

# From Saigon to Kabul: Losing battle, winning war - opinion

The Afghan crisis can potentially be turned into an opportunity if the US redirects its energies toward Iran with a credible strategy coordinated with Israel.

By EMMANUEL NAVON SEPTEMBER 4, 2021 15:12



US GENERAL AUSTIN Miller, (left) shakes hand with Afghan Defense Minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi, at a ceremony in Kabul in July, as Miller relinquishes command during the final phase of America's withdrawal from the war in Afghanistan. (photo credit: REUTERS/PHIL STEWART)

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The departure of the last US soldier from [Afghanistan](#) occurred a few days after the meeting between US President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. Some have argued that the US withdrawal, and the way it was implemented, have affected Israel's regional standing. Yet the Afghan crisis can potentially be turned into an opportunity if the US redirects its energies toward Iran with a credible strategy coordinated with Israel.

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. But America can snatch victory from the jaws of defeat precisely by learning its lessons from Vietnam. Back then, Henry Kissinger had 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 15 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 its face, it did look like there was indeed a domino effect after Saigon, and that the Communists gained the upper hand in Angola (1975), Ethiopia (1977) and Nicaragua (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 and the Muslim rebellion against the Soviets in Afghanistan. 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 15 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. US president Jimmy Carter had abandoned the Iranian shah and 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.

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 rebuilding and strengthening America's alliances with Europe, Japan, India, Israel and the UK.

Yet 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.

Recommended by | Precisely because the US left Afghanistan, it must, together with its allies, intensify its struggle against Iran and Hezbollah, the same way that the US intensified its struggle against the Soviet Union after it left Vietnam. The US must now pursue the neutralization of Iran on other fronts with a credible strategy. Following the Biden-Bennett meeting, Israel will hopefully be a partner in this strategy.

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