

Fair Observer

Monthly



September 2021

Fair Observer[®]

Fair Observer Monthly



September 2021

Fair Observer | 237 Hamilton Ave | Mountain View | CA 94043 | USA
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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

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Liberalizing India's Economy Is Critical for Global Stability

Surya Kanegaonkar
September 7, 2021

As China becomes an increasingly unreliable trading partner, India can step up if it makes the right reforms and adopts prescient policies.

The COVID-19 pandemic is increasing inequality globally and even advanced economies have not been spared. Before the pandemic began in 2020, inequality was on the rise. Decades of globalization, loose monetary policy and the rise of oligopolies have contributed to this phenomenon. In many ways, globalization has kept inflation down. When Walmart imports Chinese goods, Americans get more for less.

China can manufacture cheaply because labor costs are low. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also runs an authoritarian regime. The regime has repressive land and labor laws with scant regard for human rights. Legally, the CCP owns all the land in China and can appropriate any property it wants. Similarly, workers have little recourse to courts and sometimes work in slave-like conditions.

A rising China is challenging the postwar global order. Democracies, including the United States, are finding it difficult to meet the challenge for two reasons. First, loose monetary policies in recent years have brought back the specter of inflation. Second, no economy other than China's can meet the supply needs of advanced economies. From laptops to toys, most goods are made in China.

Labor arbitrage has defined globalization from its early years. Companies set up factories where wages tend to be lower. This increases revenues and profits, making consumers and shareholders happy. Given rising inflationary expectations,

advanced economies need labor arbitrage to keep costs of goods down. At the same time, these democratic societies want to decouple their supply chain from China.

With the size of its young workforce, India has a unique opportunity to become the new workshop of the world and emerge as a stabilizing global force in a multipolar world. To grasp this historic opportunity, it has to liberalize its economy wisely.

The Legacy of the Past

India could do well to heed the lessons of the past. The Soviet Union, Western Europe and the US emerged as strong economies after World War II by leveraging their manufacturing base. The war economy had led to a relentless focus on infrastructure, mass production and industrialization. In the case of Western Europe, the Marshall Plan helped put shattered economies back on track.

Over time, these advanced economies deindustrialized and production started shifting to emerging economies. China's rapprochement with the US allowed it to enter the postwar Western economic system. Reforms in 1978 were critical to its success. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 created a brave new world where companies chased cheap production. China, with its size, scale and speedy centralized decision-making, emerged as the big winner.

As production moved to China, workers lost jobs in advanced economies and other industries did not emerge to retrain and employ them. The Rust Belt in the US has become a synonym for down-at-heel places left behind by globalization. Even as workers grew poorer, shareholders grew wealthier, exacerbating inequality.

Today, the United States finds itself in a complicated position with China. On the one hand, the Middle Kingdom steals intellectual property, transgresses international law and challenges the US. On the other hand, it supplies American consumers with cheap goods they need. America's economic stimulus during the pandemic has, in fact, reinforced the country's

dependency on China. So, Washington cannot hold China's feet to the fire and penalize its bad behavior. Beijing follows its policy of pinpricks short of outright conflict.

The US dollar is the reserve currency of the world. Since the days of Alan Greenspan, the Federal Reserve has followed a loose monetary policy. After the 2007-08 financial crisis, the US adopted the Japanese playbook from the 1990s and introduced quantitative easing. In practice, this means buying treasury and even corporate bonds to release money into the economy after interest rates touch zero. Such increased liquidity in the US has led to bloated company valuations and allowed the likes of Amazon or Uber to expand their operations. The cost of capital has been so low that profitability in the short or even medium run matters little.

Loose monetary policy has enabled the US to counter China's state-subsidized companies to some degree. Yet both policies have distorted the market. The US can only continue with loose monetary policy as long as inflation is low. Should inflation rise, interest rates would also have to rise. This might trigger a stock market collapse, increase the cost of capital for its companies and weaken the global dominance of the US economy.

To persist with its economic model and simultaneously contain China, the US needs to curb inflation. This is only possible by shifting some if not all production away from China. Mexico, Vietnam and Bangladesh are possible alternatives. Mexico has a major drug, violence and governance problem. Vietnam and Bangladesh benefit from huge Chinese investment. Therefore, they might not be the best hedge for securing supply chains from the Middle Kingdom, especially if the companies manufacturing in these countries are Chinese.

As a vibrant democracy with a formidable military, India offers the US and the West a unique hedge against China. For geopolitical reasons alone, manufacturing in India makes sense. However, doing business in the country continues to be difficult because of red tape,

corruption, erratic policymaking, a colonial bureaucracy with a socialistic culture and more.

India's Nehruvian past still hobbles the nation's economy. The country adopted socialist command-and-control policies using a colonial-era bureaucracy that prevented the economy from achieving high economic growth. Manufacturing suffered the most. To start a factory, any entrepreneur needed multiple licenses that cost time, money and energy. Poor infrastructure made it difficult for manufacturers to compete with their East Asian counterparts. While wages were low in India, the cost of doing business made many manufacturers uncompetitive.

Acquiring land in India is still a challenge. The experience of the Tata group in Singur revealed both political and legal risks that still exist. Similarly, convoluted labor laws made hiring and firing onerous, rendering companies inflexible and unable to respond quickly to market demand. Liberalization in 1991 improved matters, but the state continues to choke the supply side of the Indian economy.

In the second half of the 1990s, liberalization lost momentum. Coalition governments supported by strong interest groups stalled reforms. In fact, India drifted back to left-leaning policies starting 2004 and this severely limited economic growth. For instance, many industrial and infrastructure projects were killed by ministers to protect the environment. India's toxic legacy of Nehruvian socialism persisted in terms of continuing state intervention. The country never meaningfully transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial economy and still suffers from low productivity. This in turn has constrained consumption and slowed down growth.

India's much-heralded information technology sector only grew because it was new. The government did not exactly know what was going on and, as a result, there were fewer regulations to constrain this sector. Fewer regulations meant that the likes of Infosys and Wipro had greater autonomy in decision-making and fewer bribes to pay.

Reduce Red Tape

The first thing that India needs is an overhaul of its colonial-era bureaucracy that resolutely strives to occupy the commanding heights of the economy. It foists endless red tape on business, strangles entrepreneurship and takes too long to make most decisions. Government service is seen as lifelong employment. Once people become bureaucrats, they have little incentive to perform. Like their colonial predecessors, they lord over citizens instead of serving them. Rarely do they craft sensible policies. Even when a government comes up with a good policy, bureaucrats implement it poorly when they are not sabotaging it actively. This must change. Bureaucrats must be accountable to citizens. Performance-linked promotions and dismissal for underperformance are long overdue.

Over the years, politicians have tried to deliver benefits and services to citizens to win reelection. To get around a corrupt, colonial and dysfunctional bureaucracy, they instituted direct benefit transfers for welfare schemes, emulating other emerging economies like Brazil. This move is necessary but not sufficient. India needs sound economic policymaking directed by domain experts in each administrative department.

Only members of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) occupy key positions in the finance ministry. Instead, India needs economists, chartered accountants, finance professionals and those with varied skill sets in this ministry. The treasuries of the US, Britain, Germany and almost every advanced economies have this diversity of talent in their upper echelons.

There is no reason why economic policymaking in 21st-century India should be monopolized by an archaic IAS. The government has made noise about the lateral entry of professionals into policymaking, but tangible results have been few and far between.

If the bureaucracy holds India back, so does the judiciary. Nearly 37 million cases are pending in the courts. It takes around six years for a case to be resolved in a subordinate court, over three years in the high courts and another three years in

the supreme court. A case that goes all the way to the supreme court takes an average of 10 years to resolve. Many cases get stuck for 20 to 30 years or more.

India needs to reform its judicial system if its economy is to thrive. Justice is invariably delayed, if not denied, and it also costs an arm and a leg. Not only does it add to transaction costs, but it also undermines business confidence. Virtual courts have already shown the way forward during the pandemic. A higher number of judges using both in-person and online technology could reduce the seemingly unending number of pending cases.

Create Efficient Markets

To improve labor productivity and consumption, the government must reduce inflation and improve purchasing power. For decades after independence in 1947, India was united politically but divided economically. Producers in one state could not sell in other states without paying taxes and, in some cases, bribes. In agricultural markets, they could not even sell in other districts. India's new goods and services tax (GST) might be imperfect, but it has already made a difference. Even during a pandemic, interstate goods movement rose by 20% and menu costs, a term in economics used for the costs of adapting to changing prices or taxes, dropped because tax filings were done online.

The 2016 Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code has led to major efficiency gains. Now, lenders can recover their debt more speedily. Bankruptcy proceedings are now much simpler even if haircuts remain high. Unsurprisingly, India has risen in the World Bank Doing Business rankings from 130 in 2016 to 63 in 2020.

As Atul Singh and Manu Sharma explained in an article on Fair Observer in 2018, non-performing assets of Indian banks have led to a financial crisis. The government could do well to adopt some if not all the reforms the authors suggested. Given rising inflationary pressures because of rising oil prices, India's central bank can no longer cut rates. So, the government has to

be creative in tackling its banking issues and free up liquidity for Indian businesses with great potential to grow. Banks burnt by poor lending in the past and fearful of corruption charges as well must discover the judgment and appetite to lend to deserving businesses in a fast-growing economy that needs credit for capital formation.

A little-noticed need of the Indian economy is to strengthen its own credit rating systems and agencies. Capital flows are aided by accurate corporate and political risk assessment. The US enjoys a global comparative advantage in attracting investments thanks to the big three homegrown agencies: S&P, Moody's and Fitch. These agencies tend to fall short in their India assessment. The standards they set give American companies an advantage over Indian ones.

Therefore, both the private sector and the government must strengthen Indian rating agencies such as CRISIL and ICRA. These agencies are improving continuously. They now have access to increased digital high-frequency data, which they can interpret in the domestic context.

As a result, Indian agencies can benchmark corporate or sovereign risk better than their American counterparts for domestic markets. A better benchmarking of risk is likely to deepen the bond market and cause a multiplier effect by enabling companies to raise money for increased capital expenditure.

