AFGHANISTAN ON THE BRINK OF AN ABYSS

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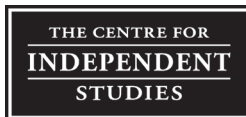
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On Tuesday 25 May 2021, Australia formally announced that its embassy in the Afghan capital Kabul would close three days later. This did not terminate the longstanding diplomatic relations between the two states,[1] but it did cast a shadow over Afghanistan's future — a future already clouded by US President Joe Biden's announcement that all US forces would be withdrawn by 11 September. How this sorry story will end remains to be seen, but it is timely to reflect on how such a flight from the Afghan theatre of operations came to pass, and on some of the dangers that may be waiting in the wings; both for Afghans and for their erstwhile supporters in the wider world.

The following discussion is divided into five sections. The first provides some context for the challenges we now face. The second shows how the 'peace process' that was supposed to flow from the US-Taliban agreement of 29 February 2020 went horribly wrong. The third examines two risks that Afghans now face: a risk of theocratic autocracy and a risk of civil war. The fourth highlights the danger that the Western exit from Afghanistan will provide inspiration — and a propaganda coup — for anti-Western radical forces in other parts of the world, including Australia's region. The final section points to the likelihood of large flows from Afghanistan of vulnerable refugees, who will need all the support they can get from Western powers that project themselves as beacons of liberty and enemies of totalitarian extremism.

Some context

Afghanistan is often seen as an exotic and intrinsically-violent country, populated by wild, bearded tribesman armed with 19th century weapons and existing alongside largely-invisible women. These images are not only misleading but dangerous.[2] They belie the complexity of Afghanistan's society, which is far more than simply 'tribal'; they miss the point that for much of the 20th century, Afghanistan was the most peaceful country in Asia; and most seriously, they neglect the effects on 21st-century Afghanistan of the forces of globalisation and commerce, which have been dramatic and far-reaching.[3] But that said, there is no doubt that Afghanistan is also a profoundly unsettled country. More than four decades have passed since the Communist coup of April 1978 that severely disrupted both Afghan society and the Afghan state,[4] and, together with the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan from December 1979, turned Afghanistan into a theatre of major-power rivalry[5] — an unhappy status it arguably retains to this day. The Soviet invasion resulted in close to a million deaths, the displacement over time of more than six million refugees, and enormous infrastructure damage and loss of human capital.[6] When the Communist regime finally collapsed in 1992,[7] barely three years after the completion of the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the Afghan resistance (*Mujahideen*) inherited the symbols of a state, but little more, and Afghanistan — largely abandoned by the wider world — slid into a period of internal disorder.

Over time, the disruption of state and society accommodated the emergence of ever-more destructive political forces, nurtured outside Afghanistan itself, that brought terror to the lives of ordinary people. The Taliban movement, which seized Kabul with Pakistani backing in September 1996, was a prime example, and its extremism had made it an international pariah by the time it was overthrown by the US and its allies in late 2001 following the September 11, 2001 Al-Qaida terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.[8] While Western support over the past two decades helped hold the Taliban at bay, they are now resurgent; poised to seek vengeance against their moderate opponents, and control of the instrumentalities of the state. Several key factors help explain how this came to pass, although the story is of course a complex one.

A first factor related to the commitment of the US. While the US committed vast sums to Afghanistan — and by 2021 it had become popular in the US to refer to Afghanistan as 'America's longest war' — for much of the preceding two decades, the attention the US paid to Afghanistan was fitful and prone to drift. The US had great difficulty in developing a coherent strategic narrative to animate its various activities in Afghanistan, and tended to rely on propaganda to project an aura of success.[9] And from 2002 onwards, US leaders became preoccupied with Iraq, at the expense of the Afghan theatre of operations. Momentum is very important in sustaining progress in a fractured situation, such as Afghanistan presented in 2001, and the shift of US focus to Iraq sucked a great deal of oxygen out of Afghanistan. In December 2007, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, captured this when he said "In Afghanistan we do what we can. In Iraq we do what we must."[10] This was later affirmed by former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates in his memoirs: "As much as President Bush detested the notion, our later challenges in Afghanistan, especially the return of the Taliban in force by the time I became defense secretary, were, I believe, significantly compounded by the invasion of Iraq."[11] It is hard to disagree.

