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Issue Brief

Two Decades After 9/11: The Liberal Security Community Lies in Tatters

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October 12, 2021

S*ummary*

Twenty years after the dreadful terrorist attacks on the twin towers, and an exorbitantly costly global war on terrorism that traversed numerous political and strategic agendas, the rules-based system that the liberal security community sought to secure through the campaign is in dire straits. Is an illiberal global order in the offing?

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There are umpteen instances in history when clichés make a resounding impact and create what could be a sense of *déjà vu*. That could probably be why adages like Afghanistan as the “graveyard of empires”¹ and the “new great game”,² the “end of history”,³ and the “post-American world”⁴ find resonance even 20 years after the 11 September 2001 attacks by the Al-Qaeda on New York’s Twin Towers. The aftermath of huge passenger planes crashing into the world’s most imposing buildings representing the American political and economic might was not just of seismic transformations in the global order but also a host of catalytic and cataclysmic events that came in quick succession and provided anything but stability and equilibrium to the global order.

The war on terror was launched by the Western democracies; the Af-Pak region became the global hub of terrorism, regimes run by autocrats and despots tumbled one after another through both military actions as well as popular revolutions followed by civil wars and ethnic strife in volatile Eurasian zones leading to the mass exodus of people and bodies landing up on Mediterranean shores. The mastermind of global Islamic terror was executed in a spectacular cross-border mission though the ideology he propounded grew into a theological octopus that continued to perpetuate through entities like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), and their ever-expanding tentacles like the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) or the Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).

Accordingly, the deep-rooted ties Taliban factions like the Haqqani network and the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) seem to hold with the ISIS and Al-Qaeda splinters might be an indicator that the Islamic Emirate that Taliban envisions in Afghanistan could be latently inspired by the templates propounded by the Emirs of IS and Al-Qaeda. Does this signify that the idea that propelled the 9/11 attacks continues to prevail, thrive and proliferate indomitably? Is it that the theological constructs they propagate have turned out to be too powerful for the great powers and their global alliances to take on? As mystifying would be the question of whether the return of the Taliban

¹ Akhilesh Pillalamarri, **“Why Is Afghanistan the ‘Graveyard of Empires?’”**, *The Diplomat*, 30 June 2017. Also see, Salma Ataullahjan, **“Afghanistan, ‘Graveyard of Empire’, Was Once Beautiful, Vibrant and Safe”**, *Policy Options Politiques*, 31 August 2021.

² Ameya Pratap Singh, **“The New Great Game”**, *The Indian Express*, 21 May 2021. Also see, Sushant Sareen, **“Afghanistan: The End Game and the New Great Game”**, *ORF*, 15 August 2021.

³ Francis Fukuyama wrote in 1989, “what we are witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or a passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”. See Francis Fukuyama, **“The End of History?”**, *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989).

⁴ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2008.

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to dominance, alongside numerous proscribed groups now masquerading as legitimate political forces, imply the grand failure of the 20-year-old campaign.

For, there has never been clear victors or losers in this global war wherein terror was met with more counter-terror and vice versa, thus pushing both state and non-state combatants into an unending spiral of violence and bloodshed, and a generation of battered collaterals scattered across territories. The vagaries of the violence were such that when the supreme leader of global Jihad was taken out in one corner, lone wolves emerged in copious numbers in another with anything from knives to cargo trucks as means of mass killing. When we witnessed the Levant emirate being driven out from his bastion in Syria, we also saw the flight of people from the same land and scores perishing in the high seas. While signs and hopes of a stable and progressive Afghan society kept emerging on the one side, they were contrasted by the sights of innocents being wiped out by misguided aerial strikes and many surviving residuals joining the ranks of either the Taliban or the global Jihad.

On the other hand, the war on terror launched by the George W. Bush Administration also entailed the attempt to restore American power and global leadership or reverse an impending decline amid a systemic shift from a unipolar character in the initial post-Cold War years towards greater polycentrism over a decade later. Thus, the political objectives of the campaign transcended the declared pursuit of terror masterminds and their supporting infrastructure in Afghanistan including uprooting the Taliban from power. Rather, it encompassed a wider politico-military doctrine against what was termed as the “axis of evil” and “rogue states”, thus bringing into the campaign an expanded grand strategic mission of wiping out despotic regimes and permeation of democratic order in volatile regions like West Asia, Af-Pak and even East Asia, though of course, determined by a selective pick-and-choose based on the power profile of the designated adversary.⁵ Hence, while Saddam Hussein of Iraq was a despot who needed to be removed in a region that had totalitarian regimes by the dozen, the mission to enforce a rules-based system also required a similar lopsided campaign against the “evil” regime in Pyongyang which too neighbours two authoritarian heavyweights.