For decades, India followed a socialist model of agriculture, doling out large unsustainable subsidies. As Singh and Sharma explained in a separate article, the Soviet model was the inspiration for the Indian one. Indian agriculture denuded groundwater, emptied government coffers and lowered farm productivity.

The current reforms allow farmers to grow what they want and sell wherever they want to bypass parasitic middlemen. The new legislation emulates the US farm bills and promises to boost agricultural production, lower inflation and increase exports. This legislation might also

lower rural hunger and improve India's human capital in the long term.

India has to transition hundreds of millions from agriculture to industry. Currently, 58% of the country's population is dependent on agriculture and contributes just 20% to gross domestic product (GDP). All advanced and industrialized economies have a much lower percentage of their populations engaged in agriculture. In the US, the figure is 1.3% and in Vietnam, 43% work in agriculture. The last time the US had 50% of its population engaged in agriculture was in 1870.

Improve Infrastructure

To facilitate movement from agriculture to industry, India must invest in infrastructure and urbanization. For decades, its infrastructure has been woefully inadequate. Indian cities are known to be chaotic and do not provide basic services to their citizens.

Recently, India launched a \$1.9-trillion National Infrastructure Pipeline that is engaged in a rollout of road, rail, seaport and airports to connect centers of manufacturing with points of export. This focus on infrastructure has to be consistent and relentless.

India could emulate Chinese cities like Chongqing and Shenzhen that could be home to industry and hubs of trade, both domestic and international. Projects like the smart city in Dholera, 80 kilometers from Gujarat's capital of Ahmedabad, are the way forward. Similarly, the new Production Linked Incentive scheme is the sort of policy India needs.

The Tatas are setting up a plant to manufacture lithium-ion batteries under this scheme. Not only could Indian industry meet the needs of a fast-growing market, but it could also be a source of cheap imports for many other countries.

India must not only focus on metropolises, but also smaller cities and towns where the cost of living is lower. Digitalization of work will allow people to stay in such urban areas. Of course, they will need investment and organization for

which India must tap capital and talent not only nationally but internationally. For instance, pension funds in North America and Europe are seeking growth to meet their increasing liabilities. If India could get its act together, investment into Indian markets could be significant.

A key part of infrastructure that needs reform in a low energy consumption society is the power sector. Gujarat's growth is underpinned by increased production and improved distribution of electricity. The rest of the country must emulate this westernmost state and Gujarat itself must bring in further reforms. Renewable energy sources such as gas, solar, wind and hydro must grow further. A nationwide energy market would bring in efficiency gains and boost growth.

A focus on renewable energy also brings risks and opportunities. Currently, China controls critical metals and rare earths required in electric vehicle and battery manufacturing. Beijing has an effective monopoly over 80% of the world's cobalt, 50% of lithium, 85% of rare earth oxides and 90% of rare earth metals. A decarbonized future cannot be intrinsically linked to an authoritarian state that has a history of not playing by free market rules.

India's \$1.1-billion "Deep Ocean Mission" offers a unique opportunity for the country to provide energy security to democratic nations in North America, Europe and elsewhere. As they transition to clean technologies, India can provide a safer, more reliable and benign alternative to an increasingly belligerent China.

In 2021, India has a historic opportunity to enter a new economic arc. The global conditions could not be more favorable. Advanced economies are looking to decouple from China without triggering inflation. India is the only country with the size and the scale to be an alternative. Its large youth population and rising middle class are powerful tailwinds for high economic growth.

Indeed, India owes it not only to its citizens, but also to the rest of the world to get its act

together and become a force for global stability at a time of much volatility and uncertainty.

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Is Operation Enduring Freedom Doomed to Endure Forever?

S. Suresh
September 8, 2021

Can the US adopt a policy that would not aggravate the situation and, over time, deescalate it, without creating yet another Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden?

Those were heady days in the US stock market. I would wake up by 5 am and watch CNBC before the stock market opened for trading at 6:30 am Pacific time. It was no different on the morning of September 11, 2001. Little did I know that catastrophic things were about to happen that would change the world.

At 8:45 am Eastern time, an American Airlines flight had crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. Within minutes, CNBC stopped discussing stocks and started covering the incident, which, at that moment, no one knew if it was an anomalous accident or an attack of some kind.

Three minutes after 9 am Eastern, as I watched incredulously at the events unfolding, I saw a United Airlines passenger aircraft fly right into the south tower of the twin towers. In under an hour, the south tower collapsed, resulting in a massive cloud of dust and smoke. By now, there was no doubt that America was under attack.

"We will remember the moment the news came, where we were and what we were doing," said President George W. Bush in an address to

Congress on September 20. Images from that Tuesday morning are still etched in my memory, happening, as it were, just nine days after my second child was born.

In all, 2,996 people of 78 nationalities lost their lives in four coordinated attacks conducted by al-Qaeda using hijacked commercial, civilian airliners as their weapons, making 9/11 the second-biggest attack on American soil — second only to the genocidal assault on Native Americans committed by the nation’s immigrant settlers.

Operation Enduring Freedom: America’s War on Terror

Addressing the nation the following day, Bush called the attacks “more than acts of terror. They were acts of war.” He promised that “the United States of America will use all our resources to conquer this enemy.” The president went on to assure Americans that this “battle will take time and resolve, but make no mistake about it, we will win.”

Twenty years later, the US has left Afghanistan and Iraq in a chaotic mess. The question remains: Did the United States win the war on terror the Bush administration launched in 2001? This was a war that has cost more than \$6.4 trillion and over 801,000 lives, according to Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University.

In October 2001, the US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban government that had harbored al-Qaeda. Soon after, al-Qaeda militants had been driven into hiding. Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the 9/11 attack and leader of al-Qaeda, was killed 10 years later in a raid conducted by US forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

In a shrewd move, Bush had left himself room to take down Iraq and its president, Saddam Hussein, using an overarching definition for the war on terror. In his address to Congress on September 20, Bush also stated: “Our war on terror begins with Al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of

global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”

True to his words, in 2003, the United States and its allies invaded Iraq under the premise that it possessed weapons of mass destruction. Bush settled his score with Hussein, ensuring he was captured, shamed and subsequently executed in 2006.

Despite reducing al-Qaeda to nothing and killing bin Laden, despite wrecking Iraq and having its leader executed, it is impossible to say that the US has won the war on terror. All that Washington has managed to do is to trade the Islamic State (IS) group that swept through Syria and Iraq in 2014 for al-Qaeda, giving a new identity to an old enemy. Following the US and NATO pullout from Afghanistan last month, the Taliban, whom America drove out of power in 2001, are back in the saddle. In fact, the Taliban’s recapture of Afghanistan has been so swift, so precise and so comprehensive that the international community is in a shock, questioning the timing and prudence of the withdrawal of troops.

Setting an expectation for how long the war or terror was likely to last, the secretary of defense under the Bush administration, Donald Rumsfeld, remarked in September 2001 that “it is not going to be over in five minutes or five months, it’ll take years.” Rumsfeld, who christened the campaign Operation Enduring Freedom, was prescient, as the war enters its third decade in a never-ending fight against terrorism.

The Winners and Losers

Ironically, Operation Enduring Freedom has only resulted in an enduring loss of American freedom, one step at a time. I still remember that I had walked up to the jet bridge and received my wife as she deplaned from a flight in 1991. Another time, when she was traveling to Boston from San Francisco, I was allowed to enter the aircraft and help her get settled with her luggage, along with our 1-year-old. It is inconceivable to be allowed to do such a thing today, and I would not be surprised if readers question the veracity

of my personal experience. In many ways, al-Qaeda has succeeded in stripping Americans of the sense of freedom they have always enjoyed.

More than Americans, the biggest losers in this tragic war are Iraqis and Afghans, particularly the women. Afghan women, who had a brief respite from persecution under the Taliban's strict Islamic laws and human rights abuses, are back to square one and justifiably terrified of their future under the new regime. The heart-wrenching scenes from Kabul airport of people trying to flee the country tell us about how Afghans view the quality of life under the Taliban and the uncertainty that the future holds.

To its east, the delicate balance of peace — if one could characterize the situation between India and Pakistan as peaceful — is likely to be put to the test as violence from Afghanistan spreads. To its north in Tajikistan, there isn't much love lost between Tajiks and the Taliban. Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rahmon, has refused to recognize the Taliban government, and Tajiks have promised to join anti-Taliban militia groups, paving the way for continued unrest and violence in Central Asia.

If History Could be Rewritten

In 2001, referring to Islamist terrorists, Bush asked the rhetorical question, "Why do they hate us?" He tried to answer it in a speech to Congress: "They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."

Islamic fundamentalists couldn't give two hoots about a form of government or a people's way of life thousands of miles away. The real answer to Bush's question lies deeply buried in US foreign policy. America's steadfast support of Israel and its refusal to recognize the state of Palestine is the number one reason for it to become the target of groups like al-Qaeda and IS.

America's ill-conceived response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 during the Cold War led to the creation of al-Qaeda. It was with US funds and support that the anti-Soviet mujahideen fought America's proxy war with the Soviets. Without US interference, al-Qaeda may never have come into existence.

During the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the US bolstered Saddam Hussein by backing his regime against the Iranians. When Hussein became too ambitious for America's comfort and invaded Kuwait in 1990, George H.W. Bush engaged Iraq in the Persian Gulf War. The US motive at that time was primarily to protect its oil interests in Kuwait.

The US created its own nemesis in Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden and spent \$6 trillion to kill them. In the process, US leaders have reduced Iraq and Afghanistan to shambles and created a new monster in the Islamic State.

Sadly, history can never be rewritten. The US has proved time and again that its involvement in the Middle East and Muslim world is aimed at advancing its own political interests. The only question that remains is: Can the US adopt a policy that would not aggravate the situation and, over time, deescalate it, without creating yet another Hussein or bin Laden? Without a radically different approach, Operation Enduring Freedom is doomed to endure forever, costing trillions of dollars each decade.

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The War on Terror Drove Iraq Into Iran's Orbit

Mehmet Alaca
September 13, 2021

Aiming to limit US influence, Iran has been gradually reshaping Iraq's internal and security policy since 2003.

After al-Qaeda targeted the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, then-US President George W. Bush declared his (in)famous doctrine of the global war on terror, which will continue to have a great effect on the Middle East and the world for the coming decades, if not centuries. The framework implemented an aggressive foreign policy against Iraq, Iran and North Korea, singled out as the “axis of evil” in the new world order.

