The fall of Kabul: Who is responsible?^

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The unopposed fall of Kabul to the Taliban on 15th August 2021 apparently took many people by surprise, including decision makers who might have expected to have been better informed about the likely consequences of a final withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. Their expressed astonishment suggests that whatever assumptions they may have made were mistaken and some of the intelligence they might have received was faulty and unrealistic. Have warning signs been ignored and past decisions based on hope and/or misinformation?

The speed with which the incumbent Government in Afghanistan collapsed raises questions about responsibility for what some have portrayed as a humiliating retreat and abandonment of allies by the US. To what extent has what has happened been a self-inflicted wound, or a likely or inevitable consequence of the grasping of a nettle that was long overdue? Are particular people, decisions and policies to blame, or might a wider range of factors explain what has happened? Has normal service resumed (Tanner, 2009; Rashid, 2009)?

As the time of writing it is too early to form definitive judgements about the likely consequences of recent events for different elements of the local population and various interested external parties, their reactions and the extent of future opposition to central control. The various factions of the Taliban took some time to agree a Ministerial team and form a Government. There is considerable uncertainty about several aspects of what might happen in what is acknowledged as a particularly challenging context (Bose, 2018). However, it is possible to consider some influencing factors and suggest tentative lessons.

Rationale for US and NATO Involvement

The prime responsibility of Governments is the security and welfare of their own citizens and this consideration should also apply to international involvements, for example where collective action is needed to deal with a shared challenge such as global warming and climate change. The initial involvement in Afghanistan of the US and its allies were not the result of lengthy and in depth analysis of international challenges, opportunities and priorities. They stemmed from an attack on the US orchestrated from within the country.

US engagement in Afghanistan, NATO involvement, anti-terrorist measures introduced by allies and the overthrow of a Taliban regime were instinctive responses in anger to an assault organised by Al-Qaeda on 11th September 2001which killed more people than the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941. That evening President Bush informed his team that in future the 'war on terror' would be his administration's highest priority. In an address to the US nation President Bush declared "if you harbour a terrorist we will treat you as a terrorist".

Initial external intervention and support of a local Northern Alliance against the Taliban was successful in relation to denying Al-Qaeda a relatively safe haven from which to plan further attacks against the 'West'. Rather than withdrawing in 2002, the US and its allies remained in Afghanistan and initiated moves to install a democratic form of political system that could hopefully lead to a Government that might command widespread support. They became

engaged in what has been described as an endless and unwinnable war (Farrell, 2018; Powers, 2018). Past experience suggests that in western democracies such a widened mission might well lead to voter fatigue if high costs were incurred over a protracted period.

Rationale for Extraction from Afghanistan

All parties involved in Afghanistan should have been aware of the need to prepare for a future without US troops on the ground and that a pull out by the US would need to be followed by any remaining allies whose contribution would not be viable in the absence of US involvement and support. Withdrawal discussions with the Taliban were initiated by former President Trump and his successor President Biden had promised electors that US forces would be withdrawn. He sought to honour this pledge following his election.

The cost of US involvement in Afghanistan over a period of some 20 years has been estimated at in excess of $2.3 trillion (Watson Institute, 2021). President Biden in a speech to the American people on 31st August 2021 defended his decision to pull out on the grounds that the US presence in the country no longer had a clear purpose and withdrawal should have occurred earlier. Comparisons with a continuing US military commitment to South Korea are misleading in that this is not actively contested by an indigenous and armed group and it has broader domestic and local support.

Afghanistan related costs will continue to occur, for example in relation to the support of injured veterans. Wear and tear on military assets will mean earlier replacement costs. Given other strategic priorities, existential threats and the greater size of public finance deficits in western countries as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, continuing involvement was likely to come under scrutiny. Ideally, the US military and economic commitment to Afghanistan should have been gradually reduced much earlier and the country encouraged to assume greater responsibility for its own development and security. Arms abandoned by ANA forces could now encourage further instability in an already volatile region (Rashid, 2009).

Economic Considerations

Concerns about recent events and reactions to them sometimes stress the scale of past expenditures in relation to what is perceived as a return to a previous situation and portray what has happened as a failure and waste of human lives and substantial resources. As already alluded to, past expenditures on US involvement in Afghanistan are substantial (Watson Institute, 2021). However, they are sunk costs and not a justification for continuing commitment. Policy decisions should reflect future incremental costs and benefits and opportunity costs of other possible uses of resources involved and the time of key players.

