

# While you were glamping, Afghanistan has fallen - Twenty years of liberal interventionism lie in ruins

Tuesday 17 August 2021, by [MASON Paul](#) (Date first published: 16 August 2021).

As I write, the BBC is reporting the Taliban are “entering Kabul from all sides”. Fourteen provincial capitals are in the hands of Taliban fighters, the 300,000 strong Afghan army in headlong retreat and Western diplomats scrambling to get out of the country.

Maybe the people of Kabul will do what Joe Biden has urged them to do — “fight”: leftists with contacts in Afghanistan have reported groups of women arming themselves in self defence since July. Maybe the West will pull together a last-minute “humanitarian” intervention. Maybe Ashraf Ghani will resign and negotiations begin. But I am not counting on any of it.

I didn’t cover Afghanistan. But I did sit in the newsroom of Newsnight in the Autumn of 2001 and watch as the hubris of liberal interventionism gripped the imagination of highly educated people, indeed people with genuine expertise in covering warfare, Islam and geopolitics.

Here at last was a just war: winnable, swiftly launched and quickly over. The botched interventions into Yugoslavia; the horrific inaction over the Rwanda genocide; the weirdly inconclusive first Iraq War could all now be forgotten, or partially atoned.

Once the Taliban were beaten, the West could bring development aid, institution building, education for women and girls. And, of course, its collective imagination: through TV series like Homeland we’ve spent 20 years projecting our own virtue onto Afghanistan.

Today, it is not just the Afghan interpreters for the British army we are leaving in the lurch. It is the entire network of civil society institutions, NGOs, cultural groups and universities that is being abandoned, and of course the workers movement and the left.

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I opposed the invasion of Afghanistan (though not publicly, since I was not allowed to by the BBC). I likewise opposed the invasion of Iraq in 2003. By the time John Reid launched the duplicitous Helmand deployment in 2006, saying Britain would be “happy to leave in three years time without firing one shot”, it was clear to a lot of my BBC colleagues that the whole thing was a disaster.

We need to remember, however, who sold liberal interventionism to that generation of the UK political, media, military, intelligence and diplomatic elite: Tony Blair and New Labour.

Former Labour special adviser Matt Cavanagh, in a RUSI journal article [\[1\]](#), spelled out Blair’s mistakes. He believed the USA had established a timeless unipolar world, in which it could reshape reality at will:

*“[Blair] tended to frame decisions about Afghanistan as part of the ‘long struggle’ against Islamic extremism, thinking about Britain’s place in that struggle alongside the US more than he did about*

*Afghanistan or the plan itself”.*

On this basis Blair colluded with the strategic mistake of the Bush administration, which was to commit to “nation building” instead of pragmatic stabilisation. This meant committing to a permanent war with the Taliban, for which Western public support drained away and for which there was no reliable local ally.

When that failed, as Cavanagh recounts, Blair came to believe it was Britain’s sole mission to “save” the US project in Afghanistan, and military chiefs reinforced that logic. They could pull from Helmand a “victory” to offset the defeat in Iraq.

The people paying the price today are the Afghan workers, peasants, women and youth who used the space of the Western intervention to build their own spaces, organisations and cultures. To defend those things they were always reliant on two forces that have proved unreliable: the Afghan army, based heavily on local elites and (as demonstrated this month) no independent will to fight; and the USA, which has pulled out.

What can we, the rich, democratic, well-armed countries of the West do about the catastrophe unfolding now?

**The short answer is nothing. Liberal interventionism has failed.**

We went to war in Iraq and were effectively defeated. Now we’re being defeated in Afghanistan. We were defeated in Syria, after the fantasy army of “moderate rebels” ready to fight Assad failed to appear (since they had been destroyed by our Saudi and Kuwaiti backed allies).

Meanwhile the unipolar world, which was the subject of so much back-slapping rhetoric at places like Davos when I used to frequent them, has evaporated.

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But it’s worse. During the last days of Trump, with the launch of a new Cold War against China, the sons and daughters of the liberal interventionist generation, fresh out of Oxbridge once again, were sold a new fantasy: the “tilt to Asia”. Britain, together with America, would refocus its gaze now to the “Indo-Pacific” — confronting the rising Chinese superpower on its doorstep with conventional deterrence and diplomatic might.

But just look at a map. Between Europe and the “Indo-Pacific” lies the Middle East, with Afghanistan as a failing state, with Iran as a regional superpower, with Syria and Turkey cemented as Russian client states — and of course Ukraine, at war, Georgia, its democracy collapsing, the Armenian-Azeri warzone.

