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“Rogue Nations” and “Failed States”: America Doesn’t Know the Difference



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

It would be easy to blame Donald Trump for the disarray in the transatlantic alliance, but twenty-five years of American exceptionalism is the real culprit. The aggressive expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the Clinton and Bush administrations over the objections of our West European allies began a period of discontinuity that still exists. Bush deepened the disarray in 2002 with his “axis of evil” speech that set the stage for the invasion of Iraq. Bush and Barack Obama considered Afghanistan the “good war,” which brought two full decades of chaos throughout

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Southwest Asia. President Joe Biden contributed to the fault lines within the transatlantic alliance with his failure to consult our allies on the Afghan withdrawal.

A constant feature of the disharmony between the United States and Europe is Washington's obsession with the use of force against so-called "rogue" states in the Third World. The past five U.S. administrations, including Biden's, don't know the difference between a "rogue" state and a "failed" state. The hegemonists in the Bush administration were obsessed with the notion of rogue states, the so-called "axis of evil" that included Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Then-Senator Hillary Clinton supported Bush's rhetoric by emphasizing that "every nation has to be either with us, or against us," which channeled such Cold Warriors as the Dulles brothers in the 1950s or the brothers Rostow and Bundy in the 1960s.

U.S. and Israeli military force has created havoc the world over. The removal of Saddam Hussein led to the creation of the Islamic State; Israel's invasion of Lebanon led to the creation of Hezbollah; U.S. intervention in Afghanistan led to the Haqqani and Hekmatyar networks and greater violence; the use of force in Libya in 2011 led to chaos in North Africa. U.S. wars since 9/11 have cost trillions of dollars and have led to tens of millions of refugees, which has fostered dangerous nationalism in European politics. There have been thousands of U.S. combatant deaths in the wars since 9/11, thousands of severely wounded survivors, thousands of suicides by veterans and active-duty personnel, and tens of thousands of civilian fatalities.

If decision making had been left to the professional military, the United States would not have gone to war in backwaters such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, where more than 60,000 Americans died. Our "best and brightest," paraphrasing David Halberstam, sent us into those godforsaken places. It is typically civilians who believe that military force can solve geopolitical problems; general officers often know better.

Conversely, the Pentagon has become too prominent in decision making in part due to the vacuum of power created by the decline of the Department of State and a generation of weak Foreign Service Officers. Ryan Crocker served as ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Kuwait; he is a competent bureaucrat. He is also an excellent example of the State Department's irrelevance. He argued in the *New York Times* that our Afghan withdrawal was due to a lack of "strategic patience." A twenty-year commitment to a Southwest Asian country with no strategic relevance to the United States wasn't good enough for Ambassador Crocker. (In a *Washington Post* oped, George Will similarly called Biden's decision "wobbly" and "impulsive.")

Crocker argues that in 2001 the “Taliban chose to fight instead” of handing over al Qaeda’s leadership. In actual fact, the turning point in Afghanistan took place twenty years ago when we allowed Osama bin Laden to escape from Tora Bora because of the Bush administration’s deceitful preoccupation with Iraq and its unwillingness to allow Taliban representation at the Bonn Conference in 2001. When members of the Taliban surrendered, we imprisoned them at Bagram and Guantanamo, instead of coopting them for a possible future role in an Afghan government. U.S. administrations have lied to the American public ever since about the war effort. We’ve been negotiating secretly with the Taliban with one foot out the door, yet Crocker didn’t realize until recently that the Doha talks were not “peace negotiations,” but “surrender talks.” We lost, Ambassador Crocker. Your charge that Biden lacks the “ability to lead our nation as commander in chief” is outrageous.

Crocker’s unrestrained observations are matched on the military side by General David Petraeus who assured President Obama that our military mission was making progress in Afghanistan and continues to argue that the United States should have maintained a military presence there. Petraeus believes a policy that had the “Afghans doing the fighting on the front lines and the United States providing assistance from the air would have been sustainable in terms of the expenditure of blood and treasure.” Petraeus fails to recognize the limits of the Afghan military (which folded rapidly) and the role of airpower in dealing with an insurgency, often killing more civilians than combatants.

Petraeus concludes that a continued U.S. presence would “roll back some of the Taliban gains in recent years.” This is the same four-star general who told the Bush and Obama administrations that the Taliban were merely “accidental guerrillas” who would eventually realign and join the Afghan government. The inability of the Pentagon to recognize the Taliban’s discipline and cohesion was central to our failure in Afghanistan. Crocker and Petraeus are perfect examples of the hubris that got the United States into a feckless twenty-year war; yet my favorite neocon, Robert Kagan, was given three pages in Sunday’s *Washington Post* to argue that hubris played no part in getting us into Afghanistan.

I don’t recall Ambassador Crocker or General Petraeus ever citing the CIA’s torture regime in Afghanistan; the civilian deaths from our drone strikes; the narco-state that Afghanistan became under the Karzai regime; or the incredible corruption that dominated life in Kabul. General Douglas Lute, who coordinated strategy for Afghanistan in

Obama's National Security Council, got it right: "We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan. We didn't know what we were doing."

Sadly, the bungled U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan puts the Biden administration on the defensive, assuring a continuation of a military psychosis that will stymie efforts to reduce the U.S. military presence overseas or the use of force, let alone the bloated U.S. defense budget. The continuation of Bush's "global war on terror" will hinder bipartisan congressional efforts to repeal the authorizations in 1991 and 2002 to use force against Saddam Hussein's regime and to limit the war powers of the White House. Congress also must reexamine the 2001 authorization to greenlight the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda, the legal foundation for hostilities against multiple terrorist organizations. The chaotic withdrawal operation complicates these tasks.

Finally, U.S. national security officials must learn the difference between rogue states and failed states. The use of military force against failed states such as Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya typically finds the United States fighting without allies, let alone an allied government. Genuine experts on Iraq at the State Department and CIA were pessimistic about the war effort because they knew that Iraq was a house of cards and that the removal of Saddam Hussein would bring down the entire apparatus, which is what transpired. Biden's critics are already treating the Taliban as heading a rogue state, although its leadership has no interests beyond its own borders.

European security officials have had greater tolerance for the ayatollahs in Iran or the Islamists throughout the Middle East and often argued against U.S. use of force in their failed states. But successive U.S. administrations have pursued the notion of "perfect security" ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. U.S. leaders mendaciously hide their decision making failures from the American public and exaggerate threats to justify policies that rely on increased defense spending and use of force.

Vice President Joe Biden warned President Barack Obama in 2009 not to get "boxed in" by the military. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be anyone in his administration to encourage President Biden to stop the "forever wars" of the past thirty years. A single suicide bomber should not stop the United States from debating the mistakes that were made in using force in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, Cold War warriors in and out of government are already arguing that the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan allows the United States to direct its planning and materiel toward countering Chinese power across Asia. Cold War hysteria remains alive and well.

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