

Review of: "American Mission in Afghanistan: Geopolitical Interests, Strategies and Reasons of Failure"

James I. Matray Matray¹

¹ California State University, Chico

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Article Review

James I. Matray

California State University, Chico

Manoi Kumar Mishra in his article "American Mission in Afghanistan: Geopolitical Interests, Strategies and Reasons of Failure" describes U.S. policy over the last half century toward Afghanistan and assesses its impact. This is a very long time period that requires fuller coverage in a book-length account. Warranting greater criticism, Mishra's presentation is poorly organized and his analysis is consistently vague. "The manner in which the War on Terror was forged and executed followed by insufficient attention to state-building drive," his main thesis holds, "indicates that the predominant motive behind the US-led Afghan mission has been geopolitical rather than humanitarian." This "geopolitical thrust of the Afghan war," Mishra further contends, "blinded the US as to formulation of proper strategies of war and peace, strengthened insurgency, kept the Afghan state weak, enhanced civilian casualties and prolonged its stay." Few scholars would argue that the Bush administration had a humanitarian motive for waging the war in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Mishra repeats the well-known reasons for the U.S. failure in Afghanistan, but his attribution of these errors to a fuzzy notion of "geopolitical thrust" does not add any new insights on this American foreign policy disaster.

A major weakness of this article is flawed and imprecise prose. Mishra fails to add marks to close quotations, inserts extraneous words in sentences, and changes tense. There are many sentences excessive in length. "Resource potential of the Central Asian region following the Soviet disintegration which was much publicized in the 1990s," the author writes in but one example, "received quick reaction from American strategists to make way for the great power's overriding influence in the region by exploring and supplying untapped natural resources through alternative pipeline routes which could end Russian monopoly over and Iranian potential to provide transit facilities for energy supplies." Sentences typically lack clarity. "Volatile geopolitical landscape and socio-political scenario," Mishra writes in ending his article, "provided the necessary inputs into and thrust to the American withdrawal from Afghanistan during the Biden administration precipitating the country into an anarchy." At times, the author writes sentences that virtually defy comprehension. For example, "George Bush though in the initial years of his Presidency wanted to steer clear of Clinton's era excessive commitments outside, post-9/11 restored US's aggressive primacist vision."

Mishra claims that after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in early 1989, the nation became "vital to American

strategic ambitions” but provides no compelling evidence to support this conclusion. It may be that U.S. leaders saw Afghanistan as occupying an important geographic position in Central Asia, as the author contends. However, there are no references to evidence demonstrating that the George H.W. Bush administration placed a high value on Afghanistan to gain access to energy resources in Central Asia (which at the time was still part of the Soviet Union) or sought a military presence there to check the regional ambitions of Russia, Iran, and China. Typically, Mishra makes the vague claim that “the geo-strategic location of Afghanistan was vital to allow the US to develop multidimensional strategies based on ocean as well as land.” At another place in the article, the author writes that “[t]he Trump administration pursued specific policies,” but never describes what these were. He also refers erroneously to “George Bush Jr.”

After his introductory comments, Mishra begins with a brief description of the competition between the Nixon administration and the Soviet Union to control access to oil resources in Central Asia. Then he suddenly shifts his focus back 1953 to explain how the Joint Chiefs of Staff at that time concluded Afghanistan had little or not strategic importance of the United States. A failure to maintain chronological order constitutes another central weakness of this article. For example, the author describes the George W. Bush administration’s initiation and conduct of the war in Afghanistan but then completely jumps over the Obama administration to discuss President Donald J. Trump’s shifting policies regarding the conflict. As a result, it is quite jarring when Mishra introduces ISIS without having provided any historical context. Late in the article, he returns to the period of Soviet occupation in the 1980s to stress how foreign occupation united divided Afghan ethnic groups. These are prime examples of how the article lacks analytical coherence.

Mishra is consistently critical of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The United States worked with Pakistan, he explains, to support Muslim resistance to Soviet occupation in the 1980s, which resulted in the development of an illicit drug trade in the nation and the emergence of narcoterrorism in regionally. Also, it encouraged a civil war in Afghanistan in the 1990s that facilitated the U.S. plan to use the nation as a bridge for access to energy resources in Central Asia for itself and its allies. Mishra claims that the United States was pursuing geopolitical interests other than access to oil, but never states what they were. Instead, he describes U.S. plans during the Clinton administration to build an oil pipeline through Afghanistan that would require protection, thus providing justification for the real goal of projecting its military power into the country. “The US,” he contends, saw “the Taliban a stabilizing force helping to advance its geostrategic interests by assisting with the laying of the . . . Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) pipeline bypassing Iran and Russia.”