Thus, it was a complex neo-conservative agenda that provided the dogmatic underpinnings for the 20-year campaign which resulted in trillions of US dollars spent down the drain along with thousands of lives lost, both of the crusaders and of the nations and societies that were to be supposedly “reformed”.⁶ To suit the broader political goals, the agenda had to traverse

⁵ For a discussion, see David Hastings Dunn, **“Bush, 11 September and the Conflicting Strategies of the 'War on Terrorism'”**, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 16, 2005, pp. 11–33; also see, Lewis Stott, **“The Iraq Invasion: The Neoconservative Perspective”**, *E-International Relations*, 17 September 2015.

⁶ **“Afghanistan: What has the Conflict Cost the US and its Allies?”**, *BBC News*, 3 September 2021.

beyond Jihad and conjoin an array of other emergent and enveloping threats which included weapons of mass destruction (WMD), nuclear proliferation, and any other variable that fitted in the “rouge state” classification. This broad canvas enabled the rationale for numerous military campaigns, as evident in the Iraqi mission ostensibly to halt Saddam Hussein’s march towards WMD capabilities, which, instead, resulted in a forcibly imposed democratic process and a consequent surge of Sunni extremism.

That global terror topped the list of threats that rankled the liberal security order and the community of Western democracies that championed its norms, only made it easy for a global coalition to be formed for the campaign.⁷ Albeit, it was clear that the mission had the larger goal of salvaging that same order that seemed to be crumbling under the weight of post-Cold War churning, and other great powers garnering strength on seeing the hegemon badly bruised. Though those were still early days of Chinese ascendancy and Russia still grappling with its post-Soviet tumults and travails, there was a distinct need for the liberal security community to use the opportunity to ensure that the post-Cold War and the post-9/11 world was purely centred on the same norms and rules-based system of their making.

Thence the irony today that the liberal security community seems to be in the midst of a hasty retreat, astounded at the way the international system is rapidly changing beyond their control, aghast at the way boorish and philistine guerillas have again floored the grand fighting machines, and clueless on how to resist the wannabe powers that are at their doorsteps.

The Great American Capitulation

The disgraceful exit of the world’s mightiest military from the besieged Afghan capital as the Taliban waited at the gates giving its eternal enemy an unchallenged thoroughfare, more or less encapsulates the sorry state of American statecraft—of a hegemon on the decline. Power-shift theorists usually describe such scenarios as representing a situation when an aspirant power challenges the reigning one, which, in the current context, could be about the Chinese efforts to take on and displace American hegemony. As bewildered the Biden Administration looks in the face of the Chinese surge, the meek surrender of the world’s powerful military before rag-tag insurgents and their asymmetric modes of warfare only adds insult to injury.

⁷ The liberal security community represents the group of liberal democracies with common security interests and whose membership is determined by liberal political and economic values. The US is the principal guardian and defender of a group of liberal democracies that self-consciously identify their security interests collectively on the basis of shared core values and an established history of cooperation. The community, most often, equate international peace and security with perceived threats to their interests and normative structures. See Glenn Chafetz, **“The Political Psychology of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime”**, *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 3, August 1995.

Notwithstanding all these realities, however, the actual crises for American power and grand strategy are not as much from the external challengers as they are from the muddled domestic political environment. That the idiosyncratic dimensions of Donald Trump's policies continue to jolt Washington's mandarins is best exemplified by the Afghan faux pas. Besides the pernicious damage done to American foreign policy leadership with his shambolic approach on vital areas like NATO affairs and the Iran nuclear deal, Trump's preference for demagogic populism in matters of grand strategy had taken things to exorbitance that even a seasoned President Joe Biden is finding it hard to reverse course. Trump's pompous announcement of timelines (May 2021) to withdraw troops from Afghanistan amid the presidential campaign, backed by an ill-conceived Doha deal made with the Taliban sans any credible oversight mechanisms, were legacies that Biden found too difficult to surmount.⁸ That Biden took the blame for the eventual messy withdrawal only illustrates the knotty position in which his Administration now operates.

