

US Credibility and the Afghanistan Withdrawal

by Riccardo Perissich

Whatever one may think of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, a decision that President Biden shared with his predecessor Donald Trump, most observers on the two sides of the Atlantic seem to agree that both the planning and the execution phases of the withdrawal were botched.

Europeans in particular, including the ever-faithful US allies in the UK, complain about not having been adequately consulted or involved in the decision and execution of the withdrawal. Whatever the merits of this debate, it has inevitably led to fundamental questions about US foreign policy and its future trajectories. After four years of Trump, many in Europe are legitimately concerned. Old and by now familiar academic debates about Washington's priorities, credibility and handling of global affairs have resurfaced as a result.

The underlining question is: to what foreign policy tribe does Biden belong? Is he an optimist or a pessimist?

A realist or an idealist? A liberal internationalist or a nationalist? Is he a Wilson or a Roosevelt and if the answer leans towards latter, which of the two Roosevelts' are we referring to?

Unfortunately, such questions and comparisons will not take us very far. Conceptualisation can be useful to simplify complex issues; however, in the real-world, politicians and diplomats are seldom driven by concepts or ideology. What matters are the concrete problems they are confronted with and the available options they chose to pursue.

Some of these problems are expected, some are not foreseen and others still are unexpected and simply happen. Concepts contribute to the decision, sometimes they help to rationalise it *post factum*, but action in foreign policy, as in many other fields, is ultimately the result of a complicated balancing act, one that involves striking a balance between interests, values, capacity and context.

Riccardo Perissich, a former Director General of the European Commission, is Senior Fellow of the School of European Political Economy of the LUISS University in Rome.

The domestic context also plays an important role. The stronger the domestic consensus, the higher the probability that a government will be confident enough to take bold action and shoulder the risks. However, a government in trouble can also use bold action to recover consensus (as UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher did in the Falklands). Of course, there also is history's trump card: mistakes, the many cases when we misjudged the context, our strength or that of our adversary and as a result the outcome was not what we had originally expected.

Autocrats may have the leisure to act according to a plan or be driven by ideology, most often for the worse. Democratically elected leaders – even Donald Trump – do not have that privilege and are obliged to be pragmatic. This does not mean that all democratic leaders are similar, but that they resist being constrained in simple categories.

Some leaders learn from mistakes, others do not. Some, like Churchill and De Gaulle, are propelled to leadership by events. Others surprise us; few were prepared to bet on German Chancellor Helmut Kohl or Angela Merkel at the beginning of their mandates. At the end of the day, the real test is competence and consistency; which can only be determined by the results achieved over time. Former President Trump failed on both accounts.

When a perceived failure, or indeed also a success, concerns a great power such as the United States, there is also the irresistible temptation to interpret it

as a game changer, a turning point in history. For the never-the-samers, if the Berlin wall falls and the Soviet Union collapses, it is “the end of history”. If the US botches the exit from Afghanistan, it is “the end of the American century”. Short of a major war, even big events are seldom a turning point. Or, maybe the correct way to put it is that the wheel never stops turning; only the speed changes.

Two Roman senators meeting for a drink in the dramatic months that followed the overthrown of Nero, with three aspiring Emperors competing for the throne, may well have agreed that what they were witnessing was “the end of Rome”. In fact, the “real Roman century” was only about to start.

The debate about Afghanistan is strangely focused on the failure to “export democracy”. In reality we went there for a variety of reasons that varied over time. One of them, at some point and for some people, was to export democracy; but to be honest, we never really tried. The reason for the failure is not that democracy was not exported, but that we were there without a clear strategy.

What has happened in Afghanistan has probably damaged the US's reputation, which confines but does not necessarily coincide with credibility. Reputation concerns the past, credibility is what friends, foes and your own people expect you to do in the future and how confident they are that you will deliver.

In this respect, Afghanistan tells us very little about Biden's future intentions and ability to confront Russia in Europe.



Or about the much more complicated task of confronting China in Asia, from Taiwan, to technological decoupling and the complex relationship with actual or potential allies in the Indo-Pacific. If anything, it confirms that Biden is essentially a pragmatist that seeks to reconcile a divided country with the difficulty to confront a potential Chinese threat in a world that has acquired the habit of expecting too much from the US.

It remains to be seen how competent and consistent Biden will be and how capable he is to learn from mistakes. The test for his credibility will be the ability to convince partners as well as foes that the refocusing of his foreign policy priorities is an element of strength and not weakness. More importantly for us Europeans, how far will Biden be prepared to listen to our concerns and treat us as partners and not only as supporting actors?

Afghanistan may have been a blunder but so was the Bay of Pigs; probably a worse one. This did not prevent John F. Kennedy from being remembered for the masterful handling of the Cuban missile crises and ascend to the heaven of great statesmen. Not all Presidents have George H.W. Bush's privilege to faultlessly terminate the Cold War, achieve German unification, win the Gulf War... only to move on to lose re-election.

History is only beginning now.

8 September 2021

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy
Tel. +39 066976831
iai@iai.it
www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)

- 21 | 42 Riccardo Perissich, *US Credibility and the Afghanistan Withdrawal*
- 21 | 41 Jesse Colzani, *If you Can't Beat Them, Join Them: Should States Embrace Bitcoin?*
- 21 | 40 Smita Srinivas, *Industrial Policies for Health: The G20 Must Act Now*
- 21 | 39 Lorenzo Kamel, *Decolonising Knowledge: A Euro-Mediterranean Perspective*
- 21 | 38 Majda Ruge, *Six Principles to Guide EU Action in the Western Balkans*
- 21 | 37 Riccardo Alcaro and Nathalie Tocci, *Seizing the Moment: European Strategic Autonomy and the Biden Presidency*
- 21 | 36 Felice Simonelli and Nadina Iacob, *Improving the EU Policymaking Process: The Dos and the Don'ts*
- 21 | 35 Dario Cristiani and Silvia Colombo, *Making Sense of Italy's Renewed Economic Diplomacy Towards Libya*
- 21 | 34 Mustafa Çıraklı, *Can Confidence Building Measures Help End the Cyprus Deadlock?*
- 21 | 33 Luca Barana, Dario Cristiani and Asli Selin Okyay, *Beyond Stability: A United Libya will Not End the Migration Challenge for Italy and the EU*