After 20 years of the doctrine in action, which saw the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq that further ignited regional instability, President Joe Biden has withdrawn US troops from Afghanistan and is determined to end the combat mission in Iraq by the end of the year. Without concluding whether two decades of aggression succeeded in defeating terrorism, it can be said that the war on terror opened a new area of influence for one of the axis of evil, namely Iran in Iraq.

Opening the Gates

Thanks to its Shia population, Iraq has been a significant target of Iranian foreign policy since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Due to both geographic and sectarian proximity, Iran, which sees Washington as an enemy and a source of instability in the region, was suspicious of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

Deeming Baathist Iraq as a major threat to its national security, the regime in Tehran has meddled in its neighbor's internal politics and strategic tendencies ever since coming to power.

With the US toppling of Saddam Hussein, however, Iran succeeded in courting Iraq's Shia population by taking advantage of its shared border and cultural, religious and economic ties.

The fact that significant Shia figures opposed to the Iraqi regime took refuge in Iran in the early 1980s strengthened Tehran's relations with these groups in the post-invasion period. During this time, the Shia population has become influential in the Iraqi state and society. For example, Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Badr Organization militia, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the recently deceased vice president of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), count among some of the most prominent pro-Iranian figures in the current Iraqi political and military establishments.

The Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a Shia resistance group headed by Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim hoping to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, was established in Iran in 1982. It became a pioneer organization for various Shia militias and political groups with connections to Tehran, incorporating the Badr Organization, then known as the Badr Brigades.

While Iran benefitted from the support of Iraqi militias during the inconclusive war with Iraq in the 1980s, Tehran redirected this mobilization against the US forces following the 2003 invasion. The Iraqi militia group Kataib Hezbollah was formed in early 2007, followed by Asaib Ahl al-Haq, as part of the campaign by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force against US forces.

Iran's presence in Iraq came to light when the Americans captured several Iranian operatives in 2006 and 2007, among them Mohsen Chizari of the IRGC. Asaib Ahl al-Haq kidnapped and killed five US soldiers in January 2007, but two months later, coalition forces captured the militia's leader, Qais al-Khazali, alongside an operative of Hezbollah, Tehran's proxy in Lebanon, Ali Musa Daqduq. It is well known that the Jaish al-Mahdi militias led by Muqtada al-Sadr, who still has distant dealings with Iran,

received intensive Iranian support to fight against the United States.

The disbanding the Iraqi army and establishing the interim government by the US after 2003 provided Iran with new opportunities to secure many significant positions in the bureaucracy. In this process, many members of the Badr Brigades were integrated into the new army and police forces, their political connections winning many rapid promotions. Today, Badr is still one of the most active groups within the police, the army and the Ministry of Interior.

Consolidation of Iranian Power

The Baghdad government was formed along ethnic and sectarian quotas. As per the country's 2005 constitution, the presidency was allocated to the Kurds, the prime minister's office to the Shia and the position of parliament's speaker to the Sunnis. The allocation of the executive position to Shia leaders strengthened Iran's elbow room in Iraqi politics.

The sectarian policies of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who held office between 2006 and 2014, disquieted the Sunni society further. In addition to the fact that the Shia occupied a central position in the administrative system, the American inability to understand Sunni expectations has marginalized Sunni society. Radicalization led to the resurgence of al-Qaeda and later the formation of the even more extreme Islamic State (IS) group in the Sunni regions of Iraq.

After capturing Mosul in June 2014, IS has taken control of almost a third of Iraqi territory. All Shia groups fighting against the new threat were united under the banner of the Popular Mobilization Units — an umbrella organization controlled mainly by pro-Iran armed groups — after Iraq's top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, called for all those able to carry a weapon to take up arms.

The PMU militias were provided with American and Iranian-made weapons during their fight against IS. Pro-Iranian militias such as the

Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq dominated the PMU. Active support by the IRGC provided to Iraqi militias and the presence of Qassem Soleimani, a Quds Force commander, at the front lines pointed to Iran's effectiveness in the field.

Integrating the PMU as a legal part of the Iraqi security mechanism in 2016 further legitimized Iranian influence in the political and military establishments. For instance, almost \$1.7 billion was allocated to the PMU, which consists of some 100,000 militants, from the \$90-billion Iraqi budget in 2021.

Defeating the Islamic State

After the declaration of victory against IS in 2017, tensions between Iran and the US, placed on the back burner during the campaign, reignited. While US officials argued that the PMU completed their mission and should be dissolved, pro-Iranian groups reassumed their anti-American tone.

Thanks to their active role in the fight against IS, Iran-backed militias secured their position in the military bureaucracy and were able to establish themselves politically. The Fatah Alliance, under the leadership of Hadi al-Amiri and backed by pro-Iranian militias, gained victory in the 2018 election, becoming the second-largest group in the Iraqi parliament. Iran has thus become one of the decision-makers in post-IS Iraq.

Tensions increased in 2018 after President Donald Trump decided to unilaterally withdraw the United States from the nuclear deal with Iran. Pro-Iranian forces began to attack US forces on the ground in Iraq. While Iran seemed to want to punish the US via the Iraqi militias, these attacks also aimed at forcing Americans to withdraw from Iraq. The situation has come to an apogee with the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis in the US drone strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020.

The assassinations shifted the tensions to the political arena. On January 5, under the leadership of pro-Iranian groups, a resolution was passed in Iraq's parliament to call on the

government to expel foreign troops from the country. In addition to political pressures, as a result of ongoing attacks by pro-Iranian militias on American bases and soldiers in Iraq, the US abandoned many of its bases in the country. As a result of strategic dialogue negotiations with Baghdad, Washington decided to withdraw its combat forces and retain only consultant support. To a large degree, Iran managed to get what it wanted — to drive the US out and reassert its own influence in the region.

Pro-Iranian militias, already active in the Shia regions, started to show their presence in Sunni-dominated areas such as Mosul, Anbar and Saladin after the defeat of IS. Furthermore, Iran-backed groups pursue a long-term strategy to seize control of disputed areas between the central government and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Iran-backed groups, including the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Imam Ali, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Saraya al-Khorasani, have been active in the disputed territories since 2014.

At the same time, these militias under the PMU umbrella reject control by Baghdad and threaten the central government. So much so that Abu Ali Askari, a spokesman for Kataib Hezbollah, was able to say that “the time is appropriate to cut his ears as the ears of a goat are cut,” referring to Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, while militias were able to flex their muscle against the government in the streets of Baghdad amid tensions leading up to the anniversary of Soleimani’s assassination.

Aiming to limit US influence, Iran has been gradually reshaping Iraq’s internal and security policy since 2003. While millions are still paying the price of the war on terror in Iraq, which resulted in the collapse of the political and economic systems followed by a campaign of terror by the Islamic State, Iran continues to consolidate its power, both in military and political spheres.

After an 18-year-long story of invasion and with the US poised to withdraw its combat forces, Iran’s hegemony over Iraq will inevitably

come to fruition. The sectarian and ethnic emphasis within the framework of the government quota system not only prevents the formation of independent Iraqi identity but also keeps fragile social fault lines dynamic, an opportunity that Iran will, without doubt, continue to exploit.

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Why Texas’ Abortion Law Matters

Monica Weller
September 13, 2021

The lack of judicial deterrence against a new Texas abortion law indicates a trend that will severely curtail women’s bodily autonomy.

It has not yet been 50 years since women were able to open a bank account without a male cosigner or since Roe v. Wade was passed in 1973 ensuring women the right to safe and legal abortion. However, by refusing to halt the implementation of Texas’s anti-abortion law, Senate Bill 8, the US Supreme Court has failed to protect the rights and bodily autonomy of all pregnant persons in Texas.

As written, the law allows private individuals to pursue legal action against anyone suspected of assisting an abortion past when a fetal heartbeat is detectable, which is generally agreed to be around the sixth week of pregnancy. According to the Guttmacher Institute, prior to the enforcement of Texas’ new anti-abortion law, while there were barriers to dissuade or prevent women from having abortions, no state directly forbade the procedure before the 20-week mark.

However, the lack of judicial deterrence against the new Texas law indicated trends

moving forward that will severely curtail women's bodily autonomy and ability to make personal health decisions.

Six Weeks

Globally, 36% of countries allow abortions upon request, including the United States. The most common gestational limit across these countries is 12 weeks — far less than US national regulations and the typical viability of a pregnancy but twice the allowance for women under the new Texas law.

In Texas, it is estimated that between 85% and 90% of women who obtain abortions are at least six weeks into their pregnancies, meaning that the new law will effectively nullify the vast majority of abortions in the state. As Texas is the second-largest US state after California, its more than 29 million inhabitants making up approximately 8.8% of the total US population as of 2020, around 7 million Texans are directly affected by the new legislation.

Additionally, due to the implementation of S.B. 8, the distance for a woman who is over six weeks pregnant to find abortion services has increased from 12 miles to 248 miles. While clinics that provide abortions, such as Planned Parenthood, remain open, they are preemptively turning away patients that are over the six-week mark in order to protect themselves from lawsuits.

One bright spot amid Texas' new "sue thy neighbor" law was the temporary restraining order issued by a local Texas District Court that prevents the organization Texas Right to Life and its associates from suing abortion providers and health care workers.

While S.B. 8 doesn't criminalize abortion, upcoming laws, including Oklahoma's anti-abortion bill that is due to take effect on November 1, will. As currently written, the Oklahoma law would make any person who performs or induces an abortion on a pregnant woman without first testing for embryonic cardiac activity guilty of homicide.

This bears a passing resemblance to the strict anti-abortion Articles 256 through 259 of the Revised Penal Code of the Philippines, which allow for the imprisonment of women and anyone who would assist them in conducting an abortion. These laws have led a World Health Organization study to declare the reduction of safe abortion options as one of three key challenges for women's health, accounting for up to 20% of maternal deaths in the Philippines.

If legal abortion in the US is further restricted, Americans should expect to see upticks in death rates of women and people who can become pregnant, particularly among the most vulnerable and poor populations in areas that severely restrict abortion.

