THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

August 25, 2021

Twenty Years of the 'Global War on Terror'

By: Sukumar Muralidharan

Matters have come full circle in Afghanistan, the main theatre of the 'war on terror'. Chaos is festering in Syria, Libya, Yemen & Iraq. The failure of U.S. justice presages an unravelling of the international order. An alternative could emerge in war or peace

Good and evil are immiscible principles in theology. Twenty years ago, when United States President George W. Bush summoned his country and the world to unending war against terrorism, compromise or conciliation had no place in his thinking.

Addressing the nation the evening of 11 September 2001, the day the U.S. mainland was attacked for the first time in close to two centuries, Bush spoke of "evil, despicable acts" and warned that the U.S. would "make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them". Two days later, Paul Wolfowitz, then the deputy secretary of defence, took his cues and proposed an expansive mandate for the campaign against terrorism: "I think one has to say it's not simply a matter of capturing people and holding them accountable, but removing the sanctuaries, removing the support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism".

> It is a measure of how times have changed that the lockstep unanimity Bush was able to command when he launched GWOT has fallen apart in toxic partisanship.

The bluster that came in the immediate wake of 9/11 has now acquired an ironic postscript. Afghanistan, the first theatre of the U.S.'s 'global war on terror' (GWOT), is after a 20-year-long effort at pacification and nation-building, right back where it started. The incumbent U.S. president, Joe Biden, has had to deflect accusations of strategic ineptitude by pleading that chaos was inevitable. The Republican party that sits in opposition today has denounced Biden for a badly botched withdrawal plan from Afghanistan, while disregarding the inconvenient truth that the template was bequeathed by a president from their side.

It is a measure of how times have changed that the lockstep unanimity Bush was able to command when he launched GWOT has fallen apart in toxic partisanship. As the longest war in U.S. history dragged on, withdrawal from Afghanistan began to be seen as a potentially winning political proposition. When it happened in August, it was a lethal body blow to U.S. power and prestige.

Exterminating states

Opinions differ on the point at which the GWOT went off the rails. But a case could be made that the problem was wrongly posed at the very beginning, leading the U.S. into a spiral of strategic blunders. First principles in international relations stipulate that the global order rests on the foundation of nation-states. There have been occasions when international law mandates the imposition of one state's will upon another, but not for the extinction of a state under some wild extrapolation of the rationale of capital punishment . In other words, chaos should have been foretold in the U.S. determination to "end states", an entirely new principle in international law.

Three days after the trauma of 9/11, Bush invoked a divine right that he believed was invested in the country he had - by a judicial whim and an enormous fluke - been chosen to lead. That investiture from a transcendent authority left no room for mundane disputation. "Americans do not yet have the distance of history", he said, but they were clear about their responsibility to destroy "evil". The U.S. had been forced into a conflict "on the timing and terms of others". But once roused to war, the U.S. would ensure that the war would "end in a way and at an hour of (its) choosing".

In internal deliberations, Wolfowitz and others who came to be called the "neoconservatives" or neocons, advocated an open-ended battle plan. Iraq, still reeling under brutal sanctions since the U.S.-led war of 1991, was mentioned as a "target rich environment" in which the U.S. could exert the didactic prowess of its formidable military. The neocons also pushed for a final settling of scores with North Korea and Iran, and among non-state actors, with militant groups in Palestine and Lebanon. Within two weeks of 9/11, Bush vowed that the war would begin - but not end - with Al-Qaeda. It would indeed continue "until every terrorist group of global reach (was) found, stopped and defeated" (Burke 2011, 46-7).

A confederacy of warlords

Beyond the florid rhetoric, practical compulsions dictated that Afghanistan should be first in the order of battle. In deploying its awesome military might in an impoverished country torn by decades of occupation and civil war, the U.S. acknowledged the utility of a low-cost approach that left a light footprint. Afghanistan had a number of men under arms outside the formal and informal structures of the Taliban state, who could be activated as the force on the ground to complete the job begun from the air (Coll 2018, 79). As the Taliban reeled under the fury of the U.S. aerial assault, warlords expelled from their redoubts through five years of harsh Islamic rule regrouped. Weapons that had been stashed away were commissioned afresh and ample infusions of U.S. dollars used to win over local factions disinclined to fight.

> The new order in Afghanistan was imagined as a confederacy of ethnic militias led by warlords [...] "zawabit (institutions)" were never going to replace "*rawabit* (personal relations)."

