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

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

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

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May 13, 2023

Dr. Mishra addresses an important question regarding the foreign policy of the United States in the post-Cold War era, viz., what were the geopolitical interests of Washington in Central Asia, a region populated by the newly independent Soviet republics—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Because the American State Department considered Afghanistan as belonging to both South and Central Asia, these interests encompassed this nation as well. It is true, as Dr. Mishra points out, that some members of the diplomatic corps and armed forces sought an opportunity for the United States to establish, for the first time, a military presence in the region, thus filling a vacuum made by the withdrawal of Soviet personnel following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The establishment of numerous bases in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, and of two bases in Central Asia, one each in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, to support the war in Afghanistan fulfilled this demand.

The article, however, overstates the geopolitical interests of the United States in the region. When the Soviet Union withdrew its forces from Afghanistan in 1989, the United States lost interest in the country, since it was only relevant to American foreign policy as a place to win victories in the Cold War. Kabul only re-appeared on the American radar as a result of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States. Although American troops are still in Japan and South Korea after more than 70 years, no U.S. president promised a permanent presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbors. All U.S. forces vacated Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan in 2005 and the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan in 2014. The last American troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021. The American mission in Afghanistan was primarily counterterrorism, the goal being to drive al Qaeda from Afghanistan, where its leader, Osama bin-Laden, had planned and executed the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, landmarks of America’s economic and military power in the world. The funds provided to strengthen the country’s political system and economy were consistent with U.S. counter insurgency (COIN) doctrine, which says that if a government can win the hearts and minds of the people by providing basic services such as roads, water, electricity, education, health care and employment opportunities, it can defeat the insurgents. When the administration of Donald Trump received assurances from the

Taliban in the 2020 Doha agreement that they would not allow Afghanistan to be used again as a haven for terrorist organizations seeking to attack the United States, it set a date for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces, a pullout executed by Trump's successor, Joe Biden, within a few months of the date stipulated in the agreement.

Dr. Misha also correctly mentions the rich mineral resources of Central Asia and their geopolitical significance. Acknowledging this natural wealth, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave a speech in September 2011 in which she called for "a new Silk Road—a web of economic and transit connections that will bind together a region too long torn apart by conflict and division" (Clinton, 2011). She foresaw a time when highly populated and energy-starved Pakistan and India would have access to the rich mineral resources, including oil and natural gas, of the sparsely populated countries of Central Asia. The United States, however, is energy independent and a net exporter of oil and gas. The countries that have a direct interest in importing fossil fuels from Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia are China, Pakistan and India. China has a strong interest in building railways and electrical transmission lines through Afghanistan to connect Xinjiang with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan, an interest acted on in July 2022 when Beijing announced it was ready to support the implementation of transportation projects, including a railway, in Afghanistan (Devonshire-Ellis, 2022).

The geopolitical interests of the United States make South Asia much more important than Central Asia. As the 2022 National Security Strategy (White House, 2022) makes clear, the major threats to the United States are Russia and China, great powers intent on revising the international order and reducing Washington's hegemony in Europe and Asia. Beijing, states the strategy, is a far more potent competitor than Moscow. The most important countries in Asia, therefore, for U.S. interests are its treaty allies, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, and India, which together in partnership with the United States present a formidable deterrent to Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. Although Islamabad is no longer needed as an ally to contain Soviet Russia, Pakistan is far more important than Afghanistan for Washington because it is the second-most populous Islamic country and fifth-most populous nation in the world. It is also a major non-NATO ally in the global war on terror.

In short, the article does a service to students of international relations by forcing the reader to conceptualize U.S. interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia but greatly overstates their importance. Political and economic instability, the presence of Islamic terrorist organizations, the lack of infrastructure to facilitate access to the abundant energy resources of the region and China's desire to incorporate Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) highlight India's far greater geopolitical interests in the country. U.S. intervention in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 served India's interests, and Delhi was one of the countries most adversely affected by the American withdrawal.

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