The running costs of the Afghan war have used budgets that could have been used to match China's relentless military build-up. There are also areas of competing costs likely to rapidly increase, such as the cost of climate adaptation and mitigation and extreme weather events (IPCC, 2021, WMO, 2021). Like welfare spending, external economic aid and foreign military support can also encourage dependency and create vested interests in their continuation and expectations of further largesse. They can stimulate a sense of entitlement, lead to corruption and create communities that fail to adapt and become a burden upon others. They may inhibit individual, collective and national efforts to become self-sufficient. They

might also be taken for granted. When they are reduced or withdrawn, previous beneficiaries may portray themselves as 'victims of cuts' or as having been abandoned.

Only a minute proportion of the cost of overseas aid and foreign involvement is usually paid by the most strident voices in favour of them. Human beings can sometimes be quick to portray themselves in a favourable light by advocating expenditure that when it becomes public policy other people and businesses have to pay for. A fairer and arguably more ethical approach would be for them to spend their own money on causes they support.

While Afghanistan is a country with significant mineral deposits, the inability of the previous Government to provide security in the areas concerned has largely prevented their exploitation, limiting any prospect of the US and its allies securing an economic return on sacrifices their citizens have made to support it. Should twenty years of their military involvement and support have offered the Afghan Government and people sufficient time to adjust, adapt and become more self-sufficient? In a Europe devastated by World War two, cities that had been reduced to rubble and societies were regenerated over a similar time period, albeit with significant support in the form of the Marshal Plan (Betts, 2020).

Military and Intelligence Considerations

However extensive they might be, available military and security forces represent a potential. Whether or not they can be accessed and rapidly deployed when and where required to influence a changing situation on the ground can depend upon contextual understanding and relevant, accurate and timely intelligence. Were Afghan forces in cities and withdrawing US forces preoccupied with leaving bases in which they had been largely confined, sufficiently aware of what was happening outside and in rural areas? Were those collecting intelligence reporting what decision makers were hoping to receive rather than uncomfortable realities? Alternatively, was intelligence accurate, but subsequently misinterpreted or ignored?

In recent years Taliban fighters had increased the area under their influence. How realistic were the expectations expressed by political decision makers in Western capitals that the Afghan security forces and the national army (ANA) would be able to withstand a further advance? Some of them were deployable Special Forces, but many ANA soldiers were relatively new and not in regular contact with their armed local opponents who often had more combat experience. Concerns about ANA numbers, reliability, effectiveness and conduct have been expressed over many years (Cahn, 2009; DOD, 2019; Jacobsen, 2019).

Because US withdrawal had been negotiated with them, the Taliban knew the end point. They could prepare and plan how best to take advantage of an unfolding situation. Even so, they expressed surprise at the speed with which the Afghan security forces capitulated. While organising and undertaking their withdrawal, were US and allied forces also modelling and evaluating various scenarios and possible Taliban takeover strategies and tactics? Were those who had put their faith in the ANA careless and incompetent or naïve and ill-informed? Had its mobility and ability to support and re-supply local operations and provincial capitals in the absence of foreign air support been tested in exercises and war games?

Attempted Introduction of Democracy

Democracies around the world are under threat from totalitarian Governments intent on expanding their spheres of influence and building up their armed forces. While the US may well have recently been on the defensive, attempting to introduce democracy to Afghanistan with its distinctive and challenging context and a long history of resistance and jostling for power amongst rival and hostile armed groups was a risky venture (Hamid and Farrall, 2015; Coll, 2018). Was this policy of the US and allies naïve? Did hope and the heart supplant reality and the head? Was subsequent external support and vigilance up to the challenge?

Could more have been achieved at an affordable price? If any of Afghanistan's democratic and other mechanisms and institutions were thought to be inappropriate, corrupt or otherwise inadequate and in need of modification, could or should this have been done during the almost 20 years of US involvement? There was little time during the withdrawal timetable to discuss changes and implement them. The preoccupation of the US and its allies was extraction rather than the consolidation of democracy.

Importantly, was there also time during the period 2001-2021 for a competent and responsible Afghan Government to initiate and progress discussions with any parties in the country that felt excluded or questioned its legitimacy and/or priorities, and would the Taliban have participated? Was there time to build military and security forces to the extent required to ensure internal order, curtail poppy production and prevent the territory of the country being again used as a base for external attacks? Who was actively monitoring 'nation building'? By 2021, was this a living project or a past aim?