An internal coup within the Taliban to overthrow its messianic leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, was among the options the CIA explored. Pakistan's Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), as a party to the deal, promised to bring a 'good Taliban' into existence from southern Pashtun tribes. Inevitably, the new order in Afghanistan was imagined as a confederacy of ethnic militias led by warlords who could be won over. The U.S. it seemed was happy with the reality that the Tadjik military commander Mohammad Fahim reportedly impressed upon the Afghanistan specialist Barnett Rubin: that "*zawabit* (institutions)" were never going to replace "*rawabit* (personal relations)" in his country (Steele 2011, 271).

It was a time when occupation was half the law. Fahim forced his way into the defence ministry and packed key positions with his men from the Tadjik ethnic group. Other warlords, whose conflicts had reduced most of Afghanistan's cities to smouldering ruins after the Soviet withdrawal, emerged to claim territories within the new order.

Hamid Karzai's choice as interim president of Afghanistan at an elaborately choreographed event in the German city of Bonn was a peace offering to the southern Pashtun tribes, which had a sense of grievance. Plans agreed between the ISI and CIA, which gave the Pashtuns first claim over Kabul, had been thwarted by Fahim. Iran played a key part in brokering the December 2001 deal, though Pakistan remained unplacated and suspicious of Karzai's intentions (Scott-Clark and Levy 2017: 80-1). That sense of being frozen out of a voice in post-Taliban Afghanistan set in play contingency plans by the ISI to protect Pakistan's interests in the south of Afghanistan.

As the twice deferred date for national elections approached in 2004, the U.S. moved to strengthen Karzai's claims towards longer occupancy of the presidency. The directive from Bush to Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. ambassador in Kabul was clear: "to turn Karzai into a great politician" (Coll 2018, 185). Khalilzad moved to enforce the presidential order with practised zeal, warning and cajoling rival warlords to back off, and occasionally, shifting them to relatively inconsequential positions (Coll 2018, 193). These may have served to reinforce the illusion of Karzai's power, but the gains were short-lived, as U.S. attention moved to the greater prize of Iraq, with a substantially greater commitment of military force.

Adventurism in Iraq

After a brief aerial bombing campaign over Iraq in 2003, the U.S. moved ground troops in strength into Baghdad, creating an illusion of facile victory. Paul Bremer, an acolyte of veteran foreign policy apparatchik Henry Kissinger, flew in to assume viceregal responsibilities and with the stroke of a pen, disband the Iraqi army and dismantle the state. Some parts of the country were left to Kurdish clients. As the U.S. floundered, Turkey and Iran stepped in, striking alliances on the ground to safeguard their interests, often in ways that ran counter to the occupying power's. When the Al Askari mosque in Samarra, a shrine of special reverence for Shi'a Islam, was bombed in 2006, Iraq erupted in civil war.

> The unstated purposes of the invasion were by now receding and all that remained was for the U.S. to choose the magnitude of defeat it could live with. An alternative was to deny the other side a victory by doubling down on the threat of force.

Despite growing evidence of deception in making the case for war, Bush had won a second term. The neocon lobby that built the case for war on falsehood blamed the victim. "Iraqis were given their freedom and yet many have chosen civil war," said columnist Charles

Krauthammer. Admission of error and any manner of contrition being inappropriate for the global superpower, Bush began a surge of troops into Iraq to contain the growing insurgency. Generous dollar payouts were made to recalcitrant tribes and their leaders, and special forces commandos empowered to carry out extra-judicial killings when contingent purposes were served.

Khalilzad was relocated to Iraq as ambassador, where his links to the energy and mining industries came under scrutiny. A new Iraqi constitution promulgated in 2005, recognised Kurdistan as a "federal region" and granted the provinces protected status, and the power to group themselves into sub-national units. The exploitation of oil and other mineral resources was to be carried out in accordance with "market principles" and under the supervision of the federal and regional governments. A more specific hydrocarbons law introduced in 2007 was trapped in the new dynamic of competition between regions for control over resources.

