

# My Intervention during the Debate on the situation in Afghanistan

John Redwood Conservative, Wokingham

Does my right hon. Friend agree that President Biden decided unilaterally to withdraw without agreeing and negotiating a plan with either the Afghan Government or the NATO allies, and that the response of the UK Government in the circumstances has been fast, purposeful and extremely well guided to protect the interests of UK citizens?

Theresa May Conservative, Maidenhead

What President Biden has done is to uphold a decision made by President Trump. It was a unilateral decision of President Trump to do a deal with the Taliban that led to this withdrawal.

What we have seen from the scenes in Afghanistan is that it has not been all right on the night. There are many in Afghanistan who not only fear that their lives will be irrevocably changed for the worse, but fear for their lives. Numbered among them will be women—women who embraced freedom and the right to education, to work and to participate in the political process.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was right to make the education of girls a key aim of his Administration, but in Afghanistan that will now be swept away. Those girls who have been educated will have no opportunity to use that education. The Taliban proclaims that women will be allowed to work and girls will be allowed to go to school, but this will be under Islamic law—or rather, under its interpretation of Islamic law, and we have seen before what that means for the lives of women and girls.

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Does my right hon. Friend have any advice for the Government on how they could take action to try to prevent the recurrence of a terrorist threat under Taliban control?

Tobias Ellwood Chair, Defence Committee, Chair, Defence Committee, Chair, Defence Sub-Committee, Chair, Defence Sub-Committee

My fear is that there will be an attack on the lines of 9/11 to bookend what happened 20 years ago, to show the futility of 20 years. We should never have left—I will come to that in a second—because after 20 years of effort, this is a humiliating strategic defeat for the west. The Taliban control more territory today than they did before 9/11.

I was born in the United States; I am a proud dual national and passionate about the transatlantic security alliance. Prior to him declaring his candidacy, I worked directly with President Biden on veterans' mental health issues. He was the keynote speaker at a veterans reception here in the House of Commons, as my guest, so it gives me no joy to criticise the President and say that the decision to withdraw, which he inherited, but then chose to endorse, was absolutely the wrong call. Yes, two decades is a long time. It has been a testing chapter for Afghanistan, so the US election promise to return troops was obviously a popular one, but it was a false narrative.

First, the notion that we gave the Afghans every opportunity over 20 years to progress, and that the country cannot be helped forever so it is time to come home, glosses over the hurdles—the own goals—that we created after the invasion. We denied the Taliban a seat at the table back in 2001. They asked to attend the Bonn talks but Donald Rumsfeld said no, so they crossed the Pakistan border to rearm, regroup and retrain. How different the last few decades would have been had they been included. Secondly, we did not start training the Afghan forces until 2005, by which time the Taliban were already on the advance. Finally, we imposed a western model of governance, which was completely inappropriate for Afghanistan, with all the power in Kabul. That was completely wrong for a country where loyalty is on a tribal and local level. That is not to dismiss the mass corruption, cronyism and elitism that is rife across Afghanistan, but those schoolboy errors in stabilisation hampered progress and made our mission harder.

There is also the notion that we cannot fight a war forever. We have not been fighting for the last three years. The US and the UK have not lost a single soldier, but we had a minimalist force there—enough assistance to give the Afghan forces the ability to contain the Taliban and, by extension, give legitimacy to the Afghan Government. The US has more personnel based in its embassy here than it had troops in Afghanistan before retreating. Both the US and the UK have long-term commitments across the world, which we forget about. Japan, Germany and Korea have been mentioned. There is Djibouti, Niger, Jordan and Iraq, and ourselves in Cyprus and Kenya, for example, and the Falklands, too. It is the endurance that counts. Success is not rated on when we return troops home. Such presence offers assurance, represents commitment, bolsters regional stability, and assists with building and strengthening the armed forces. That is exactly what we were doing in Afghanistan.

Last year, the Taliban were finally at the negotiation table in Doha, but in a rush to get a result, Trump struck a deal with the Taliban—by the way, without the inclusion of the Afghan Government—and committed to a timetable for drawdown. All the Taliban had to do was wait. The final question is about whether the UK can lead or participate in a coalition without the US. Where is our foreign policy determined—here or in Washington? Our Government should

have more confidence in themselves.

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## The Foreign Secretary

The latest attack on the Foreign Secretary for daring to take a holiday in August is bizarre given all the more important things we should be talking about.

It emerges he was of course staying in regular touch with the office from holiday. What was wrong with asking a Minister on duty in his department to make a call to an Afghan government Minister that officials wanted? As it turned out that government would prove to both powerless and short lived anyway. You cannot organise contingencies for the collapse of a government by agreeing with the government about to collapse. If the government had been stronger you did not need the contingency plan for its demise.

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## The Afghan debate

The Opposition in the debate was most disappointing. Labour and the SNP concentrated on demanding the UK takes more refugees more quickly. The SNP leader was unable to answer why Scottish local authorities had not reflected his policy in their actions. Labour was unwilling to get into the detail of who else they thought should be aboard our flights back to the UK or how the hard working operation at Kabul airport could be expanded and speeded up given the pressures on the runway and processing capacity in a situation which needs to meet the needs of many countries. They were unwilling to consider the issue of our national security and the steps that need to be taken to keep us safe against the possibility that the new Afghanistan will harbour or even encourage more terrorists hostile to the USA and her allies.

The Opposition also wished to blame President Trump as well as President Biden for the disaster, and of course had no sympathy for the view that the UK government had little choice once the USA pulled out her military presence unilaterally without considering the needs and wishes of the Afghan government. The MPs who took this approach clearly had not read the Doha Agreement as they seemed to think President Biden merely implemented that. If only. That Agreement required the Taliban to enter talks with the Afghan government and other political groups to seek an agreement. It made US final withdrawal conditional on Taliban good conduct. President Trump did not rush to remove all military support following the Agreement despite the election where he would doubtless liked to have reported a full exit.

The debate needed to discuss more what military intervention can achieve, and to consider more what political and diplomatic effort has to go in to follow up military intervention. You cannot defeat an ideology by force of arms alone if at all. You need to combat the ideas behind it in the minds of the people. South Korea has become a stable and much more prosperous society after the Korean war . The success of western style policies to promote economic growth there has been welcomed by citizens. The USA has been patient and has kept a substantial military presence there for many years which has deterred North Korean excursions across the border with the south. There has been no need for the USA or the West to fight, and the world has not doubted the West's resolve.

It is no solution to the troubles of current Afghanistan for western MPs to grandstand their conscience by saying we need to allow in more refugees. Afghanistan needs her brightest and best, her educated and enterprising to give her a chance of a journey to greater prosperity and happiness. The more you encourage to come to the West, the more the millions who cannot or will not make the journey suffer. It seems that the Opposition think the UK should welcome in all the people most equipped to offer their homeland the chance of change for the better. I want to see the West use its diplomatic and economic might to tempt Afghanistan to the paths of peace and prosperity. I understand that is not an easy choice. After President Biden's bad decision to leave in a hurry we are left with needing to use diplomacy, influence and economic sanctions to try to encourage good conduct and rein in violent excess. The West after all accepts that in the cases of several powerful authoritarian regimes who do not share our values it does not have a realistic military option that it would use in anything short of a major emergency or direct threat from the country concerned. The IMF are right to withhold cash from Afghanistan. The UK should draw up a G7 set of demands of the next Afghan government that they will need to meet to get international cash and to avoid major trade and banking sanctions.

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## [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.