This problem was compounded by a second factor, namely the dysfunctional features of the post-2001 Afghan state, and of Afghan politics more broadly. At the 2001 Bonn conference that laid out a pathway for post-Taliban transition, the parties agreed to an interim administration with up to 29 departments, essentially so the participants could all walk away with a prize. The critical issues of the appropriate scope and strength of the 'future state' — to use Francis Fukuyama's terminology[12] — received little attention. From its inception, therefore, the new Afghan state was tasked with attempting far too much. This problem was compounded by the 2004 constitution, which provided on paper for a highly centralised state and a strong presidency, but was notably weak where accountability mechanisms were concerned, and paid little attention to the important roles of locally-legitimate informal institutions and the protection of property rights. As two very experienced observers put it, "the historical process of state building produced an unconstrained, predatory state that destroyed wealth, while the more recent externally assisted state-building process enabled the predatory state while doing little to improve its ability to provide public goods."[13]

Politics also took a *neopatrimonial* turn, with formal institutions increasingly intertwined with patron-client networks that came to function as distributional devices alongside state structures and markets.[14] The US played a hand in this: Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld argued that Afghan President Hamed Karzai "should learn to use patronage and political incentives."[15] This was exceptionally poor advice, but Karzai was happy to take it. Neopatrimonialism led to corruption, but much of the fuel for corruption came from badly-designed aid flows, which had unintended consequences nearly as destructive as those that came from US-funded counter-narcotics programs, all too often executed with insufficient attention to the ways in which these could disrupt licit markets or be co-opted by clientelist networks.[16] And while elections were held in 2004, 2005,

2009, 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2019, a number were overshadowed by credible suspicions of serious fraud.[17]

However, the most critical factor of all was the resumption of active support for the Taliban by Pakistan, and specifically the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate of the Pakistan Armed Forces (ISI).[18] This allowed the Taliban to embark on a campaign of violent attacks in Afghanistan, with civilians often the victims of terrorist strikes.[19] Pakistan feared any possible expansion of Indian influence in Afghanistan,[20] and a disordered Afghanistan from ISI's perspective was preferable to a stable, pro-Indian neighbour to Pakistan's west. In 2011, US Admiral Mullen described the Haqqani network, a core component of the Taliban movement, as a "veritable arm" of the ISI.[21] No less a figure than Pakistan's President Musharraf openly stated during a visit to Kabul that "There is no doubt Afghan militants are supported from Pakistani soil. The problem that you have in your region is because support is provided from our side."[22]

This was something that US officials in Afghanistan clearly understood. In a leaked cable, the US Ambassador, retired Lieutenant-General Karl Eikenberry, wrote: "More troops won't end the insurgency as long as Pakistan sanctuaries remain. Pakistan will remain the single greatest source of Afghan instability so long as the border sanctuaries remain, and Pakistan regards its strategic interests as best served by a weak neighbour … Until this sanctuary problem is fully addressed, the gains from sending additional forces may be fleeting."[23] To the frustration of both the Afghan government and the US military, successive US presidents proved utterly incapable of dealing with this problem, although a range of diplomatic measures were available to confront it.[24] Instead, except from a fleeting moment of insight from President Trump in 2017,[25] the dominant view in Washington DC appeared to be that constructive engagement with Pakistan would allow the problem to be managed. This proved to be wishful thinking.

How a "peace process" went wrong

Given President Trump's penchant for erratic initiatives, what happened as his term approached its conclusion should not have come as a surprise; but the consequences for Afghanistan have proved catastrophic. Urged on by isolationist or pessimist voices from both the Left and the Right, the Trump Administration on 29 February 2020 signed a pact *with the Taliban* under the title 'Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan' (*Mowafeqatnamah-e awardan-e saleh be Afghanistan*). The agreement was proof positive of how adept the Taliban had become at gulling Western officials and audiences. In February 2020, even *The New York Times* published an article purportedly written by senior Taliban leader Sirajuddin Haqqani that proclaimed "I am convinced that the killing and the maiming must stop."[26] This deserved to be treated not just with a grain but with a pillar of salt, and a detailed report of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team in June 2021 offered a more sobering view: that Sirajuddin was "reported by Member States to oppose peace talks and favour a military solution."[27] The Agreement contained a timetable for a complete US withdrawal by mid-2021, and a Taliban commitment not to attack US forces, but no provisions for a general ceasefire, or for the protection of individual freedoms, or democratic institutions, or the hard-won rights of Afghan women.