The unstated purposes of the invasion were by now receding and all that remained was for the U.S. to choose the magnitude of defeat it could live with. An alternative was to deny the other side a victory by doubling down on the threat of force. Among Iraq's neighbours, Turkey had earned an indemnity from its notional membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Two others, Syria and Iran, were identified as the source of the troubles. Syria was coerced into pulling out of Lebanon, where it had long maintained the peace between fractious confessional groups. Iran was put under a renewed regime of economic and diplomatic sanctions for alleged violations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Blowbacks

By this time, Pakistan was deep in the throes of an insurgency in its tribal areas - 'blowback' in the classic sense for a country that had nurtured the Pashtun militancy as a strategic asset in Afghanistan. The Taliban, seen till then as a servitor of Pakistan's purpose, acquired an avatar, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) that threatened its patron.

Karzai and his national security directorate pressed the case for active U.S. military operations in Pakistan. The matter was partly preempted by Pakistan's military leadership, which had sent forces into its northern tribal areas in 2001 to put down a growing rebellion. From 2004, the U.S. began drone missile strikes against targets in Pakistan's tribal areas, first on a modest scale, but then with rising frequency and intensity during President Barack Obama's first term. With ground-based intelligence inputs grudgingly rendered by the Pakistanis, though never formally acknowledged, these strikes achieved some success against the recalcitrant tribes. Pakistan's main asset, the Haqqani network, though, remained mostly intact.

Civilian casualties, however, were high. Between June 2004 and September 2012, drone strikes in Pakistan killed between 2,500 and 3,300 people, of whom between 470 and 881 were civilians, including possibly 176 children, according to a report prepared by the law schools at Stanford and New York University.



A man on a wheelchair cycle in Kabul. August 2010. Source: Carpetblogger/Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Political equations in Pakistan were by now in deep turmoil. Compelled by mass protests, Pervez Musharraf handed over his army command in 2007 and the presidency in 2008. As drone strikes doubled in intensity in 2010, the U.S. faced another anxiety in the unravelling military-civilian equation in Pakistan. In security deliberations, the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan warned of a loss of "perspective" and a "dangerous political dynamic emerging " as the strikes, "too visible (and) too indiscriminate", continued (Coll 2018, 533).

In Afghanistan, targeted killings went along with a surge of troops on the ground to pacify the restive terrain. Obama sought to reorder military priorities by drawing down troops in Iraq and significantly boosting the U.S. presence in Afghanistan: from 30,000 to over 100,000 . Alongside he also sought a check on military hubris by specifying an end date. If the vaunted U.S. military was unable to achieve stated objectives by 2011, the drawdown of troops would begin. It was also a signal to the Afghan allies to get their house in order (Coll 2018, 407-8).

> An escalation of lethal insider attacks by Afghans recruited into the military effort was causing a quarter of all casualties suffered by the western coalition in Afghanistan. In most cases, this was brought about by the defection of a recruit to the opposite side.

As that deadline drew close, a worrying trend began to emerge among U.S., British, and French troop deployments: an escalation of lethal insider attacks by Afghans recruited into the military effort was causing a quarter of all casualties suffered by the western coalition in Afghanistan (Coll 2018, 607). In most cases, this was brought about by the defection of a recruit to the opposite side. Further inquiries uncovered a painful truth: if the U.S. were to escalate a conflict "violently and visibly, that action would as a side effect contribute to more terrorism" (Coll 2018, 624).

By 2014, with troop levels soon projected to fall to 10,000, Obama declared an end to combat operations in Afghanistan.

The Islamic State

Regime change efforts in Syria were by now in an advanced state; with the players - including the oil kingdoms of the Gulf, Israel, Turkey and the U.S. - often working at cross purposes within the ethnic complexity of the country. The blowback swiftly followed.

Early in June 2014, a militia of uncertain parentage emerged to overrun Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city. Within weeks, it had taken over a third of Iraq's area and proclaimed an Islamic caliphate. Like the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 1996, the world once again saw a militia emerge out of the fog and confusion of sectarian civil war to take on and literally rout better-organised forces.

> The IS had several claimants to parenthood and many generous benefactors, all ironically, from the ranks of the sub-brokers of US power in the region [...] Like the sorcerer's apprentice, the US had with its unilateral actions unleashed forces it could not control.

The Islamic State (IS), as the militia soon came to be called, added a substantial part of Syrian territory to its putative caliphate, stamping its authority upon the disparate opposition groups that had fought the Bashar al-Assad regime to a brutal stalemate in three years since the so-called Arab Spring. Explicitly committed to a brutal form of Sunni Muslim confessionalism, the IS left a trail of atrocities against the Shia, the Kurd, and the Yazidi people in areas it conquered.

"Such things do not happen spontaneously," said Richard Dearlove, a former head of Britain's external intelligence service MI6 - in what must count as a marvel of understatement. The IS had several claimants to parenthood and many generous benefactors, all ironically, from the ranks of the sub-brokers of US power in the region: Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, the US had with its unilateral actions unleashed forces it could not control.

The new Arab alliances

With this awareness, the U.S. chose the path of conciliation. Obama pushed back against accusations that he was going soft on terror, pointing out that the IS, a security threat every government claimed to be on guard against, was "a direct outgrowth of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, that grew out of our [the US] invasion". It was the law of "unintended consequences" at work with a vengeance, which Obama

said, was only warning to "generally aim before we shoot".

Obama intensified his engagement with Iran, which had worked with the U.S. after 9/11 to establish Afghanistan's interim arrangement but then been banished by Bush as a part of the "axis of evil" (Scott-Clark and Levy 2017, 116-8). It was time for Israel, for long overtly involved in U.S. strategic goals, to seek a direct role in U.S. domestic politics. Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, called in his special relationship with the right wing of the Republican party to secure an invitation to address the U.S. Congress. Amidst several standing ovations from his loyal admirers, the Israeli premier railed against the negotiations with Iran. No good could come, he declared, from dialogue with a regime steeped in theological evil.

> Pecuniary motives and a certain crass pragmatism came to prevail under Obama's successor Donald Trump [... who] oversaw a diplomatic rapprochement between Israel and three Arab monarchies.

Theology gained very little purchase with the U.S. administration, but pecuniary motives and a certain crass pragmatism came to prevail under Obama's successor Donald Trump. The nuclear deal with Iran, concluded in July 2015, was ripped up and sanctions on the state restored to their utmost severity. Trump also oversaw a diplomatic rapprochement between Israel and three Arab monarchies: Bahrain, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia was expected to join but hesitated. Eager to be part of the deal, the Saudis worried that a hasty embrace of Israel would cost them in terms of status within the Muslim world.

At its twenty-year mark, the legacy of the GWOT is this new crystallisation of alliances driven by money power in the Arab world. On the other side, there is the festering chaos in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq.

The unravelling of a world order

Henry Kissinger, guru to several generations of warmongers, once argued that the U.S. has alternated between defending the system of state autonomy and balance of power, and castigating its premises as "immoral and outmoded" (2014, 8-9). Indeed, the U.S. frequently claims for itself the mantle of prescribing its values as universally relevant, but struggles to "define the relationship between its power (still vast) and its principles".

Kissinger wrote these lines when the U.S. was effectively winding down military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, though his conscience (to the extent he has one) may also have been grappling with the withdrawal from Vietnam. It was a pretence of peace that gained him a Nobel Prize, but two years was all it took for the illusion to shatter. Vietnam was unified in 1975, much as envisaged in the Geneva Accord of 1956 that the U.S. had torpedoed.

> [As E.H. Carr observed] justice is the power of the strong, and "international order" and "solidarity," the slogans of "those who feel strong enough to impose them on others." The failure of U.S. justice in Afghanistan presages an unravelling of the international order.

Like in Vietnam, where the U.S. waged a brutal war of more than a decade, all for nothing, matters have come full circle in Afghanistan, the main theatre of the GWOT. A world order, Kissinger argued (2014, 9) describes the "concept held by a region or civilisation about the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power". Justice as a value is invoked here, though not expanded on. Appropriate here is the observation by the historian E.H. Carr (2016 (1939), 80) in his classic study of Europe between the world wars, that justice is the power of the strong, and "international order" and "solidarity," the slogans of "those who feel strong enough to impose them on others."

The failure of U.S. justice in Afghanistan presages an unravelling of the international order. An alternative could emerge in war or peace. That is a decision that today's global leaders will have to take.

References:

Burke, Jason. 2011. *The 9/11 Wars*. Penguin/Allen Lane.

Carr, E.H. 2016 (1939). *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Coll, Steve. 2018. *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan.* Penguin.

Kissinger, Henry. 2014. *World Order*. Penguin.

Scott-Clark, Catherine and Adrian Levy. 2017. *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight*. Bloomsbury.

Steele, Jonathan. 2011. *Ghosts of Afghanistan: Hard Truths and Foreign Myths*. Portobello.