In comparison to a wave of anti-abortion laws in the United States and Europe, other nations have been working to decriminalize abortion. After a decades-long struggle, abortion was decriminalized in South Korea on January 1 this year. Most recently, on September 7, Mexico's Supreme Court has ruled that it is unconstitutional to punish abortion as a crime, which will provide a path for the legalization of the procedure across the country.

However, in both countries laws to facilitate abortion procedural processes remain nebulous, and Mexico is likely to face future internal resistance as only three states and Mexico City previously allowed abortions on request.

Long-Term Impacts

By failing to halt the implementation of S.B. 8, the Texas government and the Supreme Court have paved the way for further restrictions on abortions and the oppression of women. While the Justice Department, led by Attorney General Merrick B. Garland, announced it would protect women who seek abortions under the new Texan law and sued the state on September 9, the immediate increase in fear, repression and the inevitable long-term negative impacts among both patients and health care providers cannot be understated.

The Supreme Court is expected to hear several other anti-abortion laws in the upcoming year, most critically the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* in Mississippi, which is attempting to ban all abortions beyond 15 weeks. If the Supreme Court decides in favor of the law, as it is expected to, experts like Ian Millhiser believe it will lead to the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* and the dissolution of the right to abortion in the United States.

In turn, this could dismantle the national right to abortion, and activists fear there will be no protection against further disenfranchisement of the rights and bodily autonomy of all pregnant individuals.

In opposing this, abortion rights advocates like Kathryn Kolbert of the Center for Reproductive Rights emphasize the need to turn to the legislative process, win elections and develop long-term strategies. However, the polarized nature of the American state and the parallel advance of restrictive voting laws means that the future of women's rights and bodily autonomy in the US remains dim.

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The 9/11 Boomerang Comes Back to America

Ali Demirdas
September 13, 2021

The US war machine inadvertently created a ripple effect the implications of which have been felt far beyond the Middle East.

The violent attack on the US Capitol that defiled the very foundations of “the beacon of democracy” not only violently

jolted the American psyche but astonished the world. While many scratched their heads and asked why this was happening, many others pointed to Donald Trump as being culpable for, as some put it, “the coup attempt.” However, this determination is far too myopic and fails to take into account the much bigger picture, one that has been two decades in the making.

The grave mistakes that the post-9/11 Washington administrations made in Afghanistan and Iraq have contributed to the rupture of American society, ultimately culminating in the cataclysmic events of January 6. It permanently stained America's global image as the promoter and defender of democracy. One wonders if the masterminds of the 9/11 attacks may have actually succeeded in their mission to undermine America's democratic ethos.

War on Terror

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration acquired from Congress the Authorization of Use of Military Force against a wide array of people or groups that “planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks or harbored such organizations or persons.” Within weeks, the US assembled a global coalition of more than 50 nation-states, initiating Operation Enduring Freedom, which quickly ended the Taliban's five-year reign.

Then came Colin Powell's infamous speech at the United Nations, in which the Bush administration desperately tried to justify an invasion of Iraq. Having been unable to garner support, Washington initiated its March 2003 campaign unilaterally.

While the initially stated objectives of both invasions were reached — the toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq — the vaguely defined global war on terror required the US to maintain a gargantuan military footprint in the wider Middle East region. In 2011, President Barack Obama raised the total number of military personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq to a massive 100,000.

The relentless US military war machine across the region inadvertently created a ripple effect the implications of which have been felt far and away, in Europe and across the Atlantic: refugees.

In Afghanistan, an estimated 50,000 civilians were killed as a direct result of the 20-year war, 20,000 of them in US airstrikes. Furthermore, CIA-funded Afghan paramilitary forces are known to have committed egregious abuses against the local population in the name of the fight against the Taliban. The extreme corruption of the US-backed governments of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani further alienated and oppressed the Afghan people.

In Iraq, the US deposing of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent de-Baathification — the removal and exclusion of any military or civilian associated with his regime — initiated fierce sectarian violence where the Shia Arabs, once oppressed by Hussein, began their retribution. Hussein's generals, in turn, mounted a Sunni insurgency, which ultimately morphed into the Islamic State (IS, or Daesh).

In 2015, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who helped Bush invade Iraq, acknowledged that “Without the Iraq War, there would be no ISIS.” Daesh made its biggest gains by steamrolling into Syria in 2014. At its peak, the terrorist group controlled almost a third of Syria and much of central Iraq. Daesh's push across Iraq and Syria created more refugees.

The US-led coalition then embarked on an extremely destructive military operation in late 2016 to retake Mosul and Raqqa from Daesh. It is estimated that the indiscriminate bombing of those two cities caused the death of more than 11,000 civilians. Furthermore, the US-backed proxies, particularly the Democratic Union Party, were accused by Amnesty International of committing ethnic cleansing in Syria.

Anti-Immigrant Tide

All things considered, the US-led war on terror in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria has directly or indirectly created refugees and migrants

numbering in the millions, whose last stop is generally the European Union. The world watched in shock as migrants tried to cross the Mediterranean in overflowing boats; those who were successful found themselves scaling barbed-wire fences in countries whose borders otherwise allow unhindered travel.

The migrant crisis became particularly severe in 2015. According to the UN, an estimated 800,000 migrants and refugees, fleeing conflict and persecution in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq arrived on European shores that year.

The growing refugee crisis began to shape the European political scene, giving rise to right-wing and populist politicians, threatening the EU's liberal and democratic foundations. In Poland, the anti-migrant, xenophobic, Euroskeptic Law and Justice party won the 2015 parliamentary elections by a landslide.

Hungary witnessed the consolidation of power by right-wing Prime Minister Victor Orban around the rhetoric of a migrant invasion. Citing the need to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, parliament granted extraordinary powers to Orban, turning him into a de-facto autocrat who, as many experts believe, has suffocated Hungarian democracy.

Most notably, the proponents of Brexit exploited the migrant crisis to scare voters into supporting the bid to leave the European Union. Nigel Farage, the leader of the far-right UK Independence Party and an ardent advocate of Brexit, produced a poster showing thousands of refugees crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border in 2015. The words “BREAKING POINT” were emblazoned across the picture, above a line that read: “We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders.”

Around 75% of the pro-Brexit voters cited immigration as the most important issue the UK faced. In October 2015, the anti-immigration Swiss People's Party won Switzerland's parliamentary elections by a landslide, swinging the country to the right. Many other conservative parties across Europe considerably increased their votes as well.

It appeared that the 2015 rapidly booming refugee influx constituted a major turning point for much of European politics in terms of the right-wing upsurge. The anti-immigrant tide didn't spare the United States either. In his 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump often pointed to the migrant crisis in Europe to make a case for tough immigration policies along the US-Mexico border and for the need to build a wall.

On April 28, 2016, he said: "Look at what's happening all over Europe. It's a mess and we don't need it. ... When you look at that migration, you see so many young, strong men. Does anyone notice that? Am I the only one? Young, strong men. And you're almost like, 'Why aren't they fighting?' You don't see that many women and children." According to Pew Research Center, around 65% of Trump supporters viewed immigration as a "very big problem" for the United States.

America threw a boomerang at the greater Middle East at the turn of the century. It struck Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya, among others, causing death and devastation. A decade later, it moved on to Europe, leading to the gradual revival of the "menace" the Europeans have tried to bury for so long, that of right-wing ultranationalism.

Ultimately, the returning boomerang arrived on US shores, propelling Trump to the White House. As a result, the American public has never been so divided, not since the Civil War. On January 6, the boomerang finally returned to Congress, revealing the ever-growing weakness of American democracy.

The abrupt and disastrous withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August is expected to produce even more refugees, creating a crisis that will hit Europe even harder than the one in 2015. This alone indicates that the policymakers in Washington have failed to learn lessons from the last two decades.

As China is fast ascending toward global hegemony, the West in general and the US in particular are facing tremendous challenges. The

questions yet to be answered are whether past mistakes constitute a lesson for the future. What has America learned from the tragedy of 9/11?

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Germany and France Head Into Two Very Different Elections

Hans-Georg Betz
September 15, 2021

With elections on the horizon, the mood in Germany and France could not be more different.

On September 26, German voters will go to the polls to elect a new Bundestag. The election marks the end of the Merkel era. It is supposed to ring in a new beginning, an Aufbruch, as they say in German. What is largely missing, however, is Aufbruchsstimmung — a certain positive mood fueled by expectations. It appears that the Germans don't expect very much, whatever the outcome of the election.

The outcome, in turn, is completely open. The composition of the post-Merkel government depends on how many votes each of the major parties will manage to capture. Several coalitions are possible, center-right, but also center-left. Much hinges on the results of the Greens and the liberals. And there is the additional factor of the radical populist right, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which commands around 10% of the vote.

Shunned by all other parties, the AfD remains a nuisance factor, particularly in its strongholds in the eastern part of the country where it has established itself as the voice of all those who feel disregarded and disrespected, who consider

themselves second-class citizens in unified Germany.

No Alternative

Next year, French voters are called upon to elect a new president of the republic. As it looks now, nothing will change. Macron is likely to get reelected, largely by default. As Margaret Thatcher once famously put it, albeit in an entirely different context, “There is no alternative.”

In French presidential elections, there is, of course, always an alternative. The alternative is Marine Le Pen, leader of the Rassemblement National (National Rally), the rejuvenated, remodeled successor to her father’s National Front.

Marine Le Pen has gone a long way to refurbish and embellish the face of France’s “extreme” right, to the point where many on the hard right no longer wish to be associated with the party. Their charge: Marine Le Pen is far too much to the left.

The results of the recent regional elections have shown that Le Pen’s strategy to moderate her party’s image did not work. It had hoped to win at least one or two regions but came out of the election with empty hands. Surveys paint a similar picture. Although the party records some gains among a few groups like the youth, overall, its base of support has been stagnant. Nothing suggests that this is likely to change in the foreseeable future.

This in itself is quite remarkable. It is generally thought that the far right does particularly well in times of crisis. This was the case, most recently, in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis that boosted the fortunes of a number of radical right-wing populist parties in Europe. Today, at least in France, the situation is even more propitious for the radical right, yet Marine Le Pen has largely failed to capitalize on it.

If in Germany the general mood is somber these days, in France it is outright morose — and alarmist, and panicky. The word is *déclin*. To be

sure, the French have always had a certain penchant for conjuring up the specter of decline, more often than not informed by the fear that the country was falling behind its neighbor to the east.

In 1953, as France was about to embark on what would come to be known as the *Trente Glorieuses* — the postwar “golden age,” a point of reference for contemporary French nostalgia — prominent politicians in all seriousness proclaimed that the time of decline had come. Some 30 years later, different times, same refrain. In the 1980s, leading publications were publishing national surveys exploring the decline of France.

Today, history repeats itself once again, perhaps more dramatically and desperately. How else to make sense of a statement by Jérôme Fourquet, in charge of public opinion at Ifop, a premier French polling and market research firm, who compared the situation in France today to the defeat of its army in 1940: One thought France was strong, only to be swept away by Germany.

Wrong Direction

Today again, there is an acute sense that things are going in the wrong direction — that France is falling behind, that it is being relegated to the minor leagues, as Jacques Juillard has put it in the pages of *Le Figaro*. The phrase reflecting these sentiments is “*le grand déclassement*,” which made its way into the public debate in the spring of last year.

It was provoked by the experience of the beginning of the pandemic, particularly the lockdowns, which confined the French to their homes “like in the Middle Ages,” as an editorial in *Le Figaro* put it in late April. And this because the country lacked the industrial capacities to produce the equipment necessary to protect the population or at least furnish protective masks. And of course, once again France was compared to Germany — the country “that managed the pandemic the best.”

In the meantime, that narrative of *le grand déclassment* has been significantly expanded. The most recent example is an expose on France's decline in the field of research and development in the latest issue of *Futuribles*, a decline seriously jeopardizing France's competitive position in the world. Here, as in many other areas, France has been overtaken by Germany, as another editorial in *Le Figaro* noted recently. No wonder the country has fallen into a state of "collective depression," with no end in sight.

The results of the most recent extensive inquiry into the state of French public opinion, Ipsos' *Fractures françaises*, largely confirm that much of the country has fallen into a deep psychological black hole. Some key findings: A large majority of the population (78%) shares the view that France is in decline; 60% think globalization poses a threat to the country; and almost two-thirds that France should protect itself more against today's world.

In the meantime, little appears to have changed. In a survey from August 2020, 55% of respondents said they were pessimistic with regard to their future and that of their children.

If ever there was one, this is the perfect "populist moment." Populist moments go to waste, however, if there is no populist entrepreneur to exploit them. Enter Eric Zemmour, the ubiquitous media personality, journalist, editorialist, polemicist, provocateur and the great new white hope for all those on the right who have written off Marine Le Pen's National Rally.

Like so many on the far right, Zemmour is obsessed with "*le grand remplacement*," the notion that one day in the not-so-far future, immigrants are going to "replace" the native population. As he recently put it on French TV, by "2050, France will be half Islamic; by 2100 we will be in an Islamic republic."

Zemmour might not (yet) have announced his candidacy, but he certainly has said all the right things to rally the troops, on immigration, Islam, the decline of the nation. His grand idea: Today France is divided between those who fear *le*

grand rechauffement (global warming) and those who fear *le grand déclassment* (downward social mobility).

This was the conflict that not so long ago provoked the eruption of social protest associated with the yellow vests. The movement came to a screeching halt with the beginning of the pandemic, only to morph into a new one, this time against the government's anti-COVID-19 measures, against vaccinations and the threat of a "health passport." It reflects a growing polarization between the great metropolitan areas and the rest of the country, between cosmopolitanism and parochialism, between an open and a closed society.

These conflicts have been around for some time. With Zemmour, they might have found a new champion — provided he chooses to run for the presidency. With his latest book due to appear in a few days, it might, of course, be no more than a clever ploy to boost sales. In any case, Zemmour promises to remain a nuisance factor on the right that, should he run, is likely to significantly diminish the chances of any center-right candidate progressing to the decisive second round of next year's presidential election.

Compared to France, preelection Germany looks like an island of calm. Yet appearances are deceptive, even in Germany. As has been the case elsewhere in Europe, Germany has been hit hard by the pandemic and, like elsewhere, was not prepared to face a crisis of these dimensions. For a country known for its efficiency, it took quite a long time to get organized.

At the same time, the pandemic laid open the shortfalls of the famed "German model," particularly in the field of communication technology. As a commentary in Germany's premier news magazine *Der Spiegel* put it in March of this year, with respect to the country's handling of the pandemic, Germany received "null Punkte" — zero points.

The pandemic has drastically shown that Germany needs a new beginning. And this was before the catastrophic floods that left entire towns and villages this summer devastated as if

hit by a bombing raid. The floods caused billions worth of damage. At the same time, the extent of the destruction served as a drastic reminder not only that climate change and global warming were real, but also that a continuation of Panglossian politics of neglect would likely end in disaster — and this much sooner than expected.

The message appears to have arrived. A survey from late September found more than 70% of respondents agreeing with the statement that the catastrophe was a direct result of climate change. Some 80% agreed that the government had to do more for the environment. Only a majority of AfD supporters disagreed with both statements.

The combination of a pandemic and a climate catastrophe has seriously damaged Chancellor Angela Merkel's image and, with it, the fortunes of her Christian Democratic Union. For weeks now, the party has been in a free fall in the polls. The most recent polling has it hovering around 20%, some five points behind the Social Democrats, the culmination of a dramatic turnaround that opens the possibility that the next chancellor will come from the center left.

Angela Merkel has recently warned that the upcoming election represents a *Richtungswahl* — an election that will determine which direction the country is going to take. In reality, however, there can only be one direction, toward accelerated decarbonization, toward more social justice, toward a rapid modernization of the country's physical and digital infrastructure.

With the British exit from the European Union and France's self-absorption, Germany is left alone as the uncontested leader in Western Europe. If in the past this was a nightmare scenario, today it is no longer, or at least less so. The new German government better be prepared to assume its responsibilities.

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America's Afghanistan Fiasco: The Buck Stops With Biden

Christopher Schell
September 23, 2021

If its original objective was to maintain stability, then why did Washington abandon the progress made in Afghanistan?

On August 31, President Joe Biden formally drew to a close the war in Afghanistan, touting “the extraordinary success” of the withdrawal of US troops after 20 years of fighting. Despite the incorrect “assumption — that the Afghan government would be able to hold on for a period of time beyond military drawdown,” Biden noted he had “instructed our national security team to prepare for every eventuality — even that one.” Yes, that's right: The chaos we witnessed in the scramble to leave Kabul was all part of a plan.

In the speech, there was, of course, the now-customary blame spread between the Afghan government and former President Donald Trump, but Biden did say that he “takes responsibility for the decision” to evacuate 100,000 Afghans, thereby implicitly distancing himself from the messy withdrawal itself.

Apparently deciding to withdraw all US troops is one thing, the consequences of that decision, another. Americans were assured that ties with our international partners were strengthening. Biden even spoke of the United Nations Security Council passing a resolution carrying a “clear message” that laid out international expectations for the Taliban.

But by the time he did so, the president had already relinquished any leverage the US might employ to make those prospects real. No doubt the Taliban sat upright when they heard a threat as empty as those Washington had made to the Houthis in Yemen, who have paid them rapt attention.

Appearing a little defensive, President Biden underlined: “Let me be clear: Leaving August the 31st is not due to an arbitrary deadline; it was designed to save American lives.” This implies that the original withdrawal date of September 11 was decidedly non-arbitrary— before the withdrawal descended into bedlam.

Biden, who campaigned on his foreign policy experience and the global relationships he had cultivated over his long career, now finds himself saddled with a fiasco that has been compared to the US withdrawal from Vietnam and will be remembered for bodies in free fall, eerily reminiscent of 9/11.

While President Biden and his supporters say this was inevitable and the decision to withdraw forces was made out of necessity, the broader view suggests that misjudgment, mishandling and a lack of foresight were the culprits of the botched evacuation.

A Series of Missteps

When the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was announced by then-President Trump, NATO partners felt blindsided. At the time of Biden’s withdrawal announcement, 35 other NATO member states, led by Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, collectively had approximately 7,000 personnel in Afghanistan, according to official figures. They were understandably angry at not being consulted.

After Biden became president, a review by his administration reaffirmed the withdrawal, also without consulting with allies. While assurances of regional US support force were proffered, few doubted assets outside Afghanistan would be substantially less effective than America’s in-country posture. Where could the naysayers have developed such an idea? Perhaps they were listening to what our own military was saying at the time.

On April 20, Marine Corps General Kenneth McKenzie Jr. addressed the difficulties of an “over-the-horizon” approach when he said at a hearing before the House Armed Services Committee that “It’s difficult to [strike a target]

at range — but it’s not impossible to do that at range.” General McKenzie also said of post-withdrawal peacekeeping and power-projection capabilities: “I don’t want to make light of it. I don’t want to put on rose-colored glasses and say it’s going to be easy to do.”

Leading up to the hearing, on April 9, the director of National Intelligence released a report that contained “the collective insights of the Intelligence Community,” stating that “prospects for a peace deal will remain low during the next year” because “the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory.” In bold lettering, the report made clear that “the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support.”

Two months later, in mid-June, an assessment prepared at the request of General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Kabul could fall six months after the US military left.

Almost from the moment the withdrawal encountered problems, the president alluded to inaccurate intelligence estimates, but weaknesses in the withdrawal plans became evident early on. Indeed, signs emerged in classified assessments sent over the summer that things were not going well.

The most damning of these was a State Department dissent cable, signed by 23 embassy officials and sent on July 13, that described the Taliban’s movement and the impending collapse of the Afghan government. Although the cable was immediately reviewed by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, it was largely ignored.

In addressing the dissent cable, President Biden concluded this assessment was outside the broader consensus, but even the rosier estimates maintained the Afghan government would fall in 18 to 24 months — just long enough for a September 11 commemoration and the mid-term elections.

The most optimistic estimate tacitly acknowledged that the Taliban would capture remaining US weapons and supplies, and that forfeiture of materiel to the enemy was inevitable. In effect, the decision to pull out

consciously contemplated the inadvertent arming of the Taliban within no more than two years.

Between Nation Building and Giving Up

Oft stated, though, it is that the speed of Taliban advance was unanticipated, that intelligence agencies were equally caught off guard by the departure on July 12 of the top US commander, General Scott Miller. Perhaps most shocking to the intelligence community and US allies was the withdrawal from the Bagram Air Base on July 2, in the dead of night and without notifying its new Afghan commander.

This had enormously destabilizing consequences, especially on Afghan military capabilities and morale. Intelligence agencies were put in the position of having to guess not only what the Taliban and the Afghan government would do, but also what decisions President Biden would make.

Abandoning Bagram, which had two runways as opposed to Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport's one, was shocking to many. To reduce the number of US soldiers required to defend the embassy and the airlift, operations were limited to the HKIA. This consolidation was later seen as an error, but the military preference for keeping Bagram with its larger, more defensible perimeter became infeasible because of troop constraints placed by Washington.

Blindly optimistic despite signs of looming problems, Biden maintained on July 8 that "The Taliban is not ... the North Vietnamese army. They're not — they're not remotely comparable in terms of capability. There's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of a embassy ... of the United States from Afghanistan. It is not at all comparable."

Biden's statement was buttressed by a false choice: either walk away from Afghanistan or stay in a situation that would, as the president described it, add casualties and put "American men and women back in the middle of a civil war," meaning that the US "would have run the

risk of having to send more troops back into Afghanistan to defend our remaining troops."

As Congressman Dan Crenshaw pointed out, "There are a lot of foreign policy options between nation building and giving up. We found the proper balance in recent years — maintaining a small force that propped up the Afghan government while also giving us the capability to strike at Taliban and other terrorist networks as needed."

Vulnerabilities grew as contractors withdrew, removing air support that had been the lifeblood of the Afghan military. With the Afghan army unable to resupply and pay forces, particularly those at the edge of the Taliban's advances, morale imploded. On August 13, John F. Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, stated that the Afghan military still held advantages against the Taliban, notably, "a capable air force."

But by early July, reports had already come in that Taliban fighters were executing pilots, and the Pentagon still had not formulated a plan to keep Afghan aviators flying after US withdrawal. Recognizing the air-power advantage was all for naught once the planes stopped flying, a mere three weeks before he fled Kabul, then-President Ashraf Ghani pled with Biden for air support — to no avail.

Dwindling food and munitions, a lack of reserve support and tardy soldier pay all contributed to reduced capabilities and a weakened willingness to fight. In some cases, the Taliban would offer government fighters safe passage and the equivalent of a month's salary to lay down their arms. Whatever plan was in place, it is now clear that the issue was not one of "a perception around the world and in parts of Afghanistan ... that things aren't going well," as Biden suggested to Ghani. Once the Afghan military lost air support, it was lights out.

Political Choices

Joe Biden has repeatedly claimed he had no choice but to comply with Trump's deal signed with the Taliban in Doha last year, but it wasn't at all obvious he was committed to that course of

action when he ordered a review of the withdrawal. His own secretary of defense, Lloyd Austin, visited Afghanistan in mid-March, saying he was there “to listen and learn,” promising that “It’ll inform my participation in the review that we’re undergoing with the president.”

Biden has reversed Trump’s policies in many other areas, making changes that have led to a surge of immigration at the southern border, setting a two-decade record. He has rejoined the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement, and is seeking to negotiate a deal with Iran similar to the discarded Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

If, as this administration maintains, the US left Afghanistan because the Taliban have been weakened over decades of war and it was a time to seek an exit, why is Washington negotiating with Iranians who chant “death to America” at every turn and are more capable than ever?

Prior to the August 26 explosion at Kabul’s airport that killed over 170 civilians and 13 American service members, there had been no US combat fatalities in Afghanistan since February 2, 2020. That, alongside the choice of an emotionally significant withdrawal date of September 11, suggests that the decision was a largely symbolic political statement and the plans for how to execute this mission were engineered backward with devastating consequences.

A US force amounting to 2,500 — or 3,500, as per European and Afghan officials — was a small footprint, yet it held valuable assets such as the Bagram airfield, strategically located between eastern Iran and western Pakistan. Giving up those assets, in conjunction with the collapse of the Afghan government, led to a substantial reduction in US intelligence capabilities by early July, a trend that has only accelerated to the point that the US has now lost 90% of its intelligence collection capabilities.

In a mountainous, disparate place like Afghanistan, where the tribal loyalties are fierce, the human component is everything. Over-the-horizon strikes seldom work, particularly if you don’t know who the target is — or should be.

The likelihood of creating a terrorist safe haven seems to grow by the day. Weighted against damage to US credibility and prestige, not to mention the threat to the homeland, it is hard to imagine how a nominal support force could not be justified, considering the much greater deployment of US troops in places like Germany and South Korea.

If the objective is to withdraw from “forever wars,” then why pull so few soldiers from an unstable part of the world where the Taliban and al-Qaeda (who the US Department of Defense say keep a cozy relationship) plot against the West only to leave tens of thousands of troops stationed residually from World War II and the Korean War? If the objective is to maintain stability, as it appears to be in South Korea, then why abandon the progress made in Afghanistan?

Inconsistent Principles

Some have praised President Biden for the consistency — others would say obstinacy — of his decision, but the principle of withdrawal and the manner in which it was conducted has been inconsistently applied. In the primary debate in October 2020, then-candidate Biden had this to say about the Trump administration’s decision to pull out troops from Syria that undermined the position of America’s Kurdish allies:

“I would not have withdrawn the troops and I would not have withdrawn the additional thousand troops who are in Iraq...”

“It has been the most shameful thing that any president has done in modern history — excuse me, in terms of foreign policy. And the fact of the matter is, I’ve never seen a time — and I’ve spent thousands of hours in the Situation Room, I’ve spent many hours on the ground in those very places, in Syria and in Iraq, and guess what? Our commanders across the board, former and present, are ashamed of what’s happening here.”

In a speech in Iowa the same month, Biden blasted Trump for creating a humanitarian crisis and undermining national security. “The events of this past week ... have had devastating clarity on just how dangerous he is to our national

security, to our leadership around the world and to the lives of the brave women and men serving in uniform.” Trump, he said, “sold out” the Kurds and gave the Islamic State (IS) “a new lease on life.”

“Donald Trump, I believe — it’s not comfortable to say this about a president — but he is a complete failure as a commander in chief,” Biden said. “He’s the most reckless and incompetent commander in chief we’ve ever had.”

The White House appears to be reeling from the uniformly negative coverage, but more than a few must be thinking, “Et tu, Biden?” While the president rejects criticism of his Afghanistan departure and shows no signs of altering his position, America’s weakened posture in the world is being exploited by its enemies.

Already the Chinese, the Russians and the Iranians are asking countries to question US reliability. Moscow has objected to setting up US military bases outside Afghanistan that might have effected a less chaotic withdrawal. Meanwhile, China, no doubt giddy at seeing US forces vacate Bagram just across their border and likely eager to control it themselves, seized a propitious moment to threaten Taiwan, suggesting resistance to reunification is futile.

If the withdrawal from Afghanistan is to “focus on shoring up America’s core strengths to meet the strategic competition with China and other nations,” then the US should seize upon the opportunity to reassure Taiwan and reiterate our constancy. Thus far, we have only heard posturing as Biden’s climate envoy, John Kerry, seeks nods for his cause against China’s intractable “two lists and three bottom lines” that would have Washington abandon its allies in democratic Taiwan.

All We Left Behind

When met with concerns about partners questioning America’s credibility on the world stage, Biden deflected by saying: “The fact of the matter is I have not seen that. Matter of fact, the exact opposite ... we’re acting with dispatch ...

committing to what we said we would do.” The president appears not to be watching much TV or reading the news. According to numerous reports, America’s NATO allies are furious, and snubbing British Prime Minister Boris Johnson isn’t winning him any more friends in the “mother of parliaments.”

Meanwhile, Europe, Pakistan, India and others are worried about terrorists entering the regional vacuum, not to mention fleeing Afghan refugees looking for a haven at a time when the absorption of Syrian refugees has strained government resources. Many of these countries are anticipating another massive influx of refugees. As for those the US has evacuated, conditions were reportedly squalid and, according to an email from supervisory special agent Colin Sullivan, “are of our own doing.”

Although conventional thought by the administration held a swift withdrawal would prevent greater destabilization to the government of Afghanistan, it was fanciful to maintain we could get everyone out in such haste. A now-common complaint by president Biden’s defenders is that the US didn’t start evacuating Afghan allies when Trump ordered the withdrawal. Yet that is wholly inconsistent with what Biden did.

While Biden announced the withdrawal on April 14, the airlift did not begin until July 30, and the withdrawal deadline was moved from September 11 to a more politically palatable but hastier August 31. Since then, cable news and any number of articles have focused on those the US left behind, including an Afghan who served as an interpreter and rescued Biden when his helicopter was stranded during a snowstorm in 2008.

The administration prefers to focus on the hundreds of US citizens who still remain in Afghanistan, but how many special immigrant visa (SIV) holders or those who “earned them” through their bravery and assistance have been left behind? By some estimates, a quarter of a million Afghans helped the US during the war, and rumors now circulate that the Russians are

collecting the data of all calls going to the US that is being handed over to the Taliban.

The Taliban is not known for paying friendly courtesy calls. Secretary Blinken recently said that we have “now learned from hard experience that the SIV process was not designed to be done in an evacuation emergency.” But how to square that with repeated complaints from the administration about the SIV backlog and the 14 steps required to gain one or the delay between announcing withdrawal and airlifting people out? All of this seems to make US departure appear at once precipitous and callous.

A Common Excuse

A common excuse made by the Biden administration is that many people do not want to leave. This was echoed time and again, but it conflicts with the thousands of people who have assisted with private efforts to extract America’s friends. Whatever the reasons for the poorly executed withdrawal, for those who did make it out, thanks may be given not necessarily to the US government but to the informal band of wealthy donors, veterans and CIA analysts who formed groups such as the Commercial Task Force in the Peacock Lounge of the Willard Hotel.

In that one instance, about 5,000 people were evacuated. Other groups have sprung up to guide refugees to safety or give them passwords to write on posters that would help them gain entry to the airport. Biden acknowledged the “network of volunteers,” and although many do not like hearing it, these groups have in many ways been more effective with fewer resources than the federal efforts.

For all of the president’s attempts to claim that “we planned for every contingency” and that “the buck stops with me,” the private efforts were no less necessary in the face of a self-reinforcing view that an ill-conceived, poorly-executed plan during the fighting season is proof of its necessity. When Biden said on August 16 that “the developments of the past week reinforced that ending U.S. military involvement in

Afghanistan now was the right decision,” it was a justification as inversely logical as the withdrawal.

While there were no helicopters on the roof of our embassy, officials there were nevertheless evacuated in situ. Originally, the Pentagon maintained that the embassy evacuation was “a very narrowly focused, temporary mission to facilitate the safe and orderly departure of additional civilian personnel from the State Department. ... Once this mission is over ... we anticipate having less than 1,000 U.S. troops on the ground to support the diplomatic presence in Kabul, which we all agree we still want to be able to have.”

We now know the embassy, one of America’s largest, is shuttered, with Taliban graffiti scrawled on it, and policy is run out of Qatar. While Biden is unlikely to have any “mission accomplished” signs up, US efforts have been reduced to “a new diplomatic mission” that will apparently work in concert with the Taliban.

As it stands now, the Taliban head the government in Kabul, Islamic State Khorasan is making moves, US “collaborators” are being hunted down and the Haqqani Network is ascendent. It is striking to hear the same people who cite the \$2-trillion cost of the war in Afghanistan are also those who push for the abandonment of US labors, willfully or otherwise ignoring the promise of a renewed terrorist safe haven.

It does not take much imagination to picture the Biden administration in the same position that President Barack Obama found himself in when he pulled out of Iraq. As former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz reminds us: “Mr. Biden should have known to expect this because something similar happened 10 years ago when we withdrew our forces from Iraq. Lacking U.S. air support and advisory capabilities on which the Iraqi army had grown to depend, it collapsed under an assault by Islamic State. Three years after the withdrawal, President Obama had to rush 1,500 troops back to Iraq to assist in the

fight to drive out ISIS. By 2016 that number had grown to 5,000.”

A Question of Competence

Criticism assails President Biden from all quarters, with a few observing that he had planned a 10-day vacation to Camp David as the withdrawal was reaching a crescendo. Top Obama adviser, David Axelrod, has said: “you cannot defend the execution here. This has been a disaster. ... It is heartbreaking, it is depressing, and it’s a failure. And he needs to own that failure.”

Nor is Biden finding many friends among former US ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, and Princeton’s Robert George, both of whom have some unflattering opinions that echo that of Robert Gates, who served as secretary of defense under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Secretary Gates wrote that Biden is someone who has “been wrong on nearly every major foreign policy and national security issue over the past four decades.”

Trust in America and in Joe Biden’s judgment is at a low ebb, and it is difficult to understand how the president developed a reputation for competence. On July 8, he said that “The mission was accomplished in that we ... got Osama bin Laden, and terrorism is not emanating from that part of the world.” This elides the fact that it was Biden who dissented in planning the operation that would kill bin Laden.

While Biden was not right about bin Laden, bin Laden might have been correct about Biden. When deciding not to target Biden when he was vice president, bin Laden described him as “totally unprepared for that post [of president], which will lead the US into a crisis.” Contrary to the president’s belief, it also seems that terrorism may soon be “emanating from that part of the world” again.

That’s not to say there isn’t plenty of blame to go around. A commander in the Afghan army, General Sami Sadat, has kind words for neither Biden nor Trump, nor did former National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster pull any

punches when he said in mid-August that “This collapse goes back to the capitulation agreement of 2020. The Taliban didn’t defeat us. We defeated ourselves.”

Indeed, President Trump’s former defense secretary, Mark Esper, called the Doha agreement with the Taliban “conditions-based” and said Trump “undermined” his own plan when the drawdown continued despite a lack of progress by the Taliban on the agreement’s provisions. The Biden administration would have been well within its right to renegotiate the drawdown in light of the Taliban’s unwillingness to honor its end of the bargain.

What Biden had hoped would be an orderly, triumphant return of the US military — a hope still maintained by the Department of Defense as late as July 6 — turned into the posturing fecklessness of a nakedly political stunt.

Biden has repeatedly telegraphed his punch with, however awkwardly denied, artificial deadlines that were tethered to very little outside of political opportunism. This was never more obvious than when September 11 was set as the withdrawal deadline. In choosing that date, his hand was tipped, and a plan to end the 20-year war in Afghanistan was revealed as a political stunt, an unnecessary capitulation masquerading as destiny, vainglory turned tragedy.

An Ignominious Retreat

The Economist writes of the US withdrawal: “If the propagandists of the Taliban had scripted the collapse of America’s 20-year mission to reshape Afghanistan, they could not have come up with more harrowing images” — a withdrawal where “Mr. Biden failed to show even a modicum of care for the welfare of ordinary Afghans.” In the wake of this irresponsible and costly withdrawal, there is a now burning conviction by America’s enemies that if God wills it, their adversaries will be vanquished.

That is a devastatingly effective emotional tool and recruiting argument that all but assures we will see this enemy again in closer quarters. When President Biden paid his respects on

September 11, it was against a backdrop of triumphant marches elsewhere for the jihadist cause.

While some may sigh with resignation at the “inevitable” calamity unfolding, they ignore a great number of facts and forget the indiscriminate brutality the US attempted to excise when it entered Afghanistan. They shrug at the lost lives of brave US and Afghan soldiers (2,500 and 66,000 respectively) who fought for that cause. To claim all of this was preordained is to foreclose a possible, if uneasy, calm and greet with resignation — a decidedly un-American trait — the reversion to greater violence and the tribalism that all but precluded loyalty to a central government in Kabul.

To declare the withdrawal just with rhetorical genuflections toward those who died is to forget the sacrifices of the dead, which in many cases were made for causes beyond themselves or even their country. It invites feuding terrorist groups to reconstitute and gain strength.

Accusing the Afghan government of not defending the gains of the past 20 years is at once to blame the victim and to banish the memory of what was there before the US entered and what will surely reappear in its absence. It is to debase women’s lives by accepting as banal the butchery Bibi Aisha survived, whose June 2010 Time magazine cover shocked the world and hung above my desk for years as a reminder of the inhumanity we were fighting.

It is to indict exiled President Ashraf Ghani in the face of impossible odds for remembering history and the fate of another ousted president, Mohammad Najibullah — the last Afghan leader to see the Taliban roll into Kabul in 1996. Najibullah was captured by the Taliban, castrated and, according to Robert Parry, had his severed genitals stuffed in his mouth before being strung up from a lamppost.

Although it may be said by the current administration that withdrawal was necessary and an earlier, better coordinated drawdown would have destabilized the Afghan government and the country, we have to ask what is more

destabilizing: rolling up the carpet or yanking the rug from underneath a mission that brought stability so costly in blood and treasure?

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Return of Jane: Would Stricter Rules Bring Back Illegal Abortion?

Jennifer Wider
September 24, 2021

Before Roe v Wade, the Abortion Counseling Service of Women’s Liberation, known as the Jane Collective, operated an underground network across the United States.

Before the landmark 1973 US Supreme Court decision in Roe v Wade that protected a woman’s right to choose to terminate a pregnancy without government intervention, many women found themselves in a desperate position. If a woman, especially a low-income woman, wanted an abortion, she often had to risk her life to get one.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, abortion was so dangerous that in 1965, roughly 17% of deaths relating to pregnancy and childbirth were the result of illegal abortions. The shocking statistic is unsurprising given that in the 1950s and 1960s, the number of illegal procedures ranged from 200,000 to 1.2 million per year.

Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and women of color were disproportionately affected by strict regulations as many couldn’t afford to travel to places where they could obtain a legal abortion. The levels of morbidity and mortality among this demographic were astounding. While childbirth-related deaths

among white women as a result of abortion stood at one in four in New York City in the early 1960s, the number was one in two for nonwhite and Puerto Rican women.

Born out of this predicament was the Abortion Counseling Service of Women's Liberation, also known as the Jane Collective, founded by Heather Booth as an underground service headquartered in Chicago, Illinois. The main goal of the "Service," as it became known, was to assist women in gaining access to safe and affordable abortions. Many women who were part of Jane were taught to perform abortions for others in need and did so successfully without a medical license.

Laura Kaplan, a member of Jane and author of "The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service," was not surprised when Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed into law one of the country's strictest abortion rules, banning the procedure from as early as six weeks into pregnancy, but she was angry: "I am outraged by this, but even more than Texas, I am the most angry at the Supreme Court's decision to let this blatantly unconstitutional ruling stand."

The six-week mark stipulated by the new legislation means that many women will be barred from accessing abortion services before they even realize they are pregnant. The legislators went a step further by incentivizing private citizens to report and sue providers or anyone helping a woman get an abortion for \$10,000.

Under the new law, the government doesn't enforce the bill — the private citizens of Texas do. This provision was designed to make the law harder to contest in court, but lawsuits are expected. The US Department of Justice has already mounted a legal challenge, positing that it stands "in open defiance of the Constitution."

At the same time, several Latin American countries are loosening their restrictions on abortions. "Predominantly Catholic countries like Argentina and Mexico are making progress, while we are moving backwards," says Kaplan.

Could there be a return of Jane in Texas now that abortion rights are being curtailed? "Women are not going to let women suffer," says Kaplan. "We didn't back then." Starting in 1969, Jane groups popped up all over the country, with women finding their way to one of the services when they were in need.

After New York state legalized abortion, it changed the landscape. White middle-class women could get on a plane and get to New York, but it meant that many young, poor and many women of color were left behind. Kaplan thinks history may repeat itself: "Women with the most need didn't have access to abortion and that will happen again."

It's important to note that after abortion was legalized, less than 0.3% of women, regardless of age, experienced serious complications post-procedure. If the real debate is about the preservation of life — and, indeed, the sanctity of life — we have to look beyond the life of the developing fetus and to the life of the mother as well.

Any rational policy should look at promoting access to birth control and prioritizing the health of the mother by assuring that she has access to safe procedures. Outlawing abortion doesn't work — the story of the Jane Collective has shown that. It won't change people's motivation to terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

As a democratic society, we don't want to throw ourselves back to an underworld that offers subpar care, creates a greater public health problem and endangers the health of women.

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What Is the Ruckus Over AUKUS?

Gary Grappo
September 27, 2021

Political sensibilities aside, is AUKUS the right undertaking for Britain, Australia and the US?

Earlier this month, the US, UK and Australia announced an unprecedented agreement to provide nuclear-powered submarines to the Australian Navy. The move provoked outrage from France, which had been negotiating the sale of conventionally-powered submarines to the Australians.

French ire led to the withdrawal of its ambassadors from Washington and Canberra. This was particularly surprising given France's strong political and security ties — not to mention historical, as America's oldest ally — to both nations. Inexplicably, President Emmanuel Macron did not recall his ambassador to London, prompting some to posit that after Britain's withdrawal from the EU, it didn't matter as much.

It's also very likely that Macron, who has been Europe's strongest advocate on behalf of a stand-alone European defense capability — i.e., less dependence on the US — did not want to alienate Britain in his efforts.

Prenez un Grip!

Leave it to Britain's blunt-speaking prime minister, Boris Johnson, to succinctly lend some reality to the blow-up among allies. Speaking in Washington, DC, Johnson suggested it was “time for some of our dearest friends around the world to prenez un grip about all this and donnez moi un break” — to get a grip and give him a break. A “stab in the back” was how the French publicly described the situation following the announcement of the agreement.

Johnson has it right. This was not a betrayal of the North Atlantic alliance, nor France's especially close ties with Britain or America, or its strong relationship with Australia. While there are unquestionably important strategic elements of this deal, it is a commercial one. Australia wanted to boost its naval defense capabilities in the increasingly competitive and dynamic Western Pacific.

France's conventionally-powered subs would not have been state of the art, requiring periodic surfacing for refueling, and wouldn't be available until 2035. Moreover, Canberra and Australian politicians had already begun to express reservations over these deficiencies and the exorbitant cost.

Enter the Americans, who apparently invited the British to join. In the world of diplomacy and international affairs, all issues are understood to be open for discussion and negotiation. Business is something else, however. Allies and adversaries regularly compete for business and commercial deals. Governments back their businesses and even add sweeteners from time to time to clinch the deal. It's understood; everyone does it. It's business — not personal and not political.

The surprise here is that Paris seemed to be caught unaware of the American-British offer. The French should have suspected others might be talking to the Australians, especially as their own deal was beginning to sour. Their embassies in Washington, London and Canberra, doubtlessly staffed with some of their top diplomats and intelligence and military personnel, should have picked up on it. That is what embassies are for, among other things.

What Is It Good For?

Political sensibilities aside, is this the right undertaking for the three countries? A somewhat qualified answer would be yes. US President Joe Biden has repeatedly made clear America will compete with China in the Western Pacific and around the world. To date, America has shouldered the lion's share of the security

responsibilities in that region, though Japan, South Korea, Australia, Britain and even France also play roles.

Providing the Australians with nuclear-powered subs greatly enhances their own defense capabilities and augments what the US and others are doing to shore up security in the Western Pacific.

It is a genuine security enhancement for the West, giving pause to the Chinese, who themselves possess about a dozen nuclear-powered subs, most dedicated to their ballistic missile submarine fleet. (It is important to note that the AUKUS deal will not provide Australia with nuclear weapons of any kind.)

So, Australian nuclear-powered submarines provide an excellent complement to both American and British nuclear-powered subs as well as those French nuclear submarines deployed to the region. Moreover, while the others deploy their submarines around the world, Australia will likely be confined to the Western Pacific, giving the Western allies a greater presence.

Other Asia-Pacific nations either hailed the deal or remained silent, the latter owing to sensitive trade and other economic arrangements with China they do not wish to jeopardize. After all, they saw what may have provoked all of this, namely China's unusually harsh response to Australia's call for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19, including the still unproven lab leak theory.

Canberra was blasted with a torrent of shockingly virulent verbal attacks from Beijing, which then accused Australia of "dumping" its wines on China and imposed daunting tariffs on future imports. The result was a precipitous decline in Australian wine exports to China, down as much as 96% in the final quarter of 2020.

The response shocked the Australians, who have maintained strong and important trade ties with Beijing and had sought to remain out of the US-China wrangling. But that all changed after Beijing's tough-guy actions. Anti-China

sentiment is now at a peak in Australia's Parliament and among the population. More importantly, the overreaction drove Canberra right back into the waiting arms of its long-time ally, the US. Beijing's so-called wolf-warrior actions against Australia were uncalled for and most definitely counterproductive.

A Win for Biden and the US

France's ruffled feathers notwithstanding, the AUKUS deal leverages one of America's strongest assets in the competition with China, namely its ability to forge alliances and partnerships with nations around the world, based not only on shared interests but very often on shared values. China has no such alliance network — Pakistan, North Korea, Iran and a handful of others hardly amount to what the US has managed in Europe, Asia and elsewhere.

It is perfectly consistent with Biden's repeated assertion that he will forge stronger ties with our allies and work to strengthen alliance networks. No one should be surprised with this natural evolution, a win-win for all involved.

One Asian nation whose response and views will be critical to US interests is India. India is a member of a new, American-initiated group known as the Quad, comprising Australia, India, Japan and the US. New Delhi has distanced the AUKUS deal from the Quad but otherwise remained neutral in its response, though commentary ranges from strong endorsement to equally strong criticism and warnings of an Indo-Pacific arms race.

The latter may be a bit exaggerated. Australia already has submarines, and soon these will be nuclear-powered, allowing them to remain submerged much longer or even indefinitely, depending on whether their fuel is high or low-enriched uranium. The latter would require surfacing about every 10 years or so to refuel.

But that still leaves the question of France. One might have and, indeed, should have expected some heads up to the French in advance of the announcement. France is a core

indispensable member of NATO and one of America's most important allies.

The countries have already begun to patch up their tiff. Biden and Macron spoke last week and will meet next month when Biden attends the G-20 summit. The US president endorsed his French counterpart's call for greater European defense autonomy, "consistent with NATO" objectives and obligations. Macron returned his ambassador to Washington.

Nevertheless, Washington would be wise to find some way to include Paris in this deal. If its underlying basis is security and strengthening alliances, then why not include this vital ally? France already possesses significant blue-water naval capabilities as well as genuine interests in the Pacific, with territories in French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna.

Moreover, the French could be brought in to supply or develop the nuclear-power trains for the Australian submarines using low-enriched uranium, which fuel France's nuclear subs. (Britain and the US use high-enriched uranium.) The use of low-enriched uranium would also help keep AUKUS from potentially running afoul of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It is better to have France on board the AUKUS fleet than not. The most awkward bit: What to do with the added "F"?

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The Wicked Problem of Climate, Blah, Blah, Blah

Arek Sinanian
September 30, 2021

Should we expect more of the same "blah, blah, blah" from world leaders at COP26 in Glasgow?

In December 2019, I wrote an article on Fair Observer titled, "Climate Change: One Step Forward, While Standing Still." It was a cheeky piece, looking somewhat depressingly at the progress of the United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC) meetings, otherwise known as the Conference of the Parties (COP).

The article was written in anticipation of COP25, which was due to take place in Madrid later that month. In it, I likened the global dealings with climate change to being on a travelator walking backward while it gets faster.

The next climate conference, which was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is COP26 and takes place in Glasgow in November.

Greta Thunberg Mocks World Leaders

In the meantime, Greta Thunberg, a prominent young climate activist, has been expressing similar sentiments. On September 28, at the Youth4Climate conference in Milan, the 18-year-old gave a speech in which she, in her inimitable manner, mocked world leaders for their "blah, blah, blah" of empty words and little action.

Whatever your views about her message and whether, as some have suggested, she should be at school instead of giving speeches, Thunberg has become the global voice of youth. Her voice is uncompromising — at times angry — and reverberating around the world. It's no wonder, because one of the ironies of the climate debate is that the very group of people who will be most

affected by climate change have the least sway and power to avert or abate it.

Nevertheless, the voice of young people around the world pleading for more urgent and positive action against climate change is getting louder, and perhaps, just perhaps, leaders are slowly finding ways to address the issue. But it hasn't been easy and will continue to create internal political difficulties for many leaders for years to come.

As explained in my book “A Climate for Denial,” climate change is a wicked problem. Wicked problems are those that are multifaceted, changing and difficult to address because they are a complex mix of economic, financial, political, cultural and technical issues. For climate change, inter-generational factors and short-termism create additional challenges. Quite simply, to fully address the impact of climate change, we need to change the way we access, generate and utilize energy, the driver of all our activities on the planet.

Did I say simply? The entire world has to do this in concert — and equitably and urgently. Global agreement on any major issue has never been easy, quick or complete. Climate change is one of those. The Conference of the Parties involves almost 200 nations, all with their disparate issues, from the very poor to the highly-developed industrial giants.

But climate change gives current world leaders little choice but to find a way out of the quagmire. As I wrote in another opinion piece titled, “There’s a Rock Heading for Earth,” if there was a rock, half the size of our moon heading at great speed in our direction, how would we respond? Would leaders continue to meet once a year and discuss with platitudes and endless targets to deal with the threat?

COP26 in Glasgow

So, what should we expect from COP26? More of the same “blah, blah, blah,” as Thunberg says? Will we see leaders from developed countries justifying their positions by proudly espousing their achievements to date and promising to do

more? Will leaders of developing nations cry for more action and support while they adapt to increasingly severe weather patterns?

To help predict the outcome of COP26, let me summarize the meetings so far. The first meeting of the UNFCCC was held in 1995 and was known as COP1. Twenty-six years and 25 meetings later, greenhouse gases continue to rise and climate change remains a considerable and increasing risk to humanity. Is it any wonder that the voice of youth is one of disillusionment and frustration?

Don't get me wrong, there has been considerable progress made all around the world on the installation of large, renewable energy generation systems. This has meant some improvement in balancing the economic development of countries that are still catching up with the highly industrialized nations. But, in reality, such progress hasn't been adequate — nowhere near it.

Is the global community trying hard enough? Are leaders willing and able to courageously get over the politics and avert short-termism just this once? Rhetorical questions, I know.

So, back to my earlier analogy, while the travelator continues to take the world backward in terms of emissions reductions, global action appears to be limited to meetings, targets and pledges with little progress. Let's hope COP26 leads to at least slowing the travelator down — and significantly. Otherwise, it's all “blah, blah, blah.”

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