Local Afghan Self-Sufficiency and Viability

For critical years before the Trump era when opportunities to consolidate were lost, were warnings that the Afghan war was unwinnable largely ignored (Fairweather, 2015; Barry, 2020).Where progress towards legitimacy, securing local support and economic and military self-sufficiency was not occurring, could more steps have been taken to remedy the situation? For example, could an indigenous capacity have been established or contractors employed by the Afghan Government directly to maintain the air support assets ANA operations required? Could more local civilian and military staff at all levels have been mentored or sent on courses or apprenticeships and issues relating to drug taking and conduct addressed?

External parties can create an opportunity through initial intervention, but they cannot subsequently build strong local institutions and a national allegiance, consciousness and identity without domestic commitment and support. If an economic, political and social system is to survive people must want it. They must feel it is legitimate and desirable and that they have a stake in it and benefit from it (Peter, 2011). They must actively support it and be willing to defend it when it is threatened or under attack. However, could the US which led the NATO involvement in Afghanistan have done more to enable continuing viability, for example in maintenance arrangements for US equipment supplied to local forces?

Most Governments face opposition of some form and the veneer of civilisation can be thin. For example, in a wide range of contexts around the world, including in cities in developed countries, looting has quickly occurred when people have felt that they can get away with it. Democracies can be particularly vulnerable to take over by determined minorities if others look the other way or do not actively oppose them. What has been built at great cost can

sometimes be quickly swept away if people do not fight for it. However, when faced with a choice between the likely death of themselves and their families many choose not to do so.

Reading the Road Ahead

Should one blame the Afghan Government or external parties for inadequate nation building over a period of 20 years? If sufficient steps had not been taken to involve elders, provinces and tribes outside of Kabul in governance arrangements and for them to feel they had a stake in the country that was worth fighting for, why should one be surprised by the rapidity of the Taliban advance and the fall of Kabul? The Taliban have been consistent, well entrenched and determined opponents (Rashid, 2010a & b). Throughout history cities have been occupied unopposed by advancing forces that appeared to have momentum on their side.

Has there been a general lack of foresight (Coulson-Thomas, 2021)? Against the background of a steady increase in the area under Taliban control, did the Afghan Government miscalculate or fail to read the road ahead? Was it over-optimistic, naïve and/or delusional in its assessments of the ANA, the extent to which people who had benefitted in recent years from the liberalisation that had occurred would actively support it and its ability to survive without negotiation and some accommodation with the Taliban? Local ANA units and supporters were faced with a choice between resisting and risking bloodshed and the destruction of their local city, town or village or running, hiding and hoping for the best.

The Taliban was armed, remained highly motivated, had coped with the loss of key players in drone strikes and appeared well entrenched in some locations. It was feared by many, resolute and able to continue to challenge while excluded from power. If the Afghan Government was over-optimistic, what was this based upon when even during more active US military intervention the Taliban was able to receive enough weapons, ammunition and supplies to continue operations? Following the withdrawal of US forces, how did the Government hope to contain this threat and why would an informed observer expect it to be able to do so?

Addressing Contextual Realities

One could argue that any Afghan Government whose control only extended to cities surrounded by rural areas occupied and in some cases governed by an armed opposition and with insufficient air cover in the absence of US support to guarantee open supply lines between them would have struggled to survive. A numerically inferior force would be able to concentrate and surround and cut off one provincial capital at a time. It would surely only be a matter of time before each outnumbered local garrison would capitulate.

Over a decade ago engagement with participants on the ground seemed to justify the description of the situation in Afghanistan as 'the forever war' (Filkins, 2009). One of the mysteries of the past twenty years has been why after an initially successful military intervention and local insurrection in the country the US and its allies would want to remain in some force, extend the initial mission to embrace nation building and continue to invest significant resources at great opportunity cost. Given other priorities and growing existential threats this wider and prolonged external commitment might seem difficult to justify.

The diverse constitutions and democratic systems of the countries engaged in the wider mission of nation building in Afghanistan had evolved over centuries. There was little to

suggest that their past experience would be relevant to the contemporary realities of the Afghan context and addressing obstacles ranging from local tribal cultures and hostile religious fundamentalism to the logistical challenge of supplying a land locked country. The surrounding region contained elements that supported active local resistance to key aspects of what the US was seeking to achieve (Rashid, 2009 & 2013).

