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## Biden Doctrine, Xi's Theory, and Afghanistan

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# Biden Doctrine, Xi's Theory, and Afghanistan

*Shambhu Ram Simkhada*

International Relations (IR) is the study of great power relations and how they affect the world. Despite the availability of the most sophisticated means, it must have been political will stalling communication between leaders of the current world's two superpowers, the United States of America, and the People's Republic of China even after the tumultuous leadership change in the US. But after US withdrawal from and reported Chinese inroads into Afghanistan, a telephone line between Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping sprang open leading to their recent virtual summit. Can they now change their worsening relations with dire predictions (Destined for War) between them and devastating impact for the world?

In seeking the answer, the logical starting point is to unhesitatingly ask, after wasting so much time, treasure, and blood (20 years, trillions of dollars and 2500 NATO soldiers and estimated 3000,000 Afghan casualties) to drive them out of power if half of the ministers in the new Afghan government are in the United Nations' "B" list, whose fault and failure is it, Taliban's, Afghanistan's, US-NATO's, the UN's? And for a real answer, all sides need to pause and reflect rather than play the blame game, rush to declare victors, vanquished, but then return to the business of politics, economics, diplomacy, and security as usual.

## **Rethinking Power**

To begin with, Power is the central issue in the study and practice of politics, economics, diplomacy, and security driving IR. Politics is about power, diplomacy and defense, instruments applying national power for the protection and promotion of national interests. But Afghanistan challenges our understanding of power and interest. How did an army of backward village youths defeat the much larger Afghan national security forces supported by the most powerful military alliance in the world? What good is power and how and whose interest is served by causing pain to the weak, loss of lives, resources, and prestige of the powerful?

Add Climate and COVID-19, two other most pressing global crises of today, and don't they question the contemporary power-interest paradigm in theory and practice? Even more worrying, if pandemics and climate crises worsen, Vietnam, Cambodia yesterday, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan today and who knows which one's tomorrow repeat again and again, where then is wisdom, experience, and learning? What good is the global superstructure, the UN?

## **Graveyard to Governance**

Images of the chaos in Kabul airport may have justified some debate on the timing

and method of the US pullout. But it is hard to argue against the Biden Doctrine "why should US troops keep fighting and dying when the Afghans themselves don't want to fight for their own country?" Afghans, of course, have always fought against the external occupation, Britain, the Soviet Union, and now the US, forcing them all to leave. That has made Afghanistan a "graveyard of empires" and the Afghans one of the fiercest people on earth.

The graveyard of the Afghans is, however, many times larger than that of the invaders. The suffering and backwardness of the Afghans with groups like the Taliban coming to and now returning to power is even more tragic. Just imagine, if the bravery and sacrifice of the Afghans could have been better utilized, where would Afghanistan be today? That makes Afghanistan, Climate, and COVID 19, reasons to rethink many assumptions on which mankind, even in the digital age, continues to base its wisdom and actions, theories and practices of politics, economics, diplomacy, security, and governance.

Illustrating the paradox of unlimited access to information and knowledge and yet sad commentary on human wisdom, scholars, of course, have warned since long about the disconnect between the physical (economic, technological, climate, health, migration, crime, etc.) and socio-psychological, political, and institutional sides of the human enterprise. So, a well-known historian writes "our knowledge is increasing at breakneck speed and yet we are less and less able to make sense of the present and predict the future".

Afghanistan, Climate, and COVID-19 may be Mother Nature's (God's) reminder to humans, what is power and who is more powerful? It may also be a warning to rethink ways of life and work, particularly dealing with what we see as "other", human beings (of different ethnicity, color, culture, ideology), creations of God such as animals, plants, or even soil, rock, air, water, etc. (inanimate objects) about which some ancient wisdom has long preached respect but ignored by man in the blind race to be God.

### **Need for a New Global Paradigm**

In the backdrop of the dysfunctional old national power-interest paradigm, the Biden Doctrine of withdrawal from unnecessary foreign wars and refocusing the overwhelming American Power in America's renewal of its founding ideals of Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of happiness for all Americans at home and assisting the peoples of the world who demand, and Xi's Theory of building a community of shared destiny through win-win, IR could together build the foundation of a new global paradigm. A great thinker wrote long ago "statesmen can alter reality only if they recognize and understand it". So, the first thing Biden's America and Xi's China will have to start doing is to recognize the reality of the two Americas and Chinas and start changing internally and their worldviews.

