

The Taliban's victory proves the West has failed to learn the lessons of the past

The Taliban has taken control of Kabul and declared victory in its attempt to establish control over Afghanistan. Effie G. H. Pedaliu writes that the rapid collapse of the Afghan government is set to trigger a major geostrategic realignment.

As the Taliban seek to reestablish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the 'Stars and Stripes' is lowered at the Kabul American Embassy, I cannot but think back to the 1997 [SHAFR](#) conference that I attended as a young academic. At the conference, John Cooley, an American journalist, depicted a very dark picture of how the Taliban would remain a threat for the security of the West in the years to come.

Shortened attention spans, poor strategic thinking, bad policy decisions and the legacy of Trumpist 'America First' foreign policy are coalescing to obliterate the promises of a better future offered to the people of Afghanistan and the hopes they fostered over the last 20 years. During this time, the US, the British, their allies and every international institution, from the UN to NATO, invested much 'blood and treasure' to turn the country around.

Comparisons have been made between Saigon and Kabul. They make for good copy, but they are false and misleading. In the 1960s and 1970s it was American credibility that was at stake. Now, it is the trustworthiness, reliability and relevance of the western model of governance. The damage from the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, once more, will be longer lasting and more disruptive and destructive than the fall of Saigon.

Twenty years are not enough to allow a ravaged country to blossom again. South Korea is a testament to this. In the 2,500 years from Alexander the Great to the British and the Soviets, full control of Afghanistan has never been achieved. Yet, this time there was hope that the future might be different.

A new generation of men and women were being educated; they were introduced to the values of human rights and democracy; they were growing up to share a stake in a peaceful and orderly future. This generation was not given the opportunity to show its mettle, as it had not yet matured to take on the mantle of governing their country from the corrupt Kabul body politic. The future and lives of 'the brightest and best' are now at risk. The UK [Chevening Fellowships for Afghans](#) have been, for example, reportedly, paused.

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For some peculiar reason the rapidly evolving situation in Afghanistan seems to have surprised many analysts and foreign ministries in both the US and Europe. One wonders about the quality of the advice decision makers have been relying on. It reveals narrow inputs based on a lack of pragmatism feeding into foreign policy making. International historians have been side-lined at a time when they could have helped their social scientist colleagues by offering up long-term perspectives of how the modern world has developed and not how one wishes it was. Valuable lessons from the past have not been learned nor highlighted. Wishful thinking seems to have prevailed.

Diplomats were taken in by the double speak diplomacy of 'Doha' to think that the Taliban had changed. What is happening now in the Afghan provinces proves such assumptions were wrong. People have been massacred. Children have been kidnapped. Girls have been sold as child brides. Women, entertainers, historians and poets have been tortured and murdered. Public hangings are [taking place](#). Hundreds of thousands have been displaced. Kabul is overflowing and people are taking the road to exile – if they can.

The UN Secretary General has asked Afghanistan's neighbours to keep their borders open to avert a humanitarian catastrophe. Even if Iran and Turkmenistan are willing to do so and to build refugee camps for the numbers required that are sustainable over the long term, they do not have the resources to set them up without western help. No such humanitarian aid has yet been organised nor it is easy for western countries to do so.

There is no adequate humanitarian presence in Kabul right now to keep the refugees there safe. It is no surprise that those who believed western promises and worked with the West to achieve them now feel betrayed and abandoned. The EU has made no move yet and, in any case, it is not realistic to expect it to cooperate with Tehran. America is still imposing sanctions. There are no easy solutions here. Turkey has reached a refugee saturation point.

A new wave of migration could soon be manifesting itself and not just to the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan. The refugees will have only one option and that is Europe. Soon this will be Europe's problem and Europe is again unprepared. Syria, before the start of its civil war, had a population of roughly 21 million people. Afghanistan has a population of nearly 38 million people. The once in a lifetime unprecedented refugee crisis of 2015 could be repeated if no urgent action is taken. How many EU governments are strong enough to survive the new refugee influx? Can the EU overcome its divisions over 'migration'? Do EU countries have the economic wherewithal to accommodate the new wave?

The EU is unable to elaborate a foreign policy and does not seem able to understand that it has external borders. In an unstable world, an entity that cannot defend its borders is inherently weak and has a bleak future. Germany, the strongest power of the Union, is still haunted by its past to such a degree that it cannot formulate a foreign policy based on realistic assumptions and realistic evaluations of the dangers it and the EU face. It has decided to relegate foreign policy to the status of 'economic foreign policy'.

These realities have led the EU to now watch the events unfolding in Afghanistan stunned, indecisive and divided. On 5 August, [six EU countries](#), Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands 'urged the EU's executive branch to "intensify talks" with the Afghan government to ensure that the deportations of refugees would continue'. The events of the past few days suggest that what happened in 2015 was no one off.

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Afghanistan's plight signifies nothing less than a major geostrategic realignment. The US and its allies are in retreat. China will be the main beneficiary and there will be some gains for Russia too. However, the legacy of the West will be that of botched interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Yet, it did not need to be thus. Clear aims and exit strategies are always part of the success of any intervention. It requires a clear understanding that, once the decision to intervene is taken, there must be staying power, achievable goals and a safeguarding of 'hearts and minds'.

Reports that the US has [pleaded with the Taliban](#) to spare its Embassy in Kabul are a prudent, but also a problematic course of action. It may be perceived as weakness and this is not the right way to enter into Middle Eastern haggling. President Biden [decided to implement a decision](#) taken by his predecessor. He wanted out of Afghanistan and Trump's deal with Afghanistan in February 2020 offered him an exit option.

However, the Republican Party of today seems to have no truck with the truth or reality. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has described President Biden's strategy in Afghanistan as 'reckless' and former President Trump has blamed him for the 'unacceptable' surge of the Taliban. This is mind-boggling. Yet, Biden's strategy in Afghanistan is nevertheless a poor advertisement for his slogan that 'America is back'.

The British, too, have a role to play. Few governments have the insight into a country that the UK Foreign Office and its FCO-historians have at their fingertips. One can only hope that the Johnson government becomes more vocal rather than assuming the role of the bystander. As for the EU, it needs to brace itself for meeting the uncharted waters ahead of it. It seems to be, rapidly, running out of opportunities to get its act together. Only time will tell if the nightmare of Afghanistan as a haven for anti-western elements is coming back to haunt us.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
