



[Home](#) › [News and Events](#) › [News](#)

National Security Expert Simon Reich on the Afghanistan Withdrawal and U.S. Foreign Policy

By Lawrence Lerner

Sep 8, 2021

Simon Reich is Professor in the Department of Political Science and Division of Global Affairs (DGA) at Rutgers University–Newark. His research focuses on global political economy as well as numerous human, national and international security issues.

We sat down with Reich to discuss the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the broader issue of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

The events of August 26, in which American soldiers were killed at Kabul’s airport, were a final stain on America’s longest war. To what extent was this kind of violence expected?

The loss of life that day, 13 American soldiers killed while trying to assist innocent civilians, symbolically represents the terrible culmination of a war that many Americans have long since felt was no longer their war. But it has resurrected the apprehension that took us there in the first place: that Afghanistan is a breeding ground for terrorism targeting Americans. We have come full circle, from a terrorist attack on 9/11 to a terrorist attack against Americans and innocent civilians on the closing days of America’s longest war.

This act of violence was predictable. Once again Americans were caught in the crosshairs of an internecine Muslim struggle. But we should be clear: While Americans may have tragically died, the underlying motive for the attack was to undermine a nascent Taliban government that was targeted by ISIS and other fractions of the (former) Taliban who think that, unbelievably from our perspective, they are not radical enough. American troops were, sadly, collateral damage in a historic war between two factions of Islam in which we are targets because we are interlopers. But, more immediately, the event itself presages the possibility of the complete collapse of Afghanistan in the months ahead, for whom the victims will be a vulnerable population only seeking peace in one of the poorest and most ecologically threatened countries in the world.

“We have come full circle, from a terrorist attack on 9/11 to a terrorist attack against Americans and innocent civilians on the closing days of America’s

As you mentioned, the U.S. went into Afghanistan a month after 9/11 for counterterrorism reasons—part of the neoconservatives’ pre-emptive war doctrine—and stayed 20 years to attempt nation-building. What are your views on this?

I believe that you can effectively divide the failures of American strategy into at least three discernable periods. The first, and arguably the shortest, one was the counterterrorism initiative. My criticism here was not the motive, the attack on the World Trade Center, nor the objective, to undermine the Taliban, but rather, the means of its execution. A full-scale military invasion has

longest war. "

become the default American military response (from Grenada or Panama to Afghanistan and Iraq). The U.S. military is exemplary at war-fighting, but it is not well-trained as an occupation force, nor does it want to be one.

And occupation was the second stage?

Yes, a long-term and costly one that resulted from classic "mission creep." Occupations like that have historically ended up taking one of two forms: old-fashioned exploitative colonialism or a more modern form of expensive nation-building. American policymakers chose the latter in Afghanistan.

But I believe, perhaps controversially, that the nation-building process does not amount to the longest period of the American occupation. It is hard to put a date on it, but if pushed I would say we moved to a third stage about a decade ago during the Obama Administration, a stage best characterized as damage control. With a relatively small military force, augmented by NATO partners, we could stay in Afghanistan and deny insurgents the possibility of using Afghanistan as a staging ground for terrorist attacks in the U.S. or Europe.

So, we were then stuck there.

Well, the paralyzing concern about the consequence of leaving, the fear of the unknown, became the driving conundrum of three administrations. In the end, it was the American public's impatience about a "never-ending war" rather than any strategic calculation, that broke the gridlock.

What could the U.S. have done instead?

The U.S. could have tried a variety of tactics short of invasion: counterinsurgency, arming proxies, and cajoling the Pakistani government's support more. They might even have been able to negotiate a deal at the outset for the Taliban government to turn over the Al Qaeda militants. Instead, embracing America's classic muscular foreign policy, military forces embarked on an easily winnable conventional war without preparation for winning the peace. And as any well-informed historian could tell you, an occupation of Afghanistan was doomed from the start. It has been known as the graveyard of empires.

President Biden has long wanted to shift U.S. resources toward domestic needs, while maintaining the original counterterrorism effort from outside Afghanistan. Your thoughts?

Discussion of the need for domestic renewal has been a prevalent theme that predated even the Trump administration. It's what is commonly termed "internal rebalancing" in the lexicon of geopolitics. Prescient books began appearing after the 2008 financial crisis about the need to invest in the U.S. so that we would generate the necessary resources to conduct foreign policy more effectively. The Biden administration has simply been more explicit about that need and more tangible in terms of actual programs. America's infrastructure, from bridges to roads and public

transport, is in shambles compared to its European allies and Chinese competitors. America's R&D advantages have shrunk, measured in terms of things like patent production, and our industrial capacity has been diminishing for the last several decades. There is no doubt that government has the capacity to address some of these shortcomings. The Eisenhower administration built the modern highway system. But even these huge government packages only represent a fraction of the amounts needed if American economic capacity is to be restored.

