



Deterrence Implications of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Deterrence Implications of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan” hosted by National Institute for Public Policy on September 28, 2021. The symposium focused on the long-term ramifications of the U.S. withdrawal on the credibility of U.S. deterrence of adversaries and extended deterrence commitments to allies.

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My presentation will focus on the implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan for the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments—promises made to America’s treaty allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

I will make three general points.

First, I will set out the broader context of how the Allies have historically perceived the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments.

Second, I will discuss whether and to what extent the Allies’ long-standing perceptions have been changed by the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Third, I will briefly discuss how the U.S. withdrawal may have influenced the cost/benefit calculations of America’s adversaries.

I.

Let me start by putting the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in a broader context of how U.S. Allies in have perceived U.S. credibility.

Three contextual observations stand out:

First, when assessing the credibility of the U.S. security commitments (both in terms of the U.S. resolve and capabilities), the U.S. regional allies have been primarily preoccupied with the U.S. military deployments and actions in their own regions.

* This work was performed under the auspices of the United States Department of Energy by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory under Contract DE-AC52-07NA27344. The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States government or Lawrence Livermore National Security, LLC. LLNL-CONF-827359.



The Allies have tended to have very parochial views on security. This is understandable given their focus on their core national security interests.

For example, Poland cares primarily about the U.S. readiness to compete, deter and win in Europe; Japan and Australia care about the U.S. military position in the Indo-Pacific; ROK wants credible deterrence against DPRK.

This does not mean that what the U.S. does in the other regions does not matter.

Allies draw lessons about the American capabilities and resolve based on U.S. actions around the world.

This means that the Afghanistan debacle may have much smaller effects on Allies perceptions of U.S. credibility than would be the case if the U.S. unilaterally withdrew some portion of its forces from Europe or the Indo-Pacific.

My second observation is that the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence is already under strain, both in terms of the U.S. perceived capability and resolve to use it.

This would be the case even without the horrifying images from the Kabul airport.

European confidence in the long-term reliability of the U.S. commitment to transatlantic security has been shaken by the shift in U.S. strategic priorities to Asia, and Trump's transactional approach to the Alliance.

In the Indo-Pacific, the allies have been concerned about negative shifts in the regional conventional balance of power and greater U.S. vulnerability to DPRK and Chinese nuclear threats.

These concerns, not the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, have had the most decisive impact in shaping allied perceptions of American credibility.

My third observation is that over the next decade, it is likely that the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence will be tested as never before.

- This would have been the case even without the haphazard withdrawal from Afghanistan.

China's growing military assertiveness and confidence, strengthened by its nuclear-build-up, will stress-test U.S. assurances in the Indo-Pacific.

For Europeans, it will be painful to adjust to the reality that Europe is no longer the primary theater for the United States, especially in the context of the U.S. need to simultaneously deter two nuclear-armed peer competitors.

In other words, over the coming years the consequences of the Afghanistan withdrawal will be overshadowed by more immediate allied concerns.

II.

Given this context, does the withdrawal from Afghanistan matter for the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, or more specifically, for the assurance of allies?

The effects are mixed.

On the one hand, there are some clear negative effects:

With the withdrawal, the allied concerns about the U.S. reliability are not diminishing; they are accumulating.

- The withdrawal exacerbates anxieties about the consequences of the decreasing role of Europe in the U.S. national security strategy
- Critics in Europe may say that “what happened to Afghanistan happens when you are strategically irrelevant. It may happen to us.”
- The withdrawal adds to long-standing allied concerns about U.S. unilateralism and not taking allied perspectives into account.
- The withdrawal puts into question the competence of U.S. institutions in policy implementation.
- The withdrawal shows the limits of the U.S. (and allied) military power and patience to achieve long-term political outcomes.
- The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan reduces incentives for Allies to support the U.S. in matters which do not involve their direct national security interests.

Still, there is a silver lining in the U.S. decision to disengage from Afghanistan.

Most importantly, the impact of the withdrawal on the Allies’ perceptions of the U.S. credibility is not decisive.