Particular Local Challenges

Within and across Afghanistan, certain local warlords seem to be exercise influence and be willing to quickly switch their allegiance as and when they feel it is in their interests to do so. Despite Taliban claims, it is not clear that every area and faction has finally succumbed to their central control. They may still face some opposition in the Panjshir Valley and from ISIS-K. A taste of democracy and greater freedom may encourage more protests from women and others expecting to lose ground. However, memories of past Taliban brutalities may inhibit the peaceful passive resistance that has been successful in other contexts (Roberts, 2009). Opponents now face a Taliban equipped with additional abandoned weaponry.

Some Afghans bear a heavy responsibility for the fall of Kabul, because either they were among the Taliban fighters who entered the city unopposed, or because they did not take steps to prevent the occupation, even when they were initially trained and equipped to do so. The ANA had been described as fragile (Giustozzi, 2016). It and the police force appeared to justify this assessment by melting away, by fleeing or by going into hiding. Elsewhere in the country elders did local deals to hand over cities and provinces unopposed.

The era when the end of history was declared and the supremacy of democracy seemed to have been achieved now seems a long time ago (Fukuyama, 1992). Countries and their institutions face a range of existential challenges and external threats. Democracies that rely upon the continuing support of their electorates have to prioritise and make choices. Even a super power cannot fight multiple wars at the same time, while also investing in the technologies needed to decarbonise and cope with the consequences of climate change, recover from the impact of Covid-19 and at least maintain parity with major challengers.

Many building blocks of the contemporary world originated in Muslim countries (Al-Hassani et al, 2006). However, Islam is a religion that has yet to experience a reformation. Absolutist and fixed interpretations of the Koran bear a heavy responsibility for what has happened in Afghanistan, across the Middle East and elsewhere in countries that face a terrorist threat from fundamentalists. Those carrying out attacks and often described as extremists, rely upon literal interpretations of selected quotations to justify their actions, for example the treatment of non-believers that seem intolerant and brutal in the context of other contemporary beliefs.

Policy and its Implementation

Leadership can be more than just setting direction. Aims set and goals established should be realistic in a context that is unstable and with porous boundaries (Rashid, 2013; Coll, 2018). They also subsequently need to be achieved if outcomes are to be judged as successful. One needs to distinguish between policy and its execution. One might also expect foreign policies and their conduct to promote national interests (Northedge, 1968). Leaders may have to remain focused on purpose and ends while also monitoring the effectiveness of the means of

achieving them. In regard to Afghanistan, there are critics of both US policy and its implementation in terms of the steps taken and their ordering and timing. In relation to timing, to what extent have political decision makers ignored military advice?

Withdrawal from an overseas involvement can be especially challenging (Cortright, 2011; Tuck, 2021). The implementation of policy can be particularly dependent upon other parties. One should therefore choose collaborating partners with care. An exit may depend upon a local collaborator's ability to become self-sufficient. If an end to instability and conflict is thought to be dependent upon the establishment of a more inclusive Government, its achievement may require an existing party of Government to negotiate with its opponents.

One should always think through the consequences of decisions. Attention may need to be paid to negative impacts or externalities of particular choices. Those worried about their implications in other contexts might need to be reassured. Significant decisions invariably create winners and losers. They can also trigger adverse responses from certain vested interests and aggrieved parties. Collateral damage may harm those who have been loyal. This can be upsetting and may be used by opponents to undermine trust and one's reputation. ISIL has been restricted in Iraq and Syria. It may now regroup in Afghanistan. The West now faces an increased terrorist threat. China has an open door of opportunity to extend its influence.

Learning Lessons from the Fall of Kabul

The media and public opinion invariably focus upon symptoms such as dramatic events that can be quickly portrayed and capture attention. These cannot be ignored, because as was the case with regular US television news broadcasts of the Vietnam War they can influence public opinion and lead to growing opposition (Hallin, 1986). However, those seeking to understand what has happened in Afghanistan and draw lessons need to also consider root causes such as local interpretations of the Islamic religion and reasons why ANA units dissolved. Looking ahead we will also need to contemplate the extent to which Jihadists around the world may be emboldened by recent events.

Key decision makers should focus on priorities and avoid costly and time consuming distractions. In the contemporary strategic environment they should seek to maximise flexibility, avoid dead ends, excessive crawl-out or exit costs and getting sucked in too deep. It helps to have a plan B, even when things appear to be going well. One should try not to be taken in by one's own public relations when concerns arise. It is important to address realities. Conflict in Afghanistan was occurring long before the recent US involvement and is likely to continue in a region of divisions and instability (Tanner, 2009; Rashid, 2009).