But there has also been a relevant foreign policy reorientation. There is no doubt that the pendulum began to swing away from engagement in the Middle East and South Asia in terms of foreign policy under the Obama administration, as America's attention and forces began to rebalance away from Europe and towards Asia. That process continued under Trump. In that context, the notion that we can effectively conduct counterterrorism efforts against the Taliban at distance, what is often referred to as "over-the-horizon," seems more like a fig leaf to assuage critics than a well thought out military strategy at this point.

“A full-scale military invasion has become the default American military response. The U.S. military is exemplary at war-fighting, but it is not well-trained as an occupation force, nor does it want to be one.”

Do you think Biden's shift of priorities means a shift in the U.S.'s grand strategy?

When you look at grand strategies, it is always important to distinguish between areas of continuity and those of change. Before he became the director of the CIA, William Burns penned an important piece in which he said that America faced a choice between restoration, retrenchment or reimagining a new role in the world. President Biden's rhetoric has focused on restoration, of American global leadership. That is what he means when he says, "America is back," and some of his actions have been consistent with that theme, like rejoining the Paris Climate Accords and several multilateral organizations. This represents a clear departure from his predecessor, but Biden has also continued elements of Trump's retrenchment strategy, notably in the withdrawal from Afghanistan. He had the option of reversing that decision and rejected that choice. Beyond the tragic consequences

for the people of Afghanistan, this decision to enforce the Trump-negotiated agreement has sent a clear message to American allies in Asia and Europe: that the United States is an unreliable partner who may abandon them when it suits the U.S. This has clearly undermined American credibility and, thus, created a legitimacy crisis.

The same surprising pattern of continuity between the two administrations is also true when it comes to issues like regulating the flow of people. Under Biden we have, sadly, seen little change in the administration of migrants seeking asylum on the Southern border, and Europeans, mystifyingly, still aren't allowed to travel to the U.S. even if they have been fully vaccinated. These are early days for the Biden administration. But as yet, the reinvention that Burns called for is in short supply. Perhaps we will see it in one of the most critical domains: addressing climate change. More likely, I anticipate that we will continue to see a fluctuation between a strategy of restoration and retrenchment for the duration of the Biden administration as America reorients its global position.

What do you make of Trump's 2020 deal with the Taliban?

I don't believe that there was much strategizing in this realm by the Trump administration. I think that it made so many concessions in their deal with the Taliban that the American position was driven more by the exigencies of domestic electoral politics than by any sense of geostrategy. Trump had promised his supporters that he would put an end to never-ending, costly wars. And he was intent on delivering on that electoral promise, whatever the long-term cost to the United States in terms of regional influence. I can only imagine that the Chinese and Russians must have been both amused and bemused by Trump's lack of foresight – if not by the withdrawal than by the terms and ill-preparedness of the withdrawal. Like in so many domains, finding rationality in the Trump administration's foreign policy strategy was always hard because of the perennial discord between his political leadership and the military services' efforts to sustain their characteristic global commitments. But the decision to withdraw was Trump's alone, a high-profile area where the military had no discretion.

What could Biden have done differently to mitigate what we saw in Afghanistan over the last few weeks?

The Biden administration made two key errors. The first was that he allowed insufficient time to repair an asylum system that had been severally damaged by the Trump administration. This made the processing of Afghan asylum claims far more problematic. As has been argued in recent articles, Trump's chief immigration policy advisor Stephen Miller spent years planning for and executing the dismantling of the system for the processing of Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) for Afghan interpreters and embassy staff. Biden plunged ahead without repairing it first.

The second error was the lack of preparedness for the evacuation of those who have been approved. The Ford administration, for example, set up a number of receiving centers in places like Guam to house evacuees, although even that had its shortcomings as many were left behind. But this effort has looked far more chaotic in the case of Afghanistan. New arrivals are now even being temporarily accommodated at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey. Claims by officials that they have been telling Americans to leave for months cannot hide the failings at safeguarding our friends and allies who need to flee Afghanistan. I spoke to one of my students this week whose sibling worked for

American forces, and can't even get near the airport in Kabul, let alone flee the country. Greater long-term planning and processing would surely have assured that fewer people were left stranded there.

Thanks for taking the time to speak with us.

Thank you.



POLITICAL SCIENCE

DIVISION OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Department

Division of Global Affairs

Political Science

Related News

All News

Senior Nuralhoda Elsaid Looks to Address Inequities in Global Education

May 24, 2023

Senior Shakee Merritt Encourages Political Participation for Gen Z

May 8, 2023

Senior Tonanziht Aguas Eyes Public Policy Intent on Helping Others

Mar 17, 2023

