

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 Manoj Kumar Mishra's "American Mission in Afghanistan: Geopolitical Interests, Strategies and Reasons of Failure" in Qeios (May 26, 2023)

This article offers a broad survey of US foreign policy toward Afghanistan from before the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979 until Washington's withdrawal in 2021. It attempts to answer the question: why did the US fail? Although the answer is somewhat vague, the article argues that the US' approach was too militaristic. The strength of the article is its sweeping coverage of US foreign policy. The weaknesses are some incoherence and insufficient development of key points, and the author grossly underestimates the impact of 9/11.

The first part of the article appears to cast US foreign policy toward Afghanistan as driven by Washington's quest to build oil pipelines through the country. It then abruptly argues that, since the US was not dependent on oil from Central Asia, the search for pipeline routes was to promote its "geopolitical" ambitions. The truth is that after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, the US had little interest in the country until 9/11. The paper's biggest flaw is discounting the traumatic impact of 9/11 on US foreign policy: "The US decided to intervene when the Taliban indicated it was moving away from Washington's sphere of influence." Without 9/11 and Al Qaeda, the US would have continued to ignore Afghanistan in the early 21st century. After 9/11, the US sought security and wanted to provide humanitarian assistance to a country that it had helped to devastate in providing huge arms to Afghanistan's anti-Soviet rebels in the 1980s.

The author correctly points out that difficulties initially began for the US in attacking a country in retaliation for 9/11 that was less responsible than a group within it, yet the Taliban government provided protection and support for Al Qaeda. The author insightfully lists the many reasons for Taliban successes over 20 years: its sanctuary in and support from Pakistan, the Afghan government's corruption, the Taliban's appeal to an Afghan history of resisting foreign occupation and to religion, and its control of the opium trade. The author discounts the Taliban's horrific use of terror, however. The truth is that a domestic system based on doling out money from foreign actors to largely city dwellers would fuel resentment from Afghanistan's vast rural poor. The US-backed government failed to implement a successful plan of economic development for the larger country.

Finally, the author implies the Taliban forced the US out. Instead, Presidents Trump and Biden chose to withdraw, and the Taliban had not even taken a provincial capital before the summer of 2021. The US negotiations with the Taliban had undermined the Afghans' willingness to fight, and the US withdrawal compelled the large number of private contractors

and other NATO allies to leave. In short, as a result of US actions, the Afghan government collapsed more than the Taliban led a successful revolutionary movement.¹

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Footnotes

¹ See Robert S. Snyder, "The Fall of Afghanistan: An American Tragedy," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* Vol. 34, no. 4 (2023): 747-758.