Furthermore, while the Afghan government was not a party to the Agreement, it provided for the release of up to 5000 Taliban 'combat and political prisoners' *held by the Afghan government.* Ironically, the effect of this 'confidence-building measure' was not to build trust between the Afghan parties, but to destroy any trust that the Afghan government — the most pro-Western government in Southwest Asia — had in the US. To all intents and purposes, the Agreement was a US exit agreement, not an agreement with any realistic prospect of 'bringing peace to Afghanistan'. It would be hard to find a better example of the dangers of negotiating with morally-repugnant actors.[28] Five specific defects of the negotiating process deserve to be noted, not least because of their ongoing implications for Afghanistan's future prospects.

First, the agreement was premised on the defective *assumption* that the Taliban were committed to 'good-faith negotiation'. There was no particular reason to be confident that this was the case. In earlier times, when the United Nations sought to engage with the Taliban, it found the entire experience deeply frustrating; one UN official in conversation with this writer compared it to "grasping smoke." Furthermore, the United States did virtually nothing before the agreement was signed to test the good faith of the Taliban, relying on a 'reduction of violence' of just seven days' duration as proof of their intent. This proved to be quite extraordinarily naïve.

Second, the agreement emerged from a severely defective *process*. When initially seeking to engage with the Taliban, US envoy Dr Zalmay Khalilzad committed to a standard diplomatic formula: 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed'. This can be a useful approach to negotiation, for in practice it means that offers do not become concrete until they have been matched by credible reciprocal commitments from the other side. Unfortunately, in 2019 Khalilzad abandoned this in favour of a two-stage process under which the US would first strike its own agreement with the Taliban, after which 'intra-Afghan negotiations' could follow.[29] This had a fatal effect on incentives for the Taliban to negotiate meaningfully with the Afghan

government. The US in February 2020 ended up giving the Taliban everything they really wanted — the status of a place at the table with the US, a firm timeline for US troop withdrawals, and a promise of prisoner releases — and no interest in engaging seriously with their Afghan counterparts. If anything, the two-stage process, and the prohibition on attacking the Americans, actually incentivised Taliban attacks on *Afghan* targets, since the more mayhem they could create, the stronger would be their negotiating position if a second phase of discussions ever eventuated. Predictably, Taliban violence against Afghan targets escalated dramatically in 2020 and 2021, with a wave of targeted assassinations claiming the lives of liberal intellectuals, journalists, and civil society actors.

A third defect was that Washington proved susceptible to Taliban demands that the US give them even more during the *implementation* phase of the agreement. (This doubtless reflected reluctance on the part of President Trump to see his diplomatic 'triumph' unravel on the eve of the 2020 presidential election.) This became clear when the Taliban demanded the release of a 'rogue' Afghan sergeant, Hekmatullah, who had killed three Australian soldiers within their base.[30] He was plainly a war criminal rather than a 'combat or political prisoner', but the US, in the apparent hope that his release would kickstart stalled intra-Afghan negotiations, pressured the Afghan government to hand him over to house arrest in Qatar. The Afghans had no desire to do so, but Washington proved adamant, even in the face of direct pleas from Australia that Hekmatullah not be released. His release did nothing for the negotiation process; on the contrary, it provided yet more evidence to support the prescient observation of the late Owen Harries that if one acts as if one can be taken for granted, one will be taken for granted.

A fourth defect related to the impact of the agreement on *mass psychology*. The Taliban are not popular in Afghanistan: a careful 2019 survey found that 85.1% of respondents had no sympathy at all for the Taliban.[31] But as Thomas Hobbes observed in *Leviathan:* "Reputation of power, is Power."[32] The effect of the US-Taliban agreement was

to boost the reputation of power of the Taliban, and undermine the reputation of the Afghan government. The danger to which that gave rise was that of a cascade,[33] where even opponents of a force such as the Taliban might join them in order to avoid finding themselves on a losing side. If there is a major collapse in Afghanistan, this is the form it is most likely to take.

