

The Afghan war

President Biden's decision to pull US troops out of Afghanistan rapidly has left that country fighting a nasty civil war with claims from the Afghan government side that there was insufficient consultation and no orderly handover. They feel their position against the Taliban is now weakened. According to media stories there was little consultation or discussion with NATO allies either, even though our military has done a lot to support the US led action over the years.

Let me begin by praising and thanking all the western forces and especially UK military personnel who risked their lives or gave their lives in this long conflict. They successfully confronted some extreme violence and gave Afghanistan a chance of a better life under a democratic system that respects the rights of all people in the country and offers opportunity to women and girls as well as to the men. This makes how we leave important, as the wish must be that the home grown government and forces for democracy that we have left behind now have the training and equipment to stabilise their country and resist violence against people and the governing system.

I agree that we needed to make an orderly exit, disengaging our forces from direct conflict on the streets and supporting benign local military policing to create and keep a peace. The whole long Afghan war has highlighted how difficult it is for a foreign invading force to help establish a stable freedom loving democratic system once it has with skill and some loss of life swept aside a brutal undemocratic regime. We do not and should not wish to become colonial governments, however well intentioned, acting as supporters but seen as puppet masters of local governments that emerge from the civil wars. The US and UK got to our own democratic systems by civil wars and wars of independence our ancestors fought, largely without foreign intervention.

As governments will say to us, we need to learn the lessons – again – of the Afghan interventions. They seem to be the same as elsewhere. A brave military campaign can only succeed if there is the political skill to see through a lasting peace that enough local people buy into. A war can only be won if there are enough people in the country that back the intervention by the foreign power and see it as helpful. Viet Nam showed how horribly wrong such interventions can go when the US misjudges the military and the political realities at the same time.