Starting with the US, one is the shining city on the hill, built on the strength of lofty founding ideals and institutions, strengthened by large size, favorable location, rich

natural endowment, politics of liberty and law and economics of free enterprise contributing to innovative and advanced technology and attraction and assimilation of global talent and manpower. With such advantages, after the World Wars, even more in the post-Cold War era, the US emerged as the unchallenged global superpower dominating all realms of human endeavor, intellectual, ideological, economic, technological, and military, like no other one country in the world history.

This US rise is significant in many ways, most notably in its passion to push the superiority of its political, economic, social, and strategic model on the rest of the world on the "power of its liberal democratic example" as far as possible but with most illiberal use of its national and allied military power when Washington feels necessary. Within the declared justifications of defeating Saddam Hussain in Iraq and Taliban in Afghanistan are also American overreach in imposing its model on others.

The duality in dealing with what America sees as "the other" adversary, enemy in values (ideology and religion), interests (national and sometimes even personal), combined with the sense of "national exceptionalism and universalism" is reinforced and exacerbated by the hold of the all-powerful military-industrial complex on US political-economy, vision of security and IR. But the "win at any cost" zeal also makes the US a paradoxical society at home and controversial superpower outside. So, the two Americas, one liberal, progressive, tolerant, open, generous, dynamic, successful, united, inspiring, and globalist, the other fundamentalist, fearful, selfish, vindictive, inward-looking, divided internally and divisive externally make it seem like it is at war with itself. What else can one call the Capitol insurrection and opposition to the government's vaccination policy?

Economic disparity, gun violence, drug, crime, treatment to minorities (Black lives matter), extreme political polarization) and external role (double standards on HR, never-ending wars, and some of its powerful institutions sometimes defying the very values they were created to protect (Iran-Contra, Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, etc.) showcase America's internal and external paradoxes. These played out in front of increasingly aware global audiences by social media and TV networks beaming only bad news as news make the US call for a united front against authoritarianism, in favor of democracy, HR, and rule of law less convincing, unlike the cheers it used to receive when evoking the same messages in the past.

A US scholar warned long ago "Imperialism is the logical consequence of Universalism". Afghanistan proved that without local grounding, no amount of power can externally impose values. Imagine trying to impose US values on one of the most ancient, advanced civilizations with the longest history of statehood and largest population and now economically and militarily another superpower? So, rather than China-bashing, reconciling the two Americas can better serve the cause of democracy globally.

## **Universal Human Values**

To America's credit, it is now futile for Afghanistan's current rulers to return to old

Taliban days. So, evolution to a new Taliban respecting basic universal human values is as much in Afghanistan's like US, China, and world's interests. More broadly, irrespective of what slogans they give, religious, cultural, ideological, economic, or external threat rulers out of sync with the dynamics of time and technology cannot expect to rule effectively anywhere.

This means, while the imposition of US values universally may be tantamount to imperialism, in globalizing world freedom of thought and expression, rule of law, equality among gender, ethnicity, language, religion, and region and more equitable sharing of power and prosperity are universal human desires which no government in the name of sovereignty can deny. Wherever and whenever they are denied people will demand and advocacy and support will and should continue. In this sense, Afghanistan does not pose any fewer challenges to internal Chinese dilemmas of unprecedented economic liberalization and transformation within the strict political control of the Communist party as well as plurality within the majority unitary culture. So, modern China has falsified the ideological "end of history" theory. But as it moves from poverty to prosperity, rural agrarian, and manufacturing to a high-tech knowledge economy, like other societies, it too faces daunting challenges of change.

Even more serious, Climate, COVID, and Afghanistan show West or East, Democrats or Socialists, North or South, the world faces problems of political-economy, security, and governance, which, no country irrespective of how powerful can resolve without inter-state cooperation, from national self-interest to collective interests-harmonization based on larger regional or global good. Thus, if both the Liberal-Democratic and Socialist worlds recognize their respective challenges in the right spirit, understanding on basic universal human values to which they can both agree, despite their differences, can emerge to lay the foundation of the new global paradigm.

