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Afghanistan: What now?

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The troop surge that cost US\$2 trillion and thousands of lives has only made things worse, says former UK Secretary of State for International Development Rory Stewart

When the last American military planes left Kabul airport at the end of August, it brought an end to the War in Afghanistan which had begun in 2001 following the September 11 attacks. What had started as an effort to capture Osama bin Laden, whom the Taliban had refused to hand over, became a 20-year quagmire that lasted longer than the Vietnam War and killed tens of thousands of civilians, along with many more combatants.

But in the early days of the occupation, between 2001 to 2005, international involvement was done in the spirit of a 'light footprint' as proposed by former Algerian Foreign Minister, Lakhdar Brahimi. The U.S. were not interested in a ground war – “No boots on the ground” – and nation-building was meant to be the United Nations's job, reluctant as it was following Somalia and the Balkan wars.

What if it had stayed that way, with U.S. air power allied with local Afghan forces, instead of what some believe was a misguided troop surge and subsequent withdrawal that cost upwards of US\$2 trillion but ultimately put the Taliban back in charge?

“[By 2005] a tremendous amount was achieved: Mobile phone ownership exploded across the country; the population of Kabul quadrupled; 1.5 million more girls went to school; life expectancy went up,” notes **Rory Stewart**, Senior Fellow at the Jackson Institute, Yale University and Former UK Secretary of State for International Development. Stewart concedes that rampant corruption would not have been avoided, and the warlords problem in southern Afghanistan would likely persist, but the rest of the country were a different story.

“I’m not just talking about Kabul. I’m talking about Hazarajat around Bamyan. I’m talking about the entire region up to Mazar-i-Sharif. I’m talking about the Panjshir Valley. All these areas could have continued to develop,” he explains in the Annual Ikeda Peace and Harmony Lecture titled “After Afghanistan - What's Next?” jointly organised by the SMU Wee Kim Wee Centre and Office of Core Curriculum. He adds:

“I can’t prove that the light footprint would have been the answer in Afghanistan. What I can show is that the heavy footprint definitely made things worse. Bringing in, in the end, 130,000 international troops into the villages allowed the Taliban...to rebrand and present itself as an organisation fighting for Afghanistan and Islam against a foreign military occupation.

“By going into areas like Helmand aggressively, the Taliban was given the reason to fight, and to gain Afghan support. Worse than that, the well-meaning policy to disarm the warlords drove all the militias to support the Taliban and created a power vacuum in these provinces. At the same

time, the huge surge of U.S. money supercharged corruption, creating incredible networks of corruption in the country."

Stewart, who was in charge of the Iraqi province of Maysan and thereafter appointed Deputy Governor of neighbouring Dhi Qar following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, points out that the initial troop surge after 2005 had made it impossible to return to a 'light footprint' in 2014.

"In 2005, it was estimated that there were 3,000 Taliban fighters in Afghanistan," he explains, describing the Taliban as having become by then "a small and frail insurgent organisation". "Seven years later and after US\$1 trillion spent, and after tens of thousands of Afghans had been killed, the Taliban was estimated at 50,000. In other words, the surge increased the problem instead of diminishing it.

"The light footprint in 2014 would be hard to sustain because of the Taliban, but it wasn't impossible. So long as U.S. air power remained in the country, it was impossible for the Taliban to take a major city. It made it possible for the Afghan military to maintain a presence in the streets. It was possible to allow Kabul to continue to flourish, to allow millions of Afghans to live lives increasingly similar to their opposite numbers in India."

Stewart asserts that the failure to maintain a light footprint in 2021 after the recent withdrawal does not reflect the reality in Afghanistan but that of U.S. politics. President Joe Biden, Stewart believes, is drawing on "a strong domestic American reluctance to be involved in other people's countries". On that issue, the American president is on the same page as his predecessor in the Oval Office. The end result, Stewart laments, is that "the United States and its allies lack the realism, the patience, and the moderation to find a middle path" between endless escalation and a light footprint.

WHAT ABOUT CHINA?

With the U.S. leaving Afghanistan, the resulting geopolitical vacuum is a question that hangs over a country that has seen numerous direct foreign interventions by British, Soviets, and the recent departed Americans in the last 180 years. In a Q&A session after the lecture, Stewart was asked about China occupying the power vacuum in Afghanistan.

"Since Truman and the Second World War, the United States has been committed to the idea that it requires a global presence, initially to fight communism and for the last twenty years to fight international terrorism," notes Stewart, who cites the pullout from Afghanistan as proof that the U.S. does not think that way for the time being. While he articulated China's likely reluctance take on nation-building duties or the related financial costs, Stewart also pointed out the Taliban's status as a jihadist government posing extra trouble.

"It captured many of the towns relying on terrorist groups [such as] Al Qaeda, the Haqqani Network, and others. These jihadi groups are of course on the side of the Uighur population in Xinjiang against the Chinese government. This is not a good situation for China.

“China may try to take advantage of the United States’s departure to develop links with the Taliban. But I fear it is extremely unlikely that the Taliban, facing its own internal challenges from terrorist groups, is going to prioritise its international relations even with states like China over its own jihadist instinct and its own threats internally.”

As Afghanistan returns to authoritarian rule following a brief period of being an electoral democracy, however flawed, Stewart highlights the year 2004 as the year that democracy started losing its allure. Its replacement was authoritarianism, and specifically, authoritarian populism.

“What it also reflects is the extraordinary rise of China,” says Stewart. “In 2004, the British economy was larger than the Chinese economy. Today, the Chinese economy is seven times that of the British economy. This means that suddenly there is a model out there that has broken the theory that there is a necessary link between prosperity and democracy.

“The 200-year story that democracies were the ones that grew most quickly came to an end. Authoritarian populism, and indeed the isolation we’re seeing in Afghanistan, is a response to that phenomenon. It is almost no coincidence that just as 2004 saw the beginning of this surge of America into Afghanistan, it is also the moment at which things began to turn against the notion of democracy.”

Rory Stewart was the speaker at the Annual Ikeda Peace and Harmony Lecture titled "After Afghanistan - What's Next?" that was held on 23 September 2021. The lecture was organised by the SMU Office of Core Curriculum and in association with the Wee Kim Wee Centre and the Singapore Soka Association.

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