Allegedly paving the way for the war in Afghanistan was the Clinton administration’s pursuit of a “New World Order” that would “ensure [U.S.] primacy through pushing the ideas like democracy and human rights.” It therefore turned against the Taliban because of its suppression of individual liberties. However, the Bush administration placed its policy emphasis on “geostrategic interests rather than humanitarian concerns” and this provided “the background to intervention.” “The US,” the author argues, “decided to intervene in Afghanistan when the Taliban indicated it was moving away from Washington’s sphere of influence . . .” And then, “to legitimize its long-term presence, the US resorted to the language of humanitarian intervention and provided humanitarian justifications, so the removal of the repressive Taliban regime was provided as the rationale of the war and provision of a stable and democratic state capable of securing rights of women as well as ethnic and religious minorities . . .” Rejecting “the policing and extradition options on which

international law is based,” Mishra claims, the United States in seeking to capture and punish the terrorist group violated Afghanistan’s territorial integrity, which guaranteed a long and failed military engagement.

Mishra faults the United States, as have many other observers, for not engaging in a deep analysis of its war aims or developing an exit strategy prior to invading Afghanistan, as well as shaping the perceptions of the American people about the war “to hide the dark side of this misadventure.” It never cultivated the support of Afghans who viewed the Americans as occupiers, resulting in rising popular support for Taliban. The U.S. top down approach gave no account to the interests of rural and tribal people, who rejected the legitimacy of the incompetent and corrupt government that the United States put in place in Kabul. Mishra also criticizes the United States for forcing the Afghan government to buy only U.S. goods, but never explains why this was a mistake. “Difficult terrain, porous boundaries, and difficulty in understanding native peoples’ languages and cultural dissimilarities,” the author explains in repeating a well-known argument, “have impeded the American fight against the Taliban.” He points out that in the “asymmetric warfare” in Afghanistan, U.S. enemies were able to “mingle with civilians and they can even enter the territory of some other states from where they can wage war.” What Mishra does not explain is why U.S. leaders failed to anticipate confronting the same challenges that led to the American military disaster in Vietnam.

Mishra does provide perceptive analysis of how shifting U.S. policy from one administration to the next was a central reason for the failure to achieve success in Afghanistan. “President Barack Obama,” the author writes in one of his frequently long sentences, “replaced the counterterrorism strategy of the Bush era with a counterinsurgency strategy (COIN) by inducting more troops to the Afghan theater and focusing on capacity-building of Afghan security forces as well as on winning the hearts and minds of local people.” However, this strategy failed because the Afghan government, “propped up by external forces, was unable to muster unalloyed loyalty from its security personnel.” Meanwhile, popular hostility to it grew in response to rising civilian casualties and mounting unemployment. The Taliban skillfully exploited this situation, “tapping into nationalist feelings and creati[ng] employment opportunities by running a shadow economy—production and trade of opium.” U.S. efforts to destroy the drug economy only alienated Afghans, playing into “the Taliban’s narrative of fighting against foreign occupation” and tapping “into Pashtun conservatism, which is embedded in the notions of national honor and pride and defending the country from foreign occupation at any costs.”

Following an Obama administration that shifted from a policy of trying to reconcile with the Taliban to toughness in attempt to defeat it, the Trump administration elevated a pattern of uncertain and inconsistent Afghanistan policy to a new level. Mishra describes how Trump not only remained on the offensive against the Taliban, but increased U.S. opposition to Russia and Iran, spurning possible collaboration in pursuit of a diplomatic settlement. He also retained Obama’s policy of withholding aid to Pakistan until it took stronger and meaningful action to combat terrorism. Instead, this only encouraged Pakistan to do the exact opposite. This approach, Mishra convincingly argues, put the Trump administration in a very weak position. It would explain why Trump suddenly shifted course and began pursuing a negotiated end to the U.S. presence in the country. And so, the Trump administration would set the stage for the disastrous U.S. departure from Afghanistan.

Mishra’s research is no more than adequate, while his limited citation of sources in the text is episodic. Although

his coverage of how the United States often changed course abruptly in seeking a successful policy in Afghanistan is enlightening, this positive contribution is the exception rather than the rule in his article. His primary thesis holds that “overriding geopolitical interests . . . shaped the American commitment to the vision which remained inconsistent and fragile.” But this argument misses the centrality of Al-Qaeda’s terrorist attack on the United States in motivating initiation of the war in Afghanistan. Mishra makes plain his belief that the U.S. military invasion was not just a mistake, but illegal, ignoring support for it from the United Nations and the participation of many other nations in fighting it. Moreover, he claims that “the US had ulterior objectives apart from taking on terrorism, a national security threat to America post-9/11.” Allegedly, the Afghanistan War was part of a secretive and sinister U.S. plan to establish its hegemony in Central Asia mainly to ensure control over energy resources in the region. The reality that Mishra’s article ignores is that without Al-Qaeda attacks on the United States of 9/11 there would have been no U.S. intervention in Afghanistan.