

THE ROOT CAUSE OF 'WESTERN' FAILURE IN AFGHANISTAN

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A better understanding of tribal cultures and strategic theories based on them might have prevented errors in Afghanistan and better explained the Taliban victory than do simplistic identifications of Islam, rather than tribalism and nationalism, as the agglutinating force that drives them. From a Eurasian point of view, economic integration is a more effective motor of long-term political change than short-term policies of military intervention or sanctions.

The fall of Kabul confirms a failure of Euroamerican strategic thinking in Afghanistan due to flaws in its ideological and conceptual foundations. Former Irish army officer **Philp Quinlan**, a veteran of peace missions in Somalia, has said, “to think that we can land into a country, rotate through in six- or 12-month intervals and fundamentally change how a culture has evolved always seemed to me to be an unbelievably bad mix of hubris and naivety”. The Soviet Union tried to create a secular society in Afghanistan that provided education and rights to all through their enlightenment model of socialism. NATO tried to do the same by formalising the structures of enlightenment liberal democracy. Both models foundered on the reality of tribal societies and structures that they failed to take into account or disdained (like the *jirga* and the *loya jirga*).

Studies carried out over many years by the **World Values Survey** demonstrate the tendency of affluent post-industrial societies to prioritise secular-rational values and self-expression values while pre-industrial and industrialising societies, still concerned with meeting basic needs, prioritise traditional and survival values impeding mutual understanding.

The amoral nature of *Realpolitik* makes it difficult to justify ‘Realist’ analyses or strategies on any other basis than pure naked national self-interest, and from that point of view, the Rest are as justified as the West in promoting their own self-interest. Realists like Hans Morgenthau say that universal moral principles do not apply to International Relations, but they also try to justify hegemonic dominance of the world order on the basis of providing (self-defined and self-serving) global public goods. From what amoral point of view can US or EU self-interests be inherently more justified or justifiable than Chinese or Russian or Pashtun Afghani self-interests?

Parag Khanna points out that the emerging geoeconomic order has changed perceptions of the Euroamerican ambit from the Afro-Eurasian point of view. Western democratic liberalism no longer impresses the rest of the world unless it brings large-scale benefits to the larger populations of the emerging economies. A model in which there are a few 'haves' and an increasing number of 'have-nots' is not worthy of imitation. Infrastructure financing and technical assistance afford leadership today. Due to Indian and Chinese demand, Asian consumption drives commodity prices that favour growth in Latin America and Africa. Asian and sub-Saharan African growth far exceeds the economic losses of Near and Middle Eastern and North African conflicts. Emerging paradigms leave the 'Washington Consensus' behind.

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US strategists assume the global system prefers American leadership. Conservatives believe that restraint or containment can maintain American dominance; liberals believe that Western rules and institutions make America vital to world order. Neither approach is valid because they take what America should do to be the norm without considering the possibility that other dynamics are in play. As a result of China's Belt and Road Initiative ('the new Silk Road'), Europeans and Asians are converging across the Eurasian land mass in what promises to become an inevitable flood of investment that will create a flourishing Eurasian commercial system. Military occupation and economic sanctions against major Eurasian players like Russia and Iran impede this process, to the annoyance of potential beneficiaries. From a Eurasian point of view, economic integration is a more effective motor of long-term political change than is a short-term policy of military intervention or sanctions.

At the height of the European imperialist adventure overseas, Halford Mackinder wrote: 'Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world'. The Heartland he refers to is central Asia; the World-Island is the Afro-Eurasian landmass. Afghanistan, at the crossroads of Eurasian trade, has been the object of imperialist intervention for centuries but no empire has been able to dominate it. Dwight Eisenhower allegedly advised America to avoid land wars in Asia because they require long-term and costly state-building and governance as well as short-term conquest. He also warned against the military-industrial complex that became the motor of US intervention in the region. Alfred Thayer Mahan seemed to have anticipated this warning when he proposed sea power as the compensatory answer for shaping geopolitics there. Failures in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq bear this out.

Strategists of the invasion of Afghanistan and the war in Iraq say they studied Sunzi's *Art of War* after failing in Vietnam, thinking it would provide the key to victory in central Asia. They seem not to have understood that non-state enemies have so radically changed the very nature of war that it is no longer easy to understand what victory might mean. They should have studied the *Pancatantra*, an ancient Sanskrit text on alliance-based strategy, that circulated in Persian and Arabic versions, centuries before Marco Polo travelled through Eurasia. Or even better, the *Muqaddimah*, a universal cyclical theory of history elaborated by Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406). A universal linear vision of history as progress toward a constantly improving future, giving rise to the fatal ambition for infinite growth in a world of limited resources, is another product of the Enlightenment. Ibn Khaldun perceived a pattern of the rise and fall of regimes over 120-year periods on the basis of *asabiyya*, a unifying creed or identity, and *umran*, a form of communitarianism. He contrasted the *asabiyya* and *umran* of *badawa*, non-sedentary desert lifestyles, with those of *hadara*, sedentary urban culture. Hardy *badawa* desert tribes united by *asabiyya* and their own form of *umran*, accustomed to survival tactics, hunting and warfare, overrun *hadara* urban civilisations that are weak in *asabiyya* and *umran*, accustomed to the pursuit of comfort and wealth and succumbing to corruption, weakness and disunity. Over three generations, the victorious *badawa* tribe acquires the vices of *hadara* culture, and the cycle repeats. A better understanding of tribal cultures and the analyses of Ibn Khaldun might have prevented many Euroamerican errors in Afghanistan and have provided better explanations of the Taliban victory than do simplistic identifications of Islam, rather than tribalism and nationalism, as the agglutinating force that drives them.