**The Indo-Pacific strategy now has an Afghanistan-sized hole in it, as does that other Johnsonian fantasy “Global Britain”.**

What we deserve from Britain’s military-political elites, before any further bright suggestions about projecting force in the world, is an explanation. How did this thing, which you were so wedded to, and which captured your imaginations so thoroughly, go so horrifically wrong?

The stock response is: we didn’t commit hard enough; we lost our nerve. But that was a function of being a democracy. The Afghan policy was, as Cavanagh reveals, never properly challenged within cabinet, nor by military/intelligence leaders. Only Labour left stalwarts like Jeremy Corbyn stood continually and on principle against the intervention.

A variant of this is the argument “if only we hadn’t gone into Iraq, we could have then maintained focus on the Afghan mission”. Well, 149 MPs voted against the Iraq war on 18 March 2003, including 84 Labour MPs, all 52 Libdems and all members from the SNP, Plaid and SDLP. They were vilified and ignored by the same media voices who today decry the West’s retreat from Afghanistan. But they were right.

The next thing we need is strategic compassion. There will be hundreds of thousands of new refugees from Afghanistan. Throughout my entire career since 2001 I’ve met them on the road, from Berlin to Patras to Istanbul and beyond. Wars — especially civil wars — create refugees. The nations who launched the intervention in 2001 have the same moral duty to them as they have to the Hong Kong refugees fleeing Xi Jin Ping.

We should end deportations to Afghanistan, recognise the right to remain of all Afghan refugees (who even now are among those landing in Kent, hounded by the right-wing media), and launch an active resettlement programme for the thousands more who will be on their way. Priti Patel and her cohorts need simply to stop attacking refugees and start helping them.

The ultimate need is for a rewired global system. This cannot be built on hubris or confrontation, but through collaboration.

The Taliban’s victories are a reminder that, even as Western military thought switches to “peer rivalry” (ie deterring Russia and China across a spectrum ranging from TV channels to nuclear silos), there are many parts of the world in which states are fragile, and into which no sensible Tier One power will ever again intervene.

*In this sense, though it is the West’s defeat, the Afghan tragedy is a lesson to all major powers.*

As we enter a phase of history in which the USA, Europe, Russia, India and China compete as regional, not global superpowers, there are now two case studies in overreach: Iraq and Afghanistan. As they learn from them, it is likely that major powers will now prefer proxy, cultural and economic wars: these — as Crimea, the Donbas, Syria and Hong Kong demonstrate — are winnable and don’t destroy political consent.

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There’s suddenly a lot of criticism of Joe Biden. Trump pulled the plug strategically, but why couldn’t Biden go on propping up the Ashraf Ghani government indefinitely, with just a few troops and a lot of drones? The answer is given by anarchists in Afghanistan, who tweeted overnight:

*“Mazar Sharif Fell into the Taliban’s control. As our comrades predicted, army commanders sold the city to Taliban. Thousands of soldiers surrendered without fighting...This is not war. This is pretense fighting.”*

Certainly, the Biden administration has triggered a debacle: it must have assumed the Afghan army — well equipped and Western trained — could hold the line long enough to bring the Taliban to negotiations, otherwise it wouldn’t be scrambling to get its people out so fast. That miscalculation has to be the subject of democratic scrutiny and accountability.

But there is no popular support for expeditionary warfare left, either in the USA, Britain or much of Europe. If you’ve seen your legislature stormed by fascists, and one of the oldest democratic parties in the morally captured by them, that’s going to concentrate your mind on the defence of your own democracy, not the reconquest of an ungovernable space.

This is the world we now live in. There are no technocratic solutions to it. The solutions are social: take the power away from fossil capital, finance capital and the security-intelligence elites; resist fascism by building social solidarity and self-organisation; defend the democracies that exist from the most pressing threat to them, which comes from within — from the far right, from the elite's pursuit of culture war, and the hollowing-out of judicial and parliamentary oversight and, yes, from the remnants of ISIS and Al Qaeda.

The collapse of Ghani's government will likely see a repeat of scenes witnessed during the fall of Saigon in 1975, and before that the fall of Havana in 1959. But remember, the world during both those debacles was immensely more stable than it is today.

What you're witnessing is not some tactical mistake made by Biden: it is the payback for 20 years of neoliberal hubris, for what Will Davies calls "the disenchantment of politics by economics" — plus four years of tolerating a clown in the White House.

There will be resistance to the Taliban — and it deserves our solidarity. Solidarity to the women, the workers, the youth, the democrats, the musicians, the teachers, the NGO workers.

***Disgrace to the British prime minister who called for Trump to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.***

**Paul Mason**

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<https://paulmasonnews.medium.com/while-you-were-glamping-afghanistan-has-fallen-d75f8a53b3fd>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2012.675798>