That American grand strategy continues to be in disarray and that the ghosts of Trumpism still hang over the National Mall are evident from the anxieties and ambiguities that are visible both in the White House and Foggy Bottom. The promised resurrection of the US global leadership and the grand visions espoused soon after inauguration remains still-born as faltering policies seem to define the foreign policy decisions in the early months of the Biden Administration, be it in Afghanistan or the Indo-Pacific. If evident in the inability to make political gains from the ill-fated Afghan exit and the failure to comprehend the fall-out of the AUKUS deal⁹ in allied relationships are testimonies to the Administration's frail leadership acumen, the absence of a durable game-plan to revive the Iran nuclear deal only completes that long list of ineptitudes under Biden's watch. Whether it is the failure of a seasoned statesman struggling to find his feet in a feeble political environment or whether it marks the irreversible slide of the hegemon on the path towards absolute decline is the key puzzle that needs to be deciphered.

The Liberal Security Order in Crises

It should be on expected lines that the declining sway of the reigning hegemon will have its detrimental effect on the liberal security order that it reigns over. Trump's tomfoolery and policy vacillations had already made an impact on allies who had prepared to break out from the American umbrella when it came to securing their strategic interests. The decision by the European Union to engage the Chinese on its own terms sans Washington's influence, the South Korean forays to develop missile and undersea platforms, Japan's continuing orientation towards greater self-defence capabilities and the

⁸ Deirdre Shesgreen, "**Biden Faces Trump's Deadline on Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal: Any Way You Cut It, We Are Headed for a Messy Outcome**", *USA Today*, 17 March 2021.

⁹ "**Aukus: UK, US and Australia Launch Pact to Counter China**", *BBC News*, 16 September 2021.

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autonomous pathways sought by key allies in West Asia are all discernable expressions of how allies hold lesser confidence in the guardianship of the common security and strategic framework they together fostered.

The crises, though, is more ardent for the Western democracies that form the bedrock of the liberal security community as they see their eroding grip over the international system as imperilling the rules-based normative order and its perceived stability. At the root of their uneasiness is the enhanced leverage gained by the traditional outliers in the international system, which includes a rough assortment of totalitarians and illiberal democratic regimes, increasingly gaining a foothold in regions of interest (or concern). The loose coalitions formed by the likes of China, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and so on in the Af-Pak and West Asian matters have their inherent ramifications in the Eurasian landscape as was evident in their singular and joint interventions in many of the conflict zones, be it Syria, Iraq or Yemen.¹⁰

This augmented role-playing by the illiberal powers, often at the expense of the Western alliance, signifies not just the diminishing influence of the latter but also the reality of the so-called rules-based order coming under increasing stress from actors who prefer opportunistic deals over political accountability, humanitarian considerations or democratic values. Yet, the most ominous aspect of this transformed strategic milieu is that the traditional mantle of the omnipresent security provider is being increasingly taken over by the illiberal states with the Western democracies no longer able to foot the bill after two decades of drained spending. It is exactly into this matrix that China, flushed with its economic and military resources, seeks to carve out a space even as Russia provides the counterweight to American influence.

The effects of the illiberal coalition shaping the politics in the Eurasian frontlines will invariably affect the dynamics in the other theatres as well, mainly the Indo-Pacific, where the Quad is yet to gain a definitive shape and character beyond platitudinous statements and photo-optics. If anything, the controversial and seemingly divisive AUKUS deal points to the non-committal and unstable alliance dynamics that define the Quad framework and largely drives home the message of Indo-Pacific actors having to devise individual and mini-lateral arrangements to take on the Chinese rise and clout in the region rather than rely on a larger strategic formation that could take its sweet time to provide stability to the region.

For, at the heart of the matter is the complex conditioning wherein each member of the Quad has distinct and divergent approaches when it comes to dealing with Beijing, as the Chinese ascendancy creates a different set of issues for each one of them. If it is the challenge to its global hegemony that perturbs Washington, it is the dