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## Analysing US withdrawal from Afghanistan

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The United States' transactional approach in negotiating an exit deal and abdication of moral and military leadership is being blamed for the worsening security environment in Afghanistan and take over by the Taliban.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the United States' action to pull back from Afghanistan without negotiating a credible peace deal and leaving Afghanistan, which it came to refurbish and resurrect, amidst Taliban mayhem doesn't stand on the grounds of morality and legitimacy. Having said that, while legitimacy and morality are integral facets of international politics and diplomacy, the quest for security, survival, and the balance of power underlines the realpolitik world of international politics. The foreign policy need not conform to the moral principles; it is the strategic rationale and the self-interest that guides the decision-making. To better understand the strategic rationale of the U.S. withdrawal, one needs to look beyond morality and revisit the basic concepts of international politics. At the outset, it is crucial to make a distinction between the US decision to pull out from Afghanistan and how withdrawal has been executed on the ground. While agreeing that things could have been planned better and executed gradually, this article argues that the US decision to pull out from Afghanistan has strategic and geopolitical undertones.

Back in 2001, when the United States entered Afghanistan, it was sailing on the boat flagged by the unipolar moment.<sup>2</sup> Over the decades, the United States' involvement in the unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—the so-called war against terror—tarnished American dominance. While the United States remains the mightiest and most advanced military power, it is not the only skilled and capable player in the chessboard of international politics.<sup>3</sup> The rise of China on economic, military, and technological fronts has transformed the structure of international politics. The Chinese challenge in the Western Pacific Ocean, South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean has forced the United States to reconfigure its regional commitments around the globe.

The rise of China has shifted the balance of power against the United States. The changing dynamics of the balance of power have worsened the threat perception of the United States. The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance released by the Biden Administration characterises China as "the only competitor capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to state and the open international system."<sup>4</sup> The strategy mentions "promoting a favourable distribution of power to deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the United States" as one of the central national security priorities.<sup>5</sup>

To effectively face the Chinese threat and deter China's expansionism, the United States is reconsidering its involvement in the endless and costly wars, revising its force structure, and reallocating the military and foreign policy commitments. The US is aligning its ambitions with its strength and emerging national challenges. If the increase in material capabilities expands the strategic ambitions of states, the relative decline should decrease them and compel great powers to align their ends with the means available.

To quote Macdonald and Parent, “States, like firms, tend to go bankrupt when they budget blithely and live beyond their means, but states, unlike firms, can be subject to lethal reprisals.”<sup>6</sup>

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan is not a standalone decision but a decisive step in the decade-long US rebalancing and strategic realignment. It was declared in the presidential address in the 2010 National Security Strategy that “Our adversaries would like to see America sap our strength by overextending our power... The burden of a young century cannot fall on American shoulders alone.”<sup>7</sup> In 2011, the US Congress passed the Budget Control Act to limit and rationalize defense spending. In the last decade, Pentagon has trimmed more than one-lakh serving personnel from Army and Marine Corps. In its strategy of rebalancing or pivot to Asia, the Obama administration tried to readjust the force posture of the United States by shifting focus from Europe and the Middle East towards the Asia-Pacific, what is not called the Indo-Pacific by Quad and western states. The rebalancing of force posture continued under the Trump administration in its Indo-Pacific strategy. The continued appeal by President Donald Trump to rationalize the burden-sharing of NATO and for allies to increase their contribution, US realignment from the Middle East towards Indo-Pacific; withdrawal from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan; Urgency to cultivate allies to share the costs of balancing China in the Indo-Pacific are all signs of US rebalancing.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan may not make sense from the moral and legitimacy standpoint. However, it makes absolute sense from the strategic standpoint and US national interests. When global dominance is at stake, even if you are the superpower of the world, you hardly worry about moral legitimacy. As aptly argued by Prof. Rajesh Rajagopalan, “Interests, not morals, drive states’ foreign policy.”<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Li Zixin, “US loses moral credibility abandoning Afghan forces”, *Global Times*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231225.shtml>, accessed on August 17, 2021; “The surge”, *The Hindu*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/the-surge/article35201946.ece>, accessed on July 8, 2021; James Dobbins, “To lose a war”, *RAND*, April 26, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/04/to-lose-a-war.html>, accessed on August 18, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 1 (1990), pp. 23–33.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, “Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage”, *International Security* 2019, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 141–189.

<sup>4</sup> The White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, p. 8, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>, accessed on March 25, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Paul K. Macdonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Macdonald and Parent, p. 192.

<sup>8</sup> “Interests, Not Morals, Drive States’ Foreign Policy”, YouTube video, 1:04:16, August 8, 2021, The Wire, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8A5IDZbiojA&t=1905s>, accessed on August 15, 2021.

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