

Joe Biden's Afghanistan Blunder Blemishes His Long Commitment to Human Rights

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File Photo of US President Joe Biden. Photo: Reuters.



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There was something striking in the recent televised address made by US President Joe Biden to his nation – and to the world – responding to the chaotic situation and unrest in Afghanistan after the United States announced a pull out of all its troops and citizens from the country, ending a 20-year-old war. Biden said, “We’ll continue to speak out for the basic rights of the Afghan people — of women and girls — just as we speak out all over the world...I have been clear that human rights must be the centre of our foreign policy, not the periphery.”

The reference made by Biden to ‘human rights’ being at the centre of American foreign policy, its importance and the extent to which it implies the moral, ethical claim that the ‘rights’ of everyone – not just American citizens – matter for their own cause, is noteworthy. However, somewhere it made me look back at a chapter on “Human Rights and Its Global Imperatives”, written by Amartya Sen in his 2009 book [The Idea of Justice](#).

In it Sen argues,

“There are many scholars and intellectuals who see the idea of human rights as nothing more than ‘bawling on paper’ (extending Jeremy Bentham’s derisive critique of human rights). The ‘existence’ of human rights is obviously not like the existence of, say, Big Ben in the middle of London. Nor is it like the existence of a legislated law in the statute book. Proclamations of human rights, even though stated in the form of recognising the existence of things that are called human rights, are really strong ethical pronouncements as *to what should be done*. They demand acknowledgment of imperatives and indicate that something needs to be done for the realisation of these recognised freedoms that are identified through these rights.”

It is important here to see how, according to Sen, the force of assertion about the ‘existence of human rights’ lies in the recognition of some important freedoms that, it is claimed, should be respected, and correspondingly in the acceptance of obligations by the society, in one way or another, to support and promote these freedoms.

While it is vital to see Biden emphasising America’s commitment and undistilled faith in a ‘human rights-based approach to foreign policy’, his own actions ring hollow or, in Jeremy Bentham’s words, make Biden’s words appear as ‘loose talk’.

This is disappointing given how, during Biden’s long career in the US Senate, he established a record of supporting ‘human rights’ as a goal of American foreign policy. His real test of commitment in this area was now and on how the US would leave Afghanistan.

The inability of his administration to provide safe passage to thousands of Afghans who helped the US – and allied forces – during the war is just one aspect of the troubling story. The nature of social progress made in the last two decades in Afghanistan’s provinces, across the areas of women rights, economic and social rights for all citizens, amidst a wider emergence of a more robust civil society through international support, stands in shambles right now.

It is true that in ‘realpolitik’, foreign policy involves trade-offs among many issues, including national security, economic interests and other values. However, when it comes to the ethical proclamations imposed by a promised commitment to human rights, trade-offs – and a mention of those – often give rise to charges of hypocrisy or cynicism.

Back in 2018, the killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi at Saudi Arabia’s consulate in Istanbul made many criticise former President Donald Trump for ignoring clear evidence of a brutal crime to maintain good relations with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).

Liberal thinkers saw Trump’s mild reaction to Khashoggi’s murder as “remorselessly transactional” and “heedless of the facts”. Even the conservative *Wall Street Journal* [wrote in its editorial](#), “We are aware of no President, not even such ruthless pragmatists as Richard Nixon or Lyndon Johnson, who would have written a public statement like this without so much as a grace note about America’s abiding values and principles.”

Biden may not be Trump. However, his reckless handling of the Afghan-pull out and the Faustian pact with the Taliban – despite all the ‘good’ intentions cited in the reasons for doing so to ensure the well-being of Americans – raises serious questions on his ability to ensure a moral and ethical obligation on his part (and on the part of other American allies who supported the war) to keep Afghans and their freedoms safely guarded. For worse, these freedoms, under a more resurgent Taliban, are likely to be more threatened and subjugated.

A basic understanding of human rights, as Sen argues, also raises two central questions concerning the ‘content’ and the ‘viability’ of such rights.

The issue of ‘content’ is the subject of the ethical assertion that is being made through the declaration of a human right. The ‘ethical assertion’ spoken of here is in context of the critical importance of certain freedoms (like the freedom from torture, freedom to escape hunger and starvation, freedom to be educated) and, correspondingly, of the need to accept some social obligations to promote or safeguard these freedoms.

In the weeks, months and years ahead, a critical examination of both these claims – about protecting the freedoms of Afghans and the social, moral obligations America had to protect these ‘freedoms’ – is warranted.

Furthermore, the question of ‘viability’ is equally important as it forces one to ask: How can we judge the acceptability of claims to human rights (as Biden emphasises in his speech) and assess the challenges they may face?

In simple words, for those asking why the US – and the world – should be so concerned about Afghans or why ‘their rights’ should matter, the answer lies in Sen’s profound words: “Like other ethical propositions that claim acceptability under impartial scrutiny, there is an implicit presumption in making pronouncements on human rights that the cogency of the underlying ethical claims would survive open and informed scrutiny.”

A claim that a certain freedom (whether of Afghans or any other people) is important enough to be judged as a ‘human right’ to be protected and safeguarded is also a claim that ‘reasoned scrutiny’ would sustain that judgment. What ‘sustainability of a judgement’ demands is a general appreciation – by citizens of America and all other nations – for the reach of reasoning in favour of those rights if anyone tries to question or scrutinise the claims.

So far, from what we see, the Biden administration’s approach in Afghanistan is working towards the process of making the ‘content’ and ‘viability’ of rights more symmetrically aligned to protecting the freedoms of Americans alone and not those of non-Americans, which the universalist ethical (moral) claims in a human rights-based approach to foreign policy implicitly apply.

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