Long-term U.S. credibility will depend primarily on how the United States handles the most pressing challenges for extended deterrence posed by Russia, China and DPRK.

Any negative effects of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan can be limited by the U.S. actions to reinforce its alliances in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

What is also important is that for some observers, especially in the Indo-Pacific, the withdrawal shows the U.S. ability to make hard strategic choices. It also leads to hopes that it would free U.S. military resources for current U.S. strategic priorities.

III. Impact on perceptions of adversaries

I have four brief observations.

First, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has furnished ammunition for the information struggle.

- It feeds Russia and China narrative about U.S. decline and untrustworthiness.

Second, Russia and China may be emboldened to exert influence in their respective “near abroad” regions and in other areas in which the U.S. stakes are much lower.

Third, the withdrawal may feed Chinese and Russian perceptions that time is on their side—that they may outlast the United States in the long-term strategic competition, and that the United States will eventually lose its patience.

- If these are real Russia and China calculations, both countries may double on their efforts to make strategic competition more costly and risky to the United States.

Last but not least, it seems unlikely that the Afghanistan withdrawal itself would embolden Russia, China or DPRK to test the U.S. treaty commitments.

- If they decide to do so, they would be primarily motivated by the U.S. failure to strengthen existing regional extended deterrence arrangements.

Heino Klinck

Heino Klinck is former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia.

Thank you, David, for including me in this distinguished panel and thanks also to the National Institute for Public Policy for convening this very important and timely discussion, particularly in light of today’s hearings on the Hill.

The *National Security Strategy* of 2017 and the *National Defense Strategy* of 2018 were clear in that we are in an era of great power competition and both documents articulated our vision to compete, deter, and win against revisionist competitors such as China (as well as Russia). During my tenure at the Department of Defense as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asia, I was the unofficial “Major Partners and Allies in Asia” DASD. We successfully implemented both of these guiding documents across the whole of U.S. government as well

as in conjunction with our allies, partners, and like-minded countries not only in Asia, but throughout the world, including European states such as Germany, France, and the UK.

As I reflect on the previous administration's overall track record of national security successes (and failures) in the region, I can confidently say that our network of alliances and partnerships within my AOR were stronger, more resilient, and jointly focused on the common challenge of our generation, namely an aggressive China, than ever before. I do not align myself with the assertion that the U.S. had to rebuild its alliances overseas after January 20th. Prior to the Afghan debacle, I didn't subscribe to the mantra that "America is Back" primarily because we never left. However, now I wonder (frankly, I fear) that we America may be back to 1979.

Let me say up front that I try not to be a Monday morning quarterback, something all too common in Washington. I continue to wish my successors and the current Administration all possible success in protecting our interests abroad. Their success is our Nation's success, or at least, it should be.

Unfortunately, the manner in which our Government decided, communicated, and then executed the withdrawal from Afghanistan has implications far beyond the war on terrorism. Namely those implications go to our credibility as a Nation, Ally, and Partner; our ability to accurately forecast tactical, operational, and strategic outcomes; our ability to deter and dissuade adversaries and enemies from taking actions contrary to our national security interests; and our apparent disregard and disdain for basic consultations and info sharing with those allies who served with us, shoulder-to-shoulder.

To be honest, I believe history will view our decades of conflict in Afghanistan (and Iraq) as distractions that provided China with a strategic opportunity to leapfrog us in many ways. Regardless, this does not justify the haphazard way in which the White House went about withdrawing our forces. For the record, I believe it was in U.S. national interests to maintain a footprint in Afghanistan.

- First, to ensure Afghanistan never becomes a sanctuary in which terrorists can plan, organize, and train to launch attacks against the United States, its allies, and its interests.
- Perhaps more importantly, to serve as a forward presence in Central and South Asia for potential contingency operations as well as, frankly, an intelligence platform to be utilized not only for regional priorities, but also in the context of Great Power Competition (GPC).
- To be clear, U.S. military presence on China's periphery was an obstacle to Chinese ambitions in the region.

Although the Biden Administration is still drafting its *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy*, I anticipate that both documents will continue the focus that we placed on

GPC and the China Challenge. It is within that context, that our harried, uncoordinated, and chaotic process of withdrawal from Afghanistan causes me the most concern. This chaos is being viewed and portrayed as a tragic mix of U.S. incompetence, negligence, and weakness.

Our less than perfect exit from Afghanistan undoubtedly furthers the long-standing Beijing narrative of U.S. decline. This inevitability, as posited by the CCP, really became integral to China's global strategic communications following the financial crisis of 2008. Beijing has carefully crafted a story line that democracy and capitalism are not the only model of effective governance nor perhaps even the best model. Instead, Beijing has offered that techno-authoritarianism with a measure of capitalism controlled by the State offers a viable, successful alternative model for those that are willing to forego democracy and freedom for their people.

Furthermore, the U.S. decision to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan underscores another enduring Chinese proposition that the United States is a Paper Tiger. In the 1950s and 1960s, Mao ZeDong and the CCP consistently referred to the United States as a Paper Tiger relying almost exclusively on nuclear deterrence. Consistently, the CCP has backed up their messaging by pointing to the Chinese People's Volunteer Army success during the Korean War as well as to America's eventual withdrawal from Vietnam. Even more recently in the 1990s, Chinese commentators referred to Somalia Syndrome in the wake of our Blackhawk down moment in Mogadishu and the subsequent withdrawal. The Afghan debacle has provided the CCP with an additional data point to add to their list of examples that America does not have staying power.

My concern is that Beijing might misread or interpret lessons learned from Afghanistan concerning our commitment that could perhaps embolden them to make dangerous decisions that could lead to conflict in the South or East China Seas, for instance. The stakes in such as conflict would dwarf the interests we abandoned in Afghanistan. I can think of no more dangerous scenario than Beijing's miscalculation on how we might respond to a contingency involving a treaty ally or a partner whose legitimate self-defense we are obliged to support.

Moreover, Beijing menacing messaging to third parties, our allies and partners (particularly Taiwan), has only been strengthened by our precipitous retreat. In short, Beijing is pushing the narrative that the United States cannot be trusted and that countries in the Indo-Pacific should strike deals now with the CCP before it's too late and they potentially feel the wrath and power of the PLA. As David's recent article of 11 September 2021 pointed out, China is amplifying its vitriol against Taiwan and Japan in light of U.S. decisions and actions regarding Afghanistan by even calling into question China's declared nuclear policy of no first use.

The apparent lack of consultation with our closest allies in coordinating the exit from Afghanistan is worrisome across the board. It conveys a go-it-alone attitude that is ironically reminiscent of inaccurate and politically skewed and motivated descriptions of America First

during the previous administration. Beyond the obvious operational imperatives to coordinate our withdrawal, politically and diplomatically it calls into question whether or not, or to what extent, we take into account the concerns, requirements, and needs of our allies and partners. Beyond the public statements of consternation and complaints David so vividly cited in his recent article, there are undoubtedly uncomfortable internal discussions going on in places like the Russell Building in Canberra, Ichigaya in Tokyo, and other defense ministries in the Indo-Pacific.

Focusing on the Indo part of the region, it bears highlighting that allowing Afghanistan to fall to the Taliban, is a tremendous blow to India's security interests. India has only recently become a more active member of the quad, exemplified by its military participation in exercises it had previously eschewed. India now faces a two-front dilemma in its defense planning. With the Taliban in charge, Pakistan's western flank is secured allowing Pakistani forces to redeploy to the border with India. In concert with PLA pressure along the Line of Actual Control, India now faces potential military pressure along two flanks.

Despite the Administration's purported "laser focus" on Great Power Competition, the Afghan debacle undermined our efforts to compete, and counter Chinese malign activities by undermining our credibility, calling into question our commitment to allies and partners, and providing dangerous fodder for miscalculation.

Our competitive advantage has always been our network of partners and allies. The U.S. Government must work closely with the like-minded to ensure that we contest China's diplomatic, informational, economic and other efforts in the Indo-Pacific and globally to gain broad influence and undermine the collective efforts of the United States and its allies and partners to maintain regional balances of power favorable to our mutual interests. The measure of our success in competition will lie in our ability to continuously compete from a sustained position of advantage—both militarily and otherwise—against this increasingly bellicose power, in a responsible, but dominant way that continues to underwrite the international rules-based order. Unfortunately, the costs of our strategic failure in Afghanistan as measured in terms of deterring a bellicose China, organizing future coalitions of the willing, and securing America's role as a reliable, global leader are still to be fully calculated in the Indo-Pacific.

Maj Gen James Lariviere (USMC, Ret.)

Maj Gen James Lariviere is Senior Vice President for Department of Defense Operations at GardaWorld Federal Services, and a former advisor to the Afghan National Army.

Over the last 20 years I've observed or participated in the conflict in Afghanistan from three perspectives. On 9/11 I was a professional staff member on the House Armed Services Committee staff working in the Defense Policy Group as we watched the attacks on the twin

towers and Pentagon. As a Reserve Marine officer, I was mobilized in 2002 to serve with the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (Anti-Terrorism) overseeing the Marine security task force at the Kabul Embassy. Later, in 2006, I served in Afghanistan as the mentor/advisor to the G-3 of the Afghan National Army. As the Commanding General, 4th Marine Division I oversaw the deployment of multiple infantry battalions and independent companies to Afghanistan. Finally, as the Senior VP for DoD Operations at GardaWorld Federal Services, I supervised nearly 1000-armed civilian security guards protecting 17 separate U.S. military locations across Afghanistan evacuating the last three contractors from HKIA on 29 August 2021, the day before the final withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The ignominious withdrawal from Afghanistan and triumph of the Taliban after 20 years of conflict should trigger some serious soul-searching among policymakers and senior military leaders alike. It is hard to see the collapse of the Afghan government and subsequent withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan as anything other than a self-inflicted defeat. The administration's decision to withdraw on a date certain with little or no consultation with our NATO allies and the chaotic way in which the evacuation was executed will have serious strategic implications for the United States and our allies well into the future.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, there was no question that the Bush Administration had to intervene in Afghanistan to pursue Osama bin Laden and defeat Al Qaida. On Capitol Hill at that time there was an appetite for immediate action against the perpetrators of the attacks. However, once the Taliban fell and bin Laden and his AQ followers disappeared or dispersed, Afghanistan quickly became the economy of force operation as attention shifted to Iraq. Efforts to build a functioning Afghan government and capable Afghan Security Forces foundered and policy makers across administrations struggled to articulate a defined end state. The continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan did provide the benefit of denying the Taliban and other terrorist organizations the ability to use Afghanistan as a launch pad for terrorist attacks in the West. The United States settled into a steady state management of the political and military situation in Afghanistan with no clear end to the U.S. and NATO presence. The Biden Administration entered office predisposed to end "endless wars" and presented the decision to withdrawal as a false choice – either abide by the withdrawal decision made by the Trump Administration or engage in an unacceptable escalation of conflict. This either shows the administration is either inflexible or unimaginative. Other options were available and certainly this administration has reversed other Trump era policies.

The impacts of the chaotic withdrawal are significant. The message sent to our adversaries is plain. America, and perhaps democracies in general, appear unable to sustain a long-term commitment to messy counterinsurgency or nation building-type operations. Terror groups around the world will see this as an opportunity to re-emerge in Afghanistan and elsewhere secure in the knowledge that the United States is unlikely to intervene. The administration has framed the withdrawal as an end point to the War on Terror. With all apologies to

Tolstoy, we may be no longer interested in the War on Terror, but the War on Terror may still be interested in us.

The administration also stated keeping forces in Afghanistan was no longer in the U.S. national security interest and that those forces there were needed as the United States shifted forces to the Indo-Pacific. Yet the 2,500 military personnel and nearly 18,000 contractors in Afghanistan were certainly sustainable over the long haul and not a serious distraction to the shift to great power competition. China, Russia, Iran and North Korea will all be encouraged by our defeat in Afghanistan. Each will see this event as an opportunity to further their malign geopolitical agendas. China in particular may take the view that the United States may not have the staying power in any direct confrontation. The Trump Administration talked about “America First” but kept the United States engaged with our international partners. The Biden Administration says that “America is Back” but appears to be fully implementing the “America First” policy it says it rejects.

As a result, America’s ability to reassure allies and build coalitions has been significantly damaged. Key partners such as Israel, Japan, and our NATO allies (who were left in the lurch on the way out of Afghanistan) have had their confidence shaken in America’s leadership. The United States is seen as increasingly unreliable just at the time when we need to build alliances to counter China in the Indo-Pacific region. The recent announcement of the AUKUS agreement may help allay some of those concerns. But countries like Taiwan, whose military strategy relies on U.S. support in case of a military incursion by China, may question whether the United States is truly committed to coming to the rescue in case of military conflict.

The senior U.S. military leadership also has some soul searching to do. If the only reason to have general officers is to achieve victory on the battlefield, then U.S. senior military leadership has fallen short. Over the 20 years of conflict in Afghanistan military leaders were never able to engage policy makers and articulate a clearly defined military mission in Afghanistan or define a desired end state that was feasible, achievable, affordable and sustainable. The result was 20 years of war fought in successive 1-year rotations each with its own short-term goals. As in Vietnam, we won every battle and lost the war. The United States and NATO wound up exactly where we began, with the Taliban in control of Afghanistan.

Analogies have been made to Vietnam, and certainly there will be a future Ph.D thesis on how we failed to militarily defeat the Taliban. Vietnam triggered an existential examination of the U.S. military that transformed the military from a hollow, conscript force to the all-volunteer, high-tech force that it is today. Junior leaders in Vietnam like Colin Powell, Shy Meyer, Al Gray and others vowed that they would never again repeat the mistakes of Vietnam. I don’t yet detect that same sort of existential soul searching in the U.S. military in the immediate aftermath of Afghanistan. But it is still early. What is clear is that the military establishment, just as it did after Vietnam, is happy to leave counterinsurgency behind and move on to building the conventional forces necessary to engage in the great power

competition with Russian and China. Even as that shift takes place, military leaders would do well reflect on the last 20 years and study the policy-strategy disconnect in Afghanistan that led us to where we are today.

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Michael Rühle

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The hasty Western withdrawal from Afghanistan once again has raised doubts in some quarters about the United States' willingness and/or ability to remain the leader of the West. While the groundwork for a withdrawal had been laid by the Trump Administration's deal with the Taliban in Doha in February 2020 (a deal that excluded the Afghan Government), the implementation of the withdrawal by the Biden Administration still came as a shock to many observers, both in the U.S. and abroad. It almost appeared as if President Biden was bent on turning his predecessor's statements on "America first" into a true foreign policy doctrine.

In what follows, I will argue that the withdrawal from Afghanistan is not likely to erode the United States' credibility as a provider of extended deterrence – at least not in the eyes of its friends and allies. It is a different matter when it comes to some opponents, who – like Saddam Hussein – may draw different conclusions about the U.S.' political and military stamina and thus may be more willing to test Washington's red lines. However, staying engaged in a long and inconclusive expeditionary mission just to avoid being perceived as irresolute does not constitute a viable alternative, either. Domino theories can be misleading. Hence, my assumption that as long as the Afghanistan withdrawal remains a singular event and is not seen as the beginning of a global U.S.' retrenchment, the damage should remain limited.

Four reasons stand out:

First, mission fatigue. While the departure from Afghanistan was chaotic, and the United States may indeed be the first to blame for this, the fact remains that the Afghanistan mission had run out of steam. Many NATO Allies had long reduced their military presence to a mere token one, and there was a widespread view that despite certain areas of progress this country was not going to become more stable, let alone self-sustaining. In other words, the U.S.' decision to withdraw was surprising in its sudden and rigid way, but the allies, too, wanted to get out. Whether the Allies will engage in a thorough "lessons learned" process on the Afghanistan mission remains to be seen, since it appears that both sides of the Atlantic want to forget Afghanistan as quickly as possible. European Allies will join the U.S. in trying to deflect from their collective failure, whatever it may take.

Second, European weakness. The talk of European “strategic autonomy”, that was first provoked by President Trump’s dismissive attitude vis-à-vis allies and alliances, and that grew louder as the Afghan withdrawal unfolded, should not be taken at face value. The immediate case in point—the protection of Kabul airport—was so weak that it could not serve as a basis for a fundamental reorientation of European security and defense policy. With the UK having left the EU, some EU members toying with nuclear abolition schemes, and the Eastern Europeans clinging to the U.S. as their ultimate protector whom they do not want to frustrate, the gulf between the Europeans remains too deep to expect any major progress in this regard. Does anyone still remember the European battlegroups? Once introduced with much fanfare, they were never used. In short, disappointment over Afghanistan will not become the catalyst for a new, geopolitics-savvy Europe.

Third, vital and not-so-vital interests. About 1993, amidst the turmoil in ex-Yugoslavia, then U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher reportedly said that NATO was “more important than Bosnia”. A cynical statement, perhaps, but the thinking behind it was clear: the transatlantic security relationship was a vital U.S. interest and thus must not be derailed by skirmishes among allies over a small place in the Balkans. Hence, assuming that NATO and the security of European allies continue to be much more vital to the U.S. than was the future of Afghanistan, the damage to U.S. credibility as NATO’s backbone would remain limited. To recall, even the Vietnam disaster did not fundamentally alter Western Europe’s continued belief in U.S. extended deterrence commitments. Thus far, the Biden Administration has not demonstrated a lack of interest in European security. It remains committed to NATO and even reversed Trump’s decision to withdraw several thousand U.S. troops from Germany. In short, while NATO allies may find some of Washington’s policy moves bewildering, at least for now they have little reason to doubt the U.S. commitment to the defense of Europe.

Fourth, new U.S. priorities. The strategic outlook of the United States is shifting, largely due to the rise of China. As the new technology-sharing alliance between the U.S., UK and Australia (AUKUS) suggests, the U.S.’ focus on China is real, and so are its extended deterrence commitments vis-à-vis its Asian-Pacific allies. Australia and Japan, for example, will certainly welcome that the pivot is finally moving from rhetoric to reality. Indeed, some observers, such as Edward Luttwak, have interpreted President Biden’s decision to withdraw from Afghanistan as part of a larger plan to end costly and long-term overseas engagements in order to be better able to focus on China.¹ The logic of the “pivot” is sound, as the fall of Taipei would deal a far heavier blow to U.S. global credibility than the fall of Kabul (or Saigon). It is obvious that for the Europeans, who do not want the U.S. to lower its military presence on the Old Continent, Washington’s focus on the Asia-Pacific region is a mixed blessing. They have fewer security interests in that part of the world, nor do they have

¹ Edward Luttwak, “Yes, Biden does have a strategy for Afghanistan and China,” *Panorama* (online), available at <https://www.panorama.it/luttwak-biden-strategy-afghanistan-china>.

the military capabilities to join the U.S. in containing China's assertiveness. However, Europeans will have to accept that the U.S.' pivot is inevitable. The key is to ensure that the pivot does not come at the expense of European security.

To conclude, withdrawing from costly engagements may not always have the desired effect of reducing the burden. In many cases, it may simply allow competitors to fill the vacuum that the West leaves behind. The result might well be a net loss for the U.S. and its allies in terms of geopolitical influence and, as in the case of Al Qaeda operating from within pre-9/11 Afghanistan, the (re-)emergence of a major threat. The Western withdrawal from Afghanistan thus may risk inviting a repetition of the situation that led to 9/11 in the first place. Nevertheless, the U.S. and its allies giving up on Afghanistan is not the main problem for the United States' global credibility. The decisive question is whether this hasty withdrawal remains a singular episode or whether it marks the beginning of a far more substantial reduction of US commitments worldwide. If the Biden Administration—very much like President Trump—were to start equaling global engagement with carrying a heavy burden that needs to be shed, it would pull the rug from what remains of the “liberal order” that the U.S. once helped create.

