

From Saigon to Kabul: Losing the Battle, Winning the War

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America's decision to leave Afghanistan makes sense only if the plan is to cut losses in an unwinnable war and redirect resources and energies toward a winnable strategy against Iran.

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As Prime Minister Bennett heads to Washington to discuss Iran with President Biden, the Afghan debacle can be turned into an opportunity for Israel if the US redirects its energies towards Iran with a credible strategy.

America's retreat from Afghanistan has been widely criticized because of the Taliban's swift victory and of the heart-breaking images of Afghans grabbing on to departing airplanes in a desperate attempt to escape the Taliban regime. The criticism is mostly justified. The US could have left in a more orderly fashion, and President Biden did not have to rigidly stick

to his arbitrary deadline especially after it became clear that the Afghan army was collapsing.

However, the decision to leave Afghanistan was justified. The country was a lost cause that wasted American energy and resources and distracted it from more pressing issues such as Iran and China. What could not be achieved in Afghanistan after twenty years could not be achieved at all.

US taxpayers have poured two trillion dollars in Afghanistan, and over two thousand American soldiers have lost their lives there. Even so, the country is back to square one, when the US army invaded it in 2001 and chased the Taliban regime in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In fact, the Taliban now control more territory than two decades ago, and they are better armed thanks to the American weapons seized from the Afghan army. Afghanistan, in other words, is a total loss.



Many have drawn a parallel between two scenes of a helicopter rescuing staff from a US embassy: that of Saigon in 1975, and that of Kabul in 2021. Others claim that America's retreat displays weakness, emboldens Iran, and undermines Israel's deterrence. Those claims are not unfounded. Yet America can snatch victory from the jaws of defeat precisely by learning its lessons from Vietnam. Back then, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger sacrificed a queen for a checkmate. His strategy must be repeated today.

The US did indeed lose in Vietnam, and Saigon was a humiliation. But within fifteen years the Soviet Union collapsed, and America won the Cold War. In other words, the US lost a battle, but it won the war. It did so by cutting its losses in an unwinnable war and by focusing on exploiting the weaknesses of the Soviet Union. On the face of it, it did look like there was indeed a domino effect after Saigon, and that the Communists had the upper hand. They won in Angola in 1975, in Ethiopia in 1977, and in Nicaragua in 1979. Finally, in 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, openly challenging the US.

But this seemingly unstoppable progress of the Communists was in fact an optical illusion. By invading Afghanistan, the Soviets overstretched their economically unsustainable empire. That same year, the US established diplomatic relations with China, which by then had become an enemy of the Soviet Union. The US also encouraged the Catholic rebellion against the Soviets in Poland (the Polish John Paul the Second had become Pope in 1978), and the Muslim rebellion against the Soviets in Afghanistan (Iran had become an Islamic republic in 1979). In the 1980s, the US accelerated the economic collapse of the

Soviet Union by forcing it into an arm race it could not afford. All in all, the US won the Cold War fifteen years after the fall of Saigon.

The question is whether the US has a similar strategy today against two serious challenges whose seeds were planted back in 1979: Iran and China. In 1979, Iran became an Islamic republic, and China started implementing the economic reforms that would pull it out from poverty and eventually turn it into the world's second largest economy. Back then, the US had supported those moves. Jimmy Carter had abandoned the Iranian shah, and he had encouraged China's embrace of capitalism.

Four decades later, Iran and China have become formidable challenges to the US and to the West. Iran supports groups and terrorist attacks directed at the US and at Israel, not only in the Middle East but also in Africa and in South America. A nuclear Iran would potentially be able to blackmail the US and disrupt trade (especially oil exports) in the Persian Gulf. As for China, it aims to overcome the US both economically and militarily, and it challenges American interests and values throughout the world.

Indeed, China has been deepening its relations with Iran. In April 2021 the two countries signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), meant to challenge US sanctions and to add Iran to China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). The CSP upgrades both economic and military relations between the two countries. It grants China discounted oil supplies for the next 25 years, as well as port facilities in the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

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America's decision to leave Afghanistan makes sense only if the plan is to cut losses in an unwinnable war and redirect resources and energies toward a winnable strategy. This strategy should consist of strengthening America's alliances with Europe, Japan, India, Israel, the Gulf monarchies, the British Commonwealth. President Biden knows that a new and credible nuclear deal cannot be reached and enforced with Iran. If America is heading for a Plan B, it needs the full support of its allies. As for China, it is now clear to all that, far from liberalizing because of its integration in the world economy, it has been taking advantage of this integration to entrench its global power and its authoritarian regime.

If the Biden administration wants to build a coherent alliance to confront Iran and to contain China, it cannot only make demands from its allies but must also have a coherent strategy. Upon a request from the Biden administration, for example, Israel recently added its voice to a joint declaration against China's human rights violations in Xinjiang. By joining a public statement against China, Israel took an economic risk as China threatened to retaliate. It is not enough for the Biden

administration to ask its allies to be on board vis-à-vis China. It must also come up with a plan to shield them from China's economic bullying. The fact that the US has taken advantage of China's boycott of Australia by selling more American coal to China is both cynical and counterproductive.

Precisely because the US left Afghanistan, it must intensify its struggle against Iran and Hezbollah together with its allies, the same way that the US intensified its struggle against the Soviet Union after it left Vietnam. In Afghanistan, America was wasting the lives of its soldiers and the money of its taxpayers, just like in Vietnam fifty years ago. The US must now pursue the neutralization of Iran on other fronts with a credible strategy. Prime Minister Bennett must make sure that Israel is part of this strategy.

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