

A Taliban victory is worrying for the world.

The Biden Administration will be haunted by those sad scenes of Afghans clinging to the outside of a US plane wanting to take off from Kabul. They did so in the vain hope that they might be able to go with the passengers approved for the journey inside the aircraft. That picture tells us powerfully that many Afghans see the Taliban takeover of their country as a disaster. It reminds us that the might of the USA, visibly present in the form of a large military aircraft, was bent on getting out and leaving behind the chaos that is Afghanistan under Taliban takeover.

The USA was always the initiator and senior NATO partner in the Afghan operation. For some twenty years US and allied troops fought to evict the Taliban from the towns and villages of Afghanistan, and then helped the Afghan forces recruit, train and equip to gradually take over the tasks of policing to prevent a further insurgency. Many brave UK soldiers gave their lives or suffered bad injuries in the cause of preventing the barbarism of a Taliban regime to assist the US led mission. Good advances were made in reducing the numbers of murders and exchanges of fire, allowing girls and women education and better lives, and beginning to develop a more diverse democratic system of government. These were achievements the West could be proud of, and can explain the sacrifices made by our military personnel.

President Obama tried to bring the Taliban into a peace process to see if politics and diplomacy could take over from vigilance and fighting, without success. President Trump did get into talks with the Taliban about how they could play a role within a democratic and peace loving Afghanistan. His Agreement promised US troop withdrawal in return for security guarantees from the Taliban and the intent for the Taliban to hold talks with the Afghan government to establish an agreed ways of working with them for the future. President Biden by removing US forces too speedily without the agreement of his Afghan or NATO allies left open an opportunity for the Taliban to abandon the idea of talks and to press home the advantage to take control of the whole country instead. It turned out the Afghan forces were not ready to track and withstand Taliban armed insurgents despite all the training and military equipment the US and its allies had helped provide. If President Biden had listened to allies he would have left more support in place to prevent such an easy capture of the state. His claim that he was following President Trump's policy is not borne out by reading the Doha Declaration or Agreement with the Taliban which made clear the Taliban had to negotiate a role with the Afghan government, not usurp it at the point of a gun.

What should happen now? The first thing is to ask President Biden to make sure he does not repeat the experience in Iraq by vacating there too soon and before the host nation is ready to run its own security without help. The second is to get President Biden to spell out what alliance structure he now wishes to establish, as he has damaged and undermined the Trump idea of relying on Saudi, Israel and the Gulf states as his main allies, bringing

them together in an anti Iran coalition with peace treaties between the Arab states and Israel. As President Biden tilts a bit towards Iran, how will that work out with old Trump allies who see Iran as a threat to regional peace? Will Taliban Afghanistan now ally with Iran, strengthening the forces traditionally hostile to the West? What will President Biden do if China becomes a best friend and ally of Afghanistan and offers large sums of aid, loans and investment to gain control of important economic resources? Will the US be able to rely on bases in Pakistan if Pakistan emerges as major influence on Taliban Afghanistan and another ally of Mr Biden's nemesis? Whilst it is said that even China, Pakistan and Russia have their reservations about some Taliban stances and the way they overthrew an established government, they will all most likely exploit the damage it has done to the West and will seek to lever their links to the Taliban.

We were told the world would be a better place when a new President promised grown up foreign policies from the White House. Eight months on and the Middle East is a less stable place, the US has suffered a major military defeat without firing a shot in anger to stop the Taliban that they had evicted previously, and we await some idea of how the President thinks he can pursue diplomatic avenues to defend western interests and help support more stable and prosperous societies in the Middle East.