Sometimes just pressing ahead and pouring more resource into a situation that in some key respects is not improving is the intellectually lazy and irresponsible course of action to take. One may not like to be accused of 'cutting and running', but changing direction may be required if a key partner is not delivering. How this is done can be important if not vital for successful outcomes. When a change of direction is required, allies should be consulted and involved, particularly if their contribution is mission critical, unless it is clear that they are

not willing or likely to support what is thought to be necessary from a national interest perspective. Last but not least, decision makers sometimes make the wrong call.

Reviewing Purposes and Priorities

Perhaps the biggest lesson to be learned from the Afghan experience is the need for periodic reviews of purpose and priorities, whether in a political or business context (Mayer, 2018). Mankind faces certain shared existential threats such as environmental pollution, climate change and degrading biodiversity and ecosystems while there is a diminishing window of opportunity in which to address them (UNEP, 2019; Dasgupta, 2021; IPCC, 2021; WMO, 2021). However distressing the situation in Afghanistan is, one hopes that recent and possible future events in the country and elsewhere do not detract from more important priorities from the perspective of the survival of mankind and that of other species.

An exodus of talented people in evacuations from Kabul will compound the challenges of regime change and disruption. The international community will receive multiple requests for further financial support at a time when it has been impacted by Covid-19 and some countries that in the past might have been considered best placed to help now face enormous bills for climate adaptation and mitigation, decarbonising and transitioning to simpler, healthier and more fulfilling lifestyles and more sustainable economies. Is some counter-intuitive thinking required that puts heads before hearts? From a biodiversity and environmental perspective is it desirable that some societies and places remain less developed than others as greater priority is given to UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015)?

If the earth is not to become another Venus urgent action is needed (IPCC, 2021). Until further growth can be sustainable and corporate accounts and measures of performance, output and economic growth reflect negative externalities, should the preoccupation be slowing growth and reducing development rather than increasing them? Can we have prosperity without growth (Jackson, 2016)? Assuming finite resources, can we afford to continue with materialistic growth models that are turning what remains into mountains of rubbish and waste and contributing to climate change? Should we be holding back rather than levelling up? Given pressing shared existential threats, must time be called on expensive and protracted overseas local wars? Is an alternative strategy of quick, surgical and proportionate responses to specific terrorist attacks required, such as drone strikes?

Tentative Conclusions

The Afghan context was fragmented, divided, tribal and actively resistant (Rashid, 2009 and 2010a & b). An externally imposed system that did not fully address and accommodate it was unlikely to be regarded as legitimate by armed and excluded insurgent groups. In the absence of a shared purpose across diverse communities, withdrawal from any intervention without a clear and carefully planned and thoughtfully executed exit strategy was likely to have serious negative consequences for those supporting and/or benefitting from the intervention. While some have experienced greater freedom and opportunity for a period, recent events appear to have vindicated those who have argued that from a US perspective and as practiced the war in Afghanistan was unwinnable (Fairweather, 2015; Farrell, 2018; Barry, 2020).

Holding ground across Afghanistan was likely to be costly if not impossible when faced with an armed insurgency with both local and regional support (Rashid, 2010a & b). The ANA acted as a custodian of small arms, ammunition, vehicles and night fighting equipment before its abandonment and seizure by the Taliban. US taxpayers have consequently funded the rearmament and re-equipment of the Taliban and increased its potential to consolidate, entrench its position and concentrate its rearmed forces against any remaining opposition. Some of what was left behind might be reverse engineered by those seeking to understand and better contemporary US military equipment.

The hasty withdrawal of US and NATO forces and scenes of triumphant Taliban fighters has been a shot in the arm for Islamic militants. More disaffected and alienated young people looking for meaning and purpose in their lives and with a desire to belong and serve a cause may seek to join their ranks. The war on terror may move back to Western streets. Hot overseas war costs may need to be replaced with extra vigilance at home and additional and more sophisticated and expensive security measures. Might democracies be forced to make greater use of some approaches and technologies used in totalitarian surveillance states? Could an attempt to spread democracy abroad end up undermining it at home?

Ambition has to be tempered with caution. President Biden has said that in future the US should not use military force to impose democracy on overseas societies. The debacle in Afghanistan may make others reluctant to embrace democracy. It strengthens opponents who argue it is not universally appropriate and those who campaign against it in particular contexts. It is also unsettling for countries such as South Korea and Taiwan where people have been hoping they can rely on continuing US support. Going forward, policies must be realistic and flexible and military capability should be both smart and strong. There are allies to reassure. As an era of assumed American economic and military supremacy comes to an end, the US must collaborate with them in seeking to contain totalitarian expansion.

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