

US Can Move Beyond Afghanistan Shambles With Alliance of Democracies

by Conrad Black



Pakistani President Imran Khan

In the afterglow of the shambles of American and NATO policy in Afghanistan, it is probably a good time to review American strategic thinking in the Mideast and South Asia generally.

While the Cold War was in progress and the Nehru-Gandhi Congress party was in power in India, it made some sense for the [Pakistan](#), as a partial counterweight to India, a contact bridge with China (which facilitated the reopening of relations between the U.S. and China), and as a friendly Muslim power.

The dynamics of these relationships changed after China, under Deng Xiaoping, opted for economic growth and a strenuous, stylized version of state-led capitalism, and India sloughed off the Nehru-Gandhi pretension to being the world's moral arbiter (partly because of its vast poverty), and set out after economic growth also.

The People's Republic gradually emerged as a challenger to the United States as the world's most influential country and it has treated the mountainous India-China border as a convenient skirmishing place in order to claim to be clearly preeminent over India also—it's only demographic rival in the world.

American relations with India have steadily improved for nearly 40 years and presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump particularly emphasized that progress with very successful

visits to India.

Update Pakistan Relations

Throughout the 20-year NATO involvement in Afghanistan and for some years prior to that, the Pakistani military and intelligence services, which have derived much of their operating budget from the largesse of the United States, have been funneling a substantial amount of it into Afghanistan and particularly to the Haqanni Taliban, a large Taliban faction that has been intermittently bedeviling and killing NATO forces throughout their sojourn in Afghanistan.

Given the vigorous activity of the Pakistani-sponsored Taliban faction in Afghanistan to frustrate and harass the NATO effort there, and especially in light of the pitiful ending of that effort, the status of American relations with Pakistan really should be brought up to date.

In 1971, in the India-Pakistan War in which India succeeded in politically separating East Pakistan 1200 miles distant from West Pakistan and effectively dividing that country in half, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Pakistan was drastically weakened, losing half its population in a way that presaged the disintegration of the Soviet Union 20 years later.

The United States had attempted to assist Pakistan at that time. It is a tough region: the Pakistani president in 1971, Yahya Khan, was deposed; his successor Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was executed; his successor Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq was assassinated, and his eventual successor-Bhutto's daughter, Benazir Bhutto, was also assassinated.

The Indian Premier Indira Gandhi and her successor, her son Rajiv Gandhi, were both assassinated, and the founding leader of Bangladesh, Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated with his family (and the family dog) in 1975. It is, politically and otherwise, a rough-and-tumble area.

The United States appears to have been somnambulating through these years with Pakistan mindlessly continuing a relationship which has subsidized Afghan terrorist activity and outright war with NATO forces in Afghanistan, and Pakistan has throughout that time never shown the slightest solidarity with American interests. The current Pakistani leader, former star cricketer Imran Khan, celebrated the American defeat in Afghanistan with ululations of good riddance.

All the neighboring countries have their protégé factions in Afghanistan: Russia, India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Iran. And however mistakenly and unceremoniously, the West has renounced the policy of developing and financing a pro-Western faction, dominating the cities and assuring that Afghanistan does not become again a breeding ground and launching place for sophisticated international terrorists.

In these circumstances, the United States should sever all assistance to Pakistan, a primitive, fragile, truncated, and often politically insolent country that has never ceased to swindle and confound the United States and assist its enemies these last 40 years.

It knowingly harbored Osama bin Laden and periodically suspended overland American access to its expeditionary forces in Afghanistan, irritatingly confident of its ability to spite the United States with impunity. It should at least be disabused of that practice. If Pakistan blows up, then as Henry Kissinger said of Bangladesh on its independence day in 1971: "It's not our basket case."

Rebuild American Credibility

The United States has just committed on behalf of NATO a spectacle of astonishing self-humiliation. It will require radical changes of personnel and policy to rebuild American credibility as an ally and as an opponent, but it can certainly be done and almost certainly will be done.

It took President Kennedy, who admitted error frankly and made radical changes of personnel and policy, 18 months after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, to regain his stature and reestablish the preeminence of the United States even in its own hemisphere, in the Cuban Missile Crisis. And his failure was only in giving arm's-length support to an inadequately strong rebel group—there was no humiliating departure by the Armed Forces of the United States from Cuba.

I doubt that anyone now visible in the Biden administration is remotely qualified to do what needs to be done, but that is essentially to lead NATO into association with the alliances that the United States has in East Asia, South Asia, and Australasia and convert it all into an alliance of democratic states.

Unless Pakistan is prepared to take drastic steps of political and foreign policy reformation and play it straight and bear the burdens as well as receiving the benefits of being an American ally, the West can step back slightly and allow the vaunted Chinese Belt and Road to go through Pakistan and Afghanistan and Iran.

China as Bully

China is not fundamentally nearly as strong a country as the United States, and the greatest danger that it poses to us is if we push Russia into its arms so that there is an infelicitous combination of unexploited Siberian resources and surplus Chinese population. China is a newcomer to great power politics since its last turn as a major power was many centuries ago, and its interest was then effectively confined to the bullying of its neighbors.

It seems not altogether to have outgrown those habits and even the dogged colonels of Myanmar tired of Chinese overlordship and threw the Middle Kingdom out, bag and baggage. Any Chinese success or major Western failure such as Afghanistan seems to

propel the People's Republic to greater outrages—Hong Kong, the Uyghurs, incursions into India, and threats against Vietnam.

Eventually China will irritate all those whom it seeks to bully or dominate and all of the money that it is investing in Africa will eventually be seized by the locals, and the Chinese will be sent packing. Their Belt and Road is nonsense but if they want to hurl money at the underdeveloped countries we should welcome that, not just for humanitarian reasons, but because it will not lead to significant geopolitical inconvenience for the West.

On one point the hapless Joe Biden is right: Afghanistan is strategically useless, a primitive landlocked country inhabited by fierce and inhospitable people. If it possesses resources in rare-earth, that is a very recent discovery that reminds me of Marxist Herbert Marcuse's theory that the United States was in South Vietnam in pursuit of oil (which has still not been discovered).

Not much can be expected from the deflated, excuses-addled Biden foreign and strategic policy team in terms of an imaginative foreign policy such as that pursued by President Truman and General Marshall and Dean Acheson or by President Nixon and Henry Kissinger. But even Biden might be up to giving Pakistan a good and well-deserved kick in the shins.

First published in the