The final defect arose from the disposition of American observers to 'frame' Afghanistan's problems in terms of *conflicts of interest*. There are indeed conflicts of interest in Afghanistan, but more fundamentally, there is a quite profound conflict of *values* between on the one hand the Taliban, who desire the restoration of an 'Islamic Emirate', and on the other hand moderate forces, who defend what some have called a 'republican' model of government.[34] The latter vision is essentially pluralistic, whereas the former is fundamentally totalitarian. The gulf that separates the parties is profound, and not one to be bridged through quick-fix, rabbit-out-of-a-hat, diplomatic endeavours. Sadly, it is with the destructive consequences of such endeavours that the Afghans and their government now have to struggle. The most dangerous possible consequences are theocratic autocracy and civil war.

Risks of theocratic autocracy and civil war

In order to understand the nature of the threat that the Taliban pose for a pluralist and liberal future for Afghanistan, it is important to appreciate that the Taliban are not simply a reflection of traditional Afghan social and political structures. Whilst on occasion they have been prepared to make use of such structures, especially amongst members of the Pushtun ethnic group from whom they are largely drawn, their ideological disposition is pathogenic and rigid, quite different from the pragmatic, if conservative, values associated with traditional communities. Probably the best term to capture their orientation is *totalitarian*. As the eminent Sovietologist T.H. Rigby, a critic of the 1950s 'totalitarian model' of the USSR, put it: "As a more general term signifying patterns of thought and action that tend to total social control, "totalitarianism" still deserves a place in the lexicon of the social sciences."[35] The Taliban have never been prepared to concede that there is *any* sphere of social life into which they cannot legitimately intrude. For them, their version of Islam is the solution to the problems of the world, as well as the means by which oppression can be overcome — a classically-ideological position.[36] When they have seized territory in the recent past — for example the city of Kunduz in September-October 2015 — their brutality has been fully on display.[37] There are thus good reasons for fearing that if the Taliban were to recover control of the Afghan state, they would be every bit as repressive as they were before their overthrow in 2001.

It is occasionally suggested that if the Taliban were to acquire state power, they would be obliged to moderate their behaviour, either to secure aid or to obtain international recognition. We have been here before: in 1996, when the Taliban first seized Kabul, Dr Zalmay Khalilzad wrote that "once order is established, concerns such as good government, economic reconstruction and education will rise to the fore."[38] This did not happen, and the lesson is that what matters to the Taliban is not necessarily what optimistic foreign observers might wish. Unfortunately, the willingness of the US to defer to the Taliban may well have left them with the impression that they can expect recognition from Washington even if their behaviour proves extreme. Moreover, an important recent study suggests that the Taliban obtain substantial revenues extracted at 'chokepoints' from traders in fuel and transit goods,[39] which they could use to sustain their coercive capacity even in the absence of substantial aid.

The likelihood that the Taliban in power would act as a theocratic autocracy points towards an equally alarming scenario: civil war. This is a matter of mounting concern for analysts. As Anatol Lieven has put it: "to achieve a stable and lasting hegemony over Afghanistan as a whole, the Taliban … would have to reach an accommodation with Afghanistan's other main ethnic groups — Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks — guaranteeing them autonomy and safety in their own areas. Without this, Afghanistan will be doomed to a future of unending civil war fuelled by outside backers."[40] However, there is nothing to suggest the Taliban are interested in granting autonomy to anyone, and already groups are mobilising to resist the Taliban should the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) begin to fragment. The British-educated Ahmad Massoud, son of the famous *Mujahideen* commander Ahmad Shah Massoud who was assassinated by extremists in September 2001, has been forthright in foreshadowing a military campaign should the Taliban take over, and this has been echoed by Hazara leaders, who have good reason for concern; many recall a Taliban massacre of Hazaras in Mazar-e Sharif in August 1998 that the writer Ahmed Rashid described as "genocidal in its ferocity."[41]

As Ali Yawar Adili of the highly-respected Afghanistan Analysts Network has put it: "for the first time in 20 years, powerbrokers are speaking publicly about mobilising armed men outside ANSF and government structures. While the presence of militias has been a local fact of life for many Afghans for years … never have public pronouncements about the need to mobilise, nor the wish to establish autonomous spheres of influence been expressed so brazenly."[42] If a full-scale civil war were to break out, no one could say with confidence exactly what direction it might take, but there would be a grave risk of other players becoming involved, turning it into a transnational proxy or surrogate war[43] which could have incalculable consequences not only for the people of Afghanistan, but for Afghanistan's notoriously-combustible region.

Inspiration for radicalism

The US-Taliban agreement provided in Part Two that the Taliban movement would "not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including Al-Qaida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies", that it would instruct its members "not to cooperate with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies", and that it would not "host" them.[44] In announcing the intention of the US to proceed to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, President Biden on 14 April 2021 remarked: "we'll not take our eye off the terrorist threat. We'll reorganize our counterterrorism capabilities and the substantial assets in the region to prevent reemergence of terrorists — of the threat to our homeland from over the horizon … At my direction, my team is refining our national strategy to monitor and disrupt significant terrorist threats not only in Afghanistan, but anywhere they may arise."[45] The ground reality in Afghanistan, however, belies this upbeat tone, and highlights the perils of relying on Taliban promises; according to the UN's most recent Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team report, "the Taliban and Al-Qaida remain closely aligned and show no indication of breaking ties."[46] The US withdrawal thus leaves critical issues relating to terrorism and radicalisation hanging in the air.

In particular, the confidence of the US that it can prevent the reemergence of terrorists in Afghanistan by reorganising its counterterrorism capabilities carries more than a whiff of the faith

attached to 'miracle weapons' by the German leadership towards the end of the Second World War. While there are sound operational reasons for a US president not to go into detail about counterterrorism capabilities, some problems that the US will face are palpable.[47] The US exit from Afghanistan has the inevitable effect of increasing the distance between US assets such as fighter aircraft or drones, and any potential terrorist targets in Afghanistan that the US might wish to eliminate; in turn this increases the likelihood that if the US attempts a strike, its intended target will no longer be *in situ*. The US also has an unhappy history of intelligence failures, stretching all the way back to Pearl Harbor in December 1941, but most recently obvious in its circulation of the spurious claims about weapons of mass destruction that were used to justify the 2003 Iraq invasion.[48] Furthermore, Afghanistan is a landlocked country and its immediate neighbours to its east and west are totally unreliable as partners in the gathering of counterterrorist intelligence; not for nothing did the US keep Pakistan completely in the dark before its May 2011 raid that killed Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden in his refuge in Abbottabad, virtually on the doorstep of the Pakistan Military Academy.[49]

One factor which seemed to have inclined the United States to partner with the Taliban was the belief that the Taliban were natural enemies of another set of terrorists with a foothold in Afghanistan, namely the radical Sunni Muslim group known variously as 'Islamic State', 'Daesh' 'ISIS' (that is 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria'), 'ISIL' ('Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant') and, in its Afghan variant, 'ISKP' ('Islamic State Khorasan Province').[50] Islamic State is notable for its extreme brutality, fully on display when it occupied the city of Mosul in Iraq from 2014 to 2017, and its 'Afghan' wing, although made up largely of Pakistani militants and some breakaways from the Afghan Taliban, is more than simply a local franchise.[51] The 'natural enemy thesis' first surfaced, although not in quite those terms, in an essay by an academic who was not a specialist on Afghanistan,[52] and found a certain amount of traction in US policy circles. A more

detailed analysis of the relations between the Taliban and ISKP suggests that the 'natural enemy thesis' is a serious oversimplification. While the groups *have* clashed on various occasions, at other times they have cooperated, and the likely explanation, grounded in resource mobilisation theory, lies in varying incentive structures rather than any fundamental ideological rift.[53] ISKP, fanatically hostile to Shiite Muslims,[54] has won notoriety for mass casualty attacks on Afghanistan's Shiite Hazara population, and was most likely behind an horrific bombing of a girls' school in Kabul on 8 May 2021, as well as an attack on HALO Trust de-miners in Baghlan on 8 June 2021.[55]

