

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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For The Straits Times

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan was – predictably – 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 panicked Afghans scrambling to flee at Kabul airport, the lucky ones packed like sardines in American aircraft.

The commentariat – professional pundits – have pointed to two main consequences. First, drawing a parallel to the American abandonment of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1975, this was another blow to the credibility of American commitments. Second, the precipitate US withdrawal raised the possibility of a spike in global terrorism from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

The competition between the United States and China is as much psychological as material and

Chinese spokesmen and media have tried to exploit what is undoubtedly not America's finest hour. The prognostications of the pundits are not wrong, but not as straightforward as may appear. Singapore is a close partner of the US but not an ally. We should therefore distance ourselves from the passions of the moment and take a cold, hard-headed look at the implications of what is unfolding in Afghanistan.

A humanitarian tragedy is not the same thing as a strategic disaster. We should not conflate the two situations. Although Taliban spokesmen have tried to project a new moderate image, what is "moderate" is always relative and the US withdrawal will almost certainly result in great human suffering, particularly for Afghan women and anyone the Taliban chooses to dub American collaborators or brand as kafir (infidel). But whether this amounts to a strategic disaster is another matter.

After the Sept 11, 2001 attack on the US, what then President George W. Bush intended as counter-terrorism operation quickly morphed into a frustrating and seemingly endless counter-insurgency campaign. Just as the British discovered in the 19th century and the Soviets in the 20th century, as the 21st century unfolded, the Americans learnt that intervention in Afghanistan was a strategic mistake.

Both the Obama and Trump administrations struggled to rectify the error. What their failures showed was that there is no elegant way to disengage. To rid himself of a distraction from more urgent domestic and foreign policy issues, notably the competition 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 now beyond external help. Rather than engage in angst-ridden post-mortems, what should concern us now is to accurately understand the strategic meaning of the US withdrawal.

Forty-six years ago, the American withdrawal from Indochina saw the US renouncing direct intervention on the mainland and shifting to an offshore balancer 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 rectifying mistakes and recalibrating how it engages the region by de-emphasising intervention by ground forces. But even as the US draws down its ground presence in Iraq and Syria and now Afghanistan, the US Navy's 5th 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 I have my own interests and I will take care of them in my own way, so if you are concerned about Iran or anything else, rely more on yourselves and work together. I may or 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 1995 and 2001 when its regime was abruptly terminated by the US. No one is going to intervene again and the Taliban regime 2.0 will be much longer-lived. But there is no reason to think that the Taliban is immune from the tribal centrifugal forces that have kept Afghanistan incoherent and every central authority weak for centuries. These forces will now have much more time to play out in ways we cannot now predict.

South-east Asia is the crucial hinge between the Pacific and Indian oceans and as such will always be of importance to the US and its allies, although Asean should not forget that the US need not work with it to secure its South-east Asian interests. Acknowledging Asean's 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.

An unstable Afghanistan threatens no vital American geopolitical interest. Absent involvement in Afghanistan, Central Asia is only of secondary interest to the US. The US began to wind up its military presence in Central Asia during the Obama administration. By withdrawing from Afghanistan, Mr Biden is implementing Mr Donald Trump's policy. If Afghanistan's neighbours and countries with important interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia – Iran, China, Russia and Pakistan – stay up nights worrying about what happens next, I doubt hard-headed American strategists of either party will lose much sleep.

American intervention on the mainland of South-east Asia collided with nationalism and failed. But it bought time for Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines to put our houses in order. American intervention in Afghanistan collided with tribalism and failed. But only a few Central Asian countries – primarily Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – have used the time the American intervention in Afghanistan bought for them wisely.

In 1975, as the Khmer Rouge closed in on Phnom Penh, Sirik Matak, a member of the Cambodian royal family, sent a poignant letter to the American ambassador: "You have refused us your protection," he wrote, "and we can do nothing about it... We are all born and must die one day, I

have only committed the mistake of believing in you, the Americans."

While the US is vital to the overall balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and has been constant in this strategic role, we forget at our own peril that all major powers, Russia and China, no less than America, act from calculations of their own interests in which the interests of other countries are only instrumental and therefore tactically expendable if circumstances demand it.

Media reports suggest that once it was clear that the US was serious about withdrawing, demoralised Afghan government forces generally surrendered without a fight in deals negotiated between the Taliban and tribal chiefs. Since 2001, successive Afghan governments have made the same mistake as Sirik Matak and other Cambodian, Lao and South Vietnamese leaders almost 50 years ago. That mistake was to believe that their role in the broader strategic games of their patron made them intrinsically valuable to their patron. That belief is contrary to the harsh logic of international relations.

Singapore has never been shy about acknowledging the vital US role in maintaining the stability of our region. Without stability, we and other countries – China included – cannot prosper. No other country can play such a role. In our own interest, we have therefore allowed US forces to use some of our facilities. But we have never relied on the US to expend blood or treasure to defend us. Maintaining the stability of our overall strategic environment and our national defence are different things. Nobody is going to defend us if 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.

Taliban leaders surely remember that it was support for Al-Qaeda that precipitated the intervention that terminated their regime in 2001. Jubilant as they must be at the US withdrawal, they must also be aware that the USAF in Qatar is still only a short sortie away. The need to consolidate its rule and for international recognition and aid will probably also lead the Taliban to be more discreet in its support for terrorist organisations, at least for some time. But I doubt that the Taliban can ever entirely forswear all support for all terrorist groups. If it does so, it would no longer be the Taliban.

To be alert is only prudent. Still, now that the shock of 9/11 has worn off, it is clear that while terrorism is undoubtedly very dangerous, it is not an existential threat to any well-constituted state. Defining counter-terrorism as a "war" made no sense and led the US into the morass of Afghanistan. All wars must eventually end. Terrorism wells up 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 Islamiyah plot, Singapore put in place such precautions. We would have done so even if the US had never intervened in Afghanistan. In this respect, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan may complicate but has not materially changed the overall counter-terrorism situation we face. 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.

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A US Marine escorting Department of State personnel for evacuation processing on Sunday at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. The logic of US President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan was cruel – and morally ambivalent – but strategically correct, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS