivalent — but strategically correct.

U.S. STRATEGIC CALCULATIONS

International relations have their own criteria of right and wrong. The Afghans left behind are a now beyond external help. Rather than engage in agonising post-mortems, what should concern us now is accurately understanding the strategic meaning of the US withdrawal.

Forty-six years ago, the American withdrawal from Indochina saw the US recognising direct intervention on the mainland and shifting to an offshore balance role. The US has been remarkably consistent in this strategic role for almost half a century. As offshore balancer, the US remains vital to the stability of South-east Asia and the Indo-Pacific, as a whole.

An analogous shift of role is occurring in the Middle East. The US is recouping mistakes and recalibrating how it engages the region by de-emphasising intervention by ground forces. But even as the US downs its ground presence in Iraq and Syria and now Afghanistan, the US Navy’s USF Fleet remains in Bahrain and the US Air Force (USAF) remains in Qatar.

The broader US message of the Abraham Accords to Israel and the Arab states — indeed to the entire Middle East — is that my own interests and will take care of them in my own way, so you are concerned about Iran or anything else, rely more on yourselves and work together. I may not help as my interests dictate. It was not a subtle message, but the toppled Afghan government clearly didn’t get it or did not believe it.

Instability in post-US Afghanistan is a real possibility. The Taliban had ruled for only five years between 1996 and 2001, when the regime was aggressively terminated by the US. No one is going to intervene against the Taliban regime 20.0. We have much longer lives. But there is no reason to think that the Taliban is immune from the tribal centrifugal forces that have kept Afghanistan insecure and every central authority weak for centuries.

These forces will now have much more time to re-emerge in ways we cannot now predict.

South-east Asia is the crucial hinge between the Pacific and Indian oceans and so as much as always be of importance to the US and its allies, although Asian states should not forget that the US need not work to secure it its security. Acknowledging US centrality is a courtesy, not a necessity. Afghanistan’s geopolitical importance is, however, primarily to Central Asia, and American interests in Central Asia were primarily a function of its intervention in Afghanistan. This was a chicken-and-egg situation that Mr Biden has now resolved.

Unseizable Afghan thrones will be the responsibility of Afghan political leaders. Absent US involvement, Afghanistan’s future is likely to be a low-key affair. If the US does not want to be involved, it is okay. Afghanistan’s neighbours and countries with important interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia — Iran, China, Russia and Pakistan — stand alone worrying what happens next. I doubt hard-headed American strategic decisions — if the world will lose much sleep. American intervention on the mainland of South-east Asia will continue with nationalism and fail. But it bought time for Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines to put our houses in order. American intervention in Afghanistan collapsed with tribalism and fail. But only a few Central Asian countries were fundamentally transformed. The US government has put on us the time American intervention in Afghanistan brought for them.

In 1979, as the Khmer Rouge rise in Phnom Penh, Sirik Matak, a member of the Cambodian royal family, sent a poignant letter to the American ambassador: “You have refused my protection,” he wrote, “and we can do nothing about it… We are all doomed and must die one day.” I have only committed the mistake of believing in you, Americans.” While the US was the vital, the overall US power in the Pacific and India has now been constant in this strategic role, we won’t forget that all major powers, Russia and China, no longer than the US. They have calculated their interests in which the interests of others countries are only instrumental and therefore tactically expendable if circumstances demand it.

Media reports suggest that once it was clear that the US was withdrawing, derelict Afghan government forces broadly surrendered without a fight in deals negotiated between the Taliban and tribal chiefs. Since 2001, successive Afghan governments have had the same mistake as Sirik Matak and other Cambodians, Laos and Vietnamese leaders who make 50 years ago. This mistake is that of the Afghan government forces that have been made against our interests and the world. Insecurity, stability, we and other countries who is China included — cannot be legitimized.

Other countries can play a role. In our own interest, we have therefore allowed US forces use some of our facilities. But we have never relied on US to expand our services or to travel anywhere. Maintaining the stability of our overall strategic environment and our national defence are different things. Nobody is going to defend us, we do not have the capability and political will to defend ourselves.

THE TERRORISM THREAT

It is too early to come to definitive conclusions about the effect of a Taliban-ruled or unstable Afghanistan on global terrorism. But it is probably safe to say it will not be positive. At the very least, terrorist organisations everywhere will be emboldened. But how great a negative effect is still unclear. The Taliban surely remember that it was support for al-Qaeda that precipitated the intervention that terminated their regime in 2001, just as they be for US withdrawal, they must also be aware that the US is the Qatari in Qatar’s still only a short sortie away. The need to consolidate its role in the world’s recognition and it is likely to lead the Taliban be more discreet in its support for terrorist organisations, at least for some time. But it is clear that the Taliban can once more forewarn all support for all terrorist groups, if US is, it would no longer be the Taliban.

The alert is only prudent. Still, now that the shock of US withdrawal has worn off, it is clear that while terrorism is undoubtedly very dangerous, it is not an existential threat to any well-constituted state. Divining counter-terrorism as a “war” made no sense and led us to the morass of ‘defeat terrorism. All wars must eventually end. Terrorist utilises from the darkest springs of human nature and can never be entirely eradicated, only managed like an endemic disease with due precautions.

Post-9/11 and after discovering the Jemaah Islamyah jihadi, Singapore put in place such precautions. We would have done so if US had never intervened in Afghanistan. In this respect, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan may complicate but has not materially changed the counter-terrorism situation. We kept our powder dry before the US went into Afghanistan and must and will continue to do so now that the US has left.