Yet most unsettling of all where countering violent extremism is concerned is the extremely static approach to which the US appears to have gravitated. In his 14 April remarks, President Biden stated: "With the terror threat now in many places, keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year makes little sense to me and to our leaders." The crucial issue he left unaddressed was a *dynamic* one: how the spectacle of the US abandoning a long-term moderate ally (and on the anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks) might enhance the recruitment and mobilisation strategies of radical groups in diverse parts of the world. When the Soviet Union withdrew its forces from Afghanistan in February 1989, the withdrawal fuelled a narrative in radical circles that religion was a force-multiplier that could defeat even the superpower. There is every reason to fear that exactly the same kind of narrative, applied to the US, could be used to inspire and reinvigorate extremist groups in areas remote from Afghanistan itself, including places such as Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines. To this, unfortunately, can be added another layer of rhetoric. Central to the mobilisation strategies of Islamic State in particular is the proposition that Western powers can never be *trusted*; that they will *betray* their allies in the Muslim world when it suits them to do so.[56] Given the recent actions of the United States, this is a line of argument which could prove difficult to contest.

Refugees

To the economist Albert O. Hirschman we owe an understanding of how and why *exit* can be a rational and appropriate response to certain situations.[57] In the political sphere, it is most starkly reflected in the phenomenon of the refugee. This was something of which Hirschman himself had direct experience, and in the 21st century, he would probably have been labelled a people smuggler: during the Second World War, he was part of a network based in Marseilles that arranged the escape from Nazism of figures such as Hannah Arendt, Marc Chagall, Arthur Koestler, Heinrich Mann, and Franz Werfel.[58]

There is a high probability that very large numbers of Afghans will seek to leave Afghanistan as refugees if the Taliban secure control of the state. Why would exit be their preferred option? Several factors come into play. First, very large numbers of Afghans have experienced forced displacement in the decades since the communist coup of April 1978, and while it would be going too far to speak of a tradition of mobility, these experiences have familiarised many people with the phenomenon of flight; it is not entirely a venture into the unknown. Second, Afghanistan's population is a notably youthful one: as of 1 June 2020, some 24,559,262 Afghans, or 74.6 per cent of the total population, were estimated to be under the age of 30.[59] Young Afghans may feel more physically capable of confronting the arduous challenge of fleeing their country, and as products of 21st century globalisation, they are also more likely to have developed visions of Western countries as environments in which freedom, human rights, democracy, and

entrepreneurialism are valued. Third, the situation they face if they remain in Afghanistan is likely to be very grim. During the period of Taliban rule in the late 1990s, there was a popular belief — which this writer encountered during visits to various parts of Afghanistan — that the situation was so frightful that the international community would have to intervene to set things right. In 2021, with the international community itself heading for the exit, no Afghan is going to entertain any such belief.

In the kind of environment which is looming, no Afghan is safe. The Taliban in the past have proved capable of attacking any moderate individuals, whether they be Pushtun, Hazara, Tajik, Uzbek, or a member of some other ethnic minority. The Hazaras have particular reason to be fearful, as there is a very long history of marginalisation or persecution of Hazaras by dominant groups, stretching back at least to the 19th century,[60] and they are readily identifiable from their physical appearance. Many fled Afghanistan, including to Australia, following the massacre of August 1998,[61] although like many refugees, they found that host governments beholden to populist politicians[62] often treated them in a manner that was anything but liberal.[63]

In 2015, over 200,000 Afghans fled in the direction of Europe, which is again likely to be the destination to which refugees head if the Taliban seize control of the state. The challenge for European powers is that the numbers could easily overwhelm any capacity or disposition on the part of states between Afghanistan and Western Europe to interdict the movement of those in transit, and that the overwhelming majority would likely fit *any* meaningful definition of refugee, whether philosophical, sociological or legal. The upside, if there is one, is that if past experience is anything to go by, such refugees are likely to be highly entrepreneurial, and averse to extremism in any of its forms.[64] For decades, most Afghans have survived economically not on the strength of foreign aid or state welfare, but simply through the circular flow of income in a market economy. And those who leave Afghanistan will be fleeing to escape extremism, not to spread it.

Afghans who have worked closely with either the US or its allies are now in extreme danger, and it is vital that their prompt resettlement to the countries that they have assisted not become entangled in the red tape for which migration-control bureaucracies are notorious. It would be perverse in the extreme if classical liberals who have meticulously documented diverse pathologies of the state and its agencies were to exempt such migration-control bureaucracies from critical scrutiny, especially when issues of life and death are at hand, as they are for many Afghans. But beyond these immediate cases of vulnerability, it would be timely to put in place a set of measures to ensure that when Afghan refugees flee, they are accepted with the dignity they deserve, rather than warehoused at arms' length or driven away, as were many Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany in the 1930s.[65]

Of course, it pays to be unsentimental about the objectives of the state. As Chandran Kukathas has recently reminded us: "immigration control is not a means of self-determination used by an existing political community, formed into a state to protect its independently given identity, but rather a part of the way in which the state creates and controls its population in order to serve its own interests."[66] The US, in its haste to exit Afghanistan, has shown little concern for any interests other than its own. But that said, other countries, likely soon to be confronted with the challenge of major Afghan refugee flows, have an opportunity to prove that they can do better.

Endnotes

1   See William Maley, *Australia-Afghanistan Relations: Reflections on a half-century* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019).

2   See Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

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4   See Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

5   For more detail, see Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* (London: Profile Books, 2011).

6   For details, see William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (London: Macmillan/Red Globe Press, 2021) pp.123-128.

7   On the Soviet withdrawal, see Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Katya Drozdova and Joseph H. Felter, 'Leaving Afghanistan: Enduring Lessons from the Soviet Politburo', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol.21, no.4, Fall 2019, pp.31-70.

8   On the emergence of the Taliban, see Anthony Davis, 'How the Taliban Became a Military Force', in William Maley (ed.), *Fundamentalism Reborn?: Afghanistan and the Taliban* (London: Hurst & Co., 1998) pp.43-71. On the complex links between *al-Qaeda* and the Taliban, see Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010* (London: Hurst & Co., 2012); Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

9   On Western strategic narratives, see Beatrice De Graaf, George Dimitriu and Jens Ringsmose (eds), *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning domestic support for the Afghan War* (New York: Routledge, 2015). On US propaganda, see Lauren Kay Johnson, 'I helped write the official lies to sell the Afghanistan war', *The Washington Post*, 14 December 2019. Taliban propaganda and narratives were often more sophisticated (possibly as a result of tutelage from the Pakistan military); see *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?* (Kabul and Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2008); Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017).

10   Robert Burns, 'Mullen: Afghanistan Isn't Top Priority', *The Washington Post*, 11 December 2007.

11   Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014) p.569.

12   See Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) p.7.

13   See Ilia Murtazashvili and Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, 'The political economy of state building', *Journal of Public Finance and Public Choice*, vol.34, no.2, October 2019, pp.189-207 at p.191; also Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

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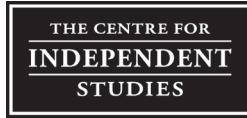
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Afghanistan on the Brink of an Abyss

Australia's recent closure of its embassy in Kabul, and the withdrawal of all US forces from Afghanistan after 20 years by 11 September 2021, casts a deep shadow over Afghanistan's future prospects.

In this paper, leading expert on Afghanistan, William Maley, examines the implications of the US withdrawal. He discusses how the 'peace process' that was supposed to flow from the US-Taliban agreement of February 2020 went horribly wrong, destroying trust in the United States and weakening the Afghan government. He warns that if the Taliban regain control, Afghanistan faces two risks: theocratic totalitarianism and civil war. He also notes that whilst the United States is confident it can prevent the re-emergence of terrorism in Afghanistan, the spectacle of the US abandoning a long-term moderate Muslim ally risks inspiring and reinvigorating anti-Western extremist groups in other nations.

The paper concludes by pointing to the likelihood of large flows from Afghanistan of vulnerable refugees, arguing that in the kind of environment that is looming no Afghan is safe. These refugees are likely to seek out Western countries where freedom, democracy and human rights are valued, presenting a humanitarian challenge that could overwhelm governments unless timely measures are put in place now.

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