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The dramatic siege of US-occupied Afghanistan

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A tale of betrayal and tragedy brought about by the mess of wars, accidental guerillas and political miscalculation

* On August 13, Taliban islamic militia swept into the western Afghan city of Herat

* Joe Biden inherited his predecessor's withdrawal plan and only altered it at the margins: Choosing the symbolic 20-year anniversary of the attacks on mainland US on September 11, 2001, as the final date for withdrawal

* The fall of Kabul represents the collapse of US strategy, which relied upon a confederacy of warlords as a nation-building strategy

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Afghanistan's story of conflict, betrayal and tragedy could be told several ways, one being through the life stories of individuals the US relied upon to build the new order that now lies in shambles.

On August 13, Taliban Islamic militia swept into the western Afghan city of Herat. Negotiations followed a brief flurry of fighting. The city was then handed over to the Taliban, along with the former governor of the western province, Ismail Khan. Further details about the powerful western warlord, now captive, were unavailable, with the Taliban refusing comment.

Northern warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, meanwhile, remained out of sight. Video images of Taliban fighters feasting their eyes on the opulence of his Kabul palace were soon circulating over social media.

As Kabul fell on August 15, President Ashraf Ghani fled into exile, surfacing days later in the United Arab Emirates to refute rumours he had travelled with currency-stuffed suitcases. Vice President Amrullah Saleh, once associated with the Tadjik militia commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, bravely asserted his claim to being the legitimate president, but may have been in retreat in the remote and isolated Panjshir Valley, the sole redoubt against the last phase of the Taliban's rule.

With the exception of Ghani, who parachuted into Afghanistan from a high-paid billet at the World Bank and won two presidential elections of disputed legitimacy, these are names associated with some of the darkest spots in recent Afghan history.

This was the cast of characters whose bitter and violent squabbles after the collapse of the post-Soviet regime made the Taliban takeover in 1996 seem like deliverance. They were the raw material the US chose after accepting with great reluctance, that the excision of the Taliban from the Afghan body politic also imposed the responsibility of creating an alternative.

Conflict region

Initial statements of intent by the US and the first draft of the battle-plan for Afghanistan drawn up 10 days after 9/11, **seemed to disdain reconstruction**. It was only well into the execution of war plans, that US President George Bush mentioned as an after-thought , that it may be a good idea — once the military mission was complete — to entrust the "useful function" of "so-called nation building", to the United Nations.

Occupation was the law in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Mohammad Fahim, heir to Ahmad Shah Massoud as commander of the Tadjik militia, forced his way into Afghanistan's defence ministry and packed its key positions. Ismail Khan assumed overlordship over the West, seizing control over the trade routes with Iran and building an emirate of medieval splendour. Dostum failed to secure a position of real power and retreated in a sulk, retaining his military resources and constantly threatening the political order emerging out of the ruins.

US strategy was guided by no doctrine other than raw power. The bargain also involved the recruitment of all existing sources of power on the ground, outside the Taliban fold. And then, with a tenuous peace attained, the US in 2003 moved on to fresh adventures in Iraq, trampling on all norms of lawful conduct.

A debacle on two fronts soon seemed a real prospect. The US military hierarchy was chopped and changed and experts flown in to salvage a situation sinking into chaos. A counter-insurgency expert who enjoyed brief prominence was Australian military officer turned anthropologist, David Kilcullen, who won the ears of two US commanding generals, David Petraeus and Stanley A McChrystal, tasked with retrieving the mess of the wars in distant places.

Kilcullen's opinions, rendered in briefings with the US military command, remain unavailable. His 2008 book titled **The Accidental Guerilla** provides a reasonable summation perhaps, of the counsel he may have rendered. The trouble, he argued, was that the US had sought to settle large, cosmic questions of good and evil in very small contexts. This brought it in collision with local power configurations that reacted furiously to the threat of disorder.

Most adversaries the US faced were "accidental guerillas" impelled to take up arms by the invasion of their spaces and their lives. It was a situation the US could extricate itself from, by learning how to fight "small wars in the midst of a big one". There were six elements that Kilcullen identified in this approach: "Securing the people where they live; disaggregating the Taliban system; building local allies; denying the enemy access to the population; linking the people to their government; the 'persistent presence' approach; and full-spectrum political maneuvere".

In plain terms, the strategy was one of taking territory, "disaggregating" local factions to isolate the Taliban, and then holding terrain and rebuilding. This involved co-opting local power into larger structures of authority. The six points taken together, Kilcullen confidently predicted, would add up to a "comprehensive system" to address the compulsions of war-fighting in Afghanistan's diverse environments and social milieus.

Within the brief attention spans of the US in Afghanistan, its shallow commitments and the distractions of reordering the entire world, these fanciful theorems were left by the wayside. Beginning in 2016, a series of "Lessons Learned" reports by the US Defence Department's Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) laid out a long catalogue of failures. It began with a gross failure of understanding, as an army general of the three-star rank bluntly told the review: "We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan — we didn't know what we were doing.... We didn't have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking".

False image

The picture released to the public was one of steady progress. "Every data point was altered to present the best picture possible", said an army officer who functioned as senior counter-insurgency adviser in Afghanistan. And the strategy of taking territory and stabilising the situation, while creating a linkage of trust with the Afghan government, achieved at best illusory gains. "Successes in stabilizing Afghan districts rarely lasted longer than the physical presence of coalition troops and civilians", read one report compiled in May 2018.

Seven years into its occupation of Afghanistan, the Soviet Union had effectively thrown in the towel. In November 1986, Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, chief of general staff, rather dolefully told the Politburo of the Soviet Communist Party, that "there (was) not one square kilometre (in Afghanistan) left untouched by the boot of a Soviet soldier". But no sooner did he leave the place, than the "enemy" would return and restore "it all back the way it used to be".

By mid-1988, the Soviet Union had announced a "front-loaded" schedule for withdrawal involving the immediate cessation of military operations and the departure of the last soldier by early-1989. The political order in Afghanistan endured till early-1992, when it crumbled under the dual impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the defection of Afghan army factions to the ranks of the Islamic warriors.

The US withdrawal now takes place under a miasma of self-delusion and political miscalculations. President Barack Obama declared the end of major combat operations in Afghanistan in 2014, but then kept troops in substantial numbers on the ground because of the newly arisen threat of the Islamic State.

Return to base

Donald Trump took office in 2017, determined to cash in on the political dividends of "bringing the boys home". Negotiations begun under Qatari sponsorship dragged on fitfully and then gained momentum in election year 2020. The deal finally struck, involved a commitment by the Taliban to not attack US troops during the final months of their tours of duty and to prevent Afghan soil being used for terrorism against a third country. Intelligence estimates about the longevity of the

political order remained bleak, though none could have anticipated the catastrophic collapse that unfolded in August. And the US made it amply clear that it cared very little by freezing out the elected Afghan government from its talks with the Taliban.

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9/11 as that event came to be known, has moulded world politics through the first decade of the millennium. In 2008, global conclaves of the powerful were forced to shift their attention by an economic meltdown, to the possible buckling of the foundations of international order.

The whole strategic equation has since changed, though few today seem willing to recognise the reality of a world where a single superpower's writ no longer runs. Governments stricken by a fear of freedom, grope for a means of coping in a world where older certainties have dissipated. *Pax Americana* has ended, but a new order is yet to emerge. Aspiring powers will stake their claims to dominance and hegemony in smaller and lesser degrees, with unpredictable consequences.

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