### **Threshold of Power**

Of course, those trying to paint Saigon with the same brush as Kabul as a symbol of America's decline forget that if the US was to open its borders over 10 percent (guesstimating!) of the peoples of the world may rush to enter. Objectively speaking, is there any other country in the world capable of attracting and assimilating peoples from around the world as the US? So, the crowd and chaos at Kabul airport was a surprise only to blind America bashers and Americans themselves who erroneously think the world hates them.

Let alone critics, American intellectuals themselves make another serious mistake. The US had enormous capability while leaving Saigon and more now as it left Kabul. It could have annihilated Vietnam and Afghanistan if it had so decided, as it did Hiroshima to demand Japan's surrender in World War II. So, rather than the actual power, it is the moral, ethical, and strategic calculations and global image considerations that create the dilemma in the use of certain types of power (weapons), forcing the US to withdraw even as being seen to be defeated despite having the capability to defeat its enemies,

the Taliban in this case.

Even more significant, as a democracy, it is the power of America's own public opinion which demanded withdrawal from Vietnam then and is demanding the end of the so-called "Forever Wars" in distant places not directly linked to vital US national security interests now. The political and economic consideration based on national need and popular demand to refocus on internal strengthening by giving up part of the post-World War II "international policeman" role is what prompted Presidents Obama to campaign for the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, Trump to start negotiations with the Taliban and Biden to order the actual withdrawal.

This then opens the question, was US withdrawal from Afghanistan its defeat or a tactical move to refocus on larger strategic contest it sees more seriously threatening its vital national interests? With what understanding with Taliban leadership did the US withdraw or what may force it to return? Even more critical, what happens if Afghanistan becomes a failed state again as it now seems to be happening? How would regimes less susceptible to public opinions at home and more vulnerable outside respond to similar situations? These questions make the Biden-Xi communication so significant and their joint effort towards laying the foundations for a new global paradigm based on minimum consensus on basic universal human values so vital.

As a good sign, both sides agreed in their virtual summit that they want to avoid competition turning into confrontation and conflict. How can they achieve this goal? The world needs a new global governance architecture built on politics of liberty and law, economics of enterprise with equity and corporate social responsibility, society of social justice, caring and sharing, foreign and security policy of friendship with all. This global architecture built on the foundation of basic universal human values despite ideological and cultural differences, can replace the old hegemonic and conflictual polarity by a cooperative and managed competitive plurality as the new paradigm of great power relations in the 21st Century and beyond.

Whichever side took the initiative to open the dialogue this was statesmanship of wisdom and courage. Without communication at difficult times, the danger of the use of more lethal power considered unusable crossing the threshold increases in a bigger conflict between great powers with devastating consequences for the world. This makes the management of US-China relations vital not just for them but for the world. That is why the Biden Doctrine of ending unnecessary external military involvements and Xi's Win-Win Theory must converge to transform contemporary IR.

## **Breakthrough or Breakdown**

A US scholar wrote long ago "we exist in a bizarre combination of stone-age emotions, medieval beliefs (and institutions) but God-like technology. This is how we (mankind) have lurched into the 21st Century". As humanity embarks on its journey towards the third decade of what we call the 4th economic and technological epoch, the world needs a new political-governance architecture consistent with the dynamics of time

and technology. Only an enlightened scholarship can conceptualize, and statesmanship of vision and courage committed to moral and ethical values of common humanity beyond narrow personal and national power comprehend and transform the world to the new paradigm of harmonized national interests, human security, and wellbeing.

Learning from the tragedies of the two World Wars the UN was created to lead the world from its classical national power-interest paradigm to a new global norm and rules-based order through change at all levels of human behavior, individual, institutional to the most powerful institution, the nation-state, for collective security, prosperity, and dignity. In this sense, Climate, COVID, and Afghanistan, particularly the return of the Taliban even after so much time, treasure, and blood in ousting and preventing them to return to power, is a sad commentary on the UN and its top leadership chosen by the P5 and the main Western powers responsible for its creation.

Belatedly, current UN SG António Guterres has gathered the wisdom and courage to stress "The world has arrived at an inflection point in history...time for diplomatic niceties is long gone.... we either reach a breakthrough or face the breakdown". As the contemporary world's two superpowers, US and China can come together and lead the world to a breakthrough or as in the past follow the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) path. Therein lies the value of convergence of the Biden Doctrine and Xi's Theory. If they do, this could be another transformative epoch more foresighted than Yalta and Dumbarton Oaks, creating the current global order and its failed pathfinder, the United Nations after the tragedies of the World Wars.