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Afghanistan, Failure and Second Thoughts

Photograph Source: Petty Officer 1st Class Chris Fahey – Public Domain

It is a country other powers simply cannot leave alone. Even after abandoning its Kabul post in ignominy, tail tucked between their legs, Australia is now wondering if it should return – in some form. The Department of Trade and Foreign Affairs has been sending out a few signals, none of them definitive. "We will not comment on intelligence matters," a spokesman for foreign minister Senator Marise Payne stated tersely earlier this month.

The spokesman was, however, willing to make general remarks about a belated return. When, he could not be sure, but Canberra's diplomatic arrangements in Afghanistan "were always expected to be temporary, with the intention of resuming a permanent presence once circumstances permit." Australia continued "to engage closely with partners,

including the Afghanistan government and coalition member countries." Rather embarrassing remarks, given the sudden closure of the embassy on June 18.

The Australian response, confused and stumbling, is much like that of their counterparts in Washington. While the Biden administration speeds up the departure of troops, the cord to Kabul remains uncut though distinctly worn. In April, the US House Services Committee was told by General Kenneth "Frank" McKenzie, head of US Central Command, that the Pentagon was "further planning now for continued counterterrorism operations from within the region."

Amanda Dory, acting undersecretary of defense for defense policy, also informed members that the Pentagon remained interested in considering "how to continue to apply pressure with respect to potential threats emanating from Afghanistan." Hazily, she claimed that the department was "looking throughout the region in terms of over-the-horizon opportunities."

Such window dressing does little to confront the situation on the ground, which looks monstrously bleak for the increasingly titular Kabul government. General Scott Miller, top US military commander in Afghanistan, clumsily admitted in June that, "Civil war is certainly a path that can be visualized if this continues on the trajectory it's on right now." The hasty withdrawal from Bagram airbase on July 2 certainly gave the Taliban much scope to visualize that fact.

Unceremoniously hung out to dry in the Doha agreement forged by the US and the Taliban, the frail and terminal regime has imposed a month-long countrywide curfew to address the vigorous onslaught. According to the interior ministry, the curfew is intended "to curb violence and limit the Taliban movements", though it would not apply to Kabul, Panjshir and Nangarhar.

The US Air Force has also made a dozen airstrikes in southern Afghanistan, concerned by the Taliban's push towards Kandahar, the second-largest city in the country. "The United States has increased airstrikes in support of Afghan security forces in the past several days," announced General McKenzie. "And we're prepared to continue this heightened level of support in the coming weeks if the Taliban continue their attacks."

Such actions are only band aid measures at best. The surrender of Afghan soldiers to the Taliban across numerous districts is inking the writing on the wall. The response from Kabul is that the Afghan army is behaving strategically, refocusing attention on protecting urban centres. In reality, they have lost both their mettle and the plot, with the Taliban in control of some 85 per cent of the country's territory, including critical border

checkpoints. As a reminder of their emerging dominance, ghoulish material such as video footage showing the execution of 22 elite Afghan commandos, trained by US forces, terrifies government soldiers.

But McKenzie is a picture of hope over experience. "The Taliban are attempting to create a sense of inevitability about their campaign. They're wrong. There is no preordained conclusion to this fight."

Other countries are also bubbling with concern, which, when translated into security matters, imply future interference. Russia, bloodied and bruised by its own Afghanistan experience, casts a concerned eye at the Taliban train. "The uncertainty of the development of the military-political situation in this country and around it has increased," stated Russia's grave foreign minister Sergey Lavrov earlier this month. "Unfortunately, in recent days we have witnessed a rapid degradation of the situation in Afghanistan." It was "obvious that in the current conditions there are real risks of an overflow of instability to neighbouring states."

Moscow shares, with Washington, a dark paternalism towards the country. While the Biden administration has shown less interest of late, Moscow is looking for reassurance against impending chaos. "It is the feeling in Moscow," reasoned Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the Moscow-based *Russia in Global Affairs*, "that the US is not able to, or even interested in, maintaining a presence in the region to guarantee any particular future direction in Afghanistan." The implications of this are ominous enough.

The emptying of the barracks does not put an end to the prying and meddling from non-Afghan personnel. The country will still host a myriad of special forces and intelligence officials. Excuses for maintaining some militarised footprint will be traditional: the threat posed by terrorism; the thriving opium trade. The contractor business will also boom. A Taliban victory promises a slice of violence for everybody, but so does the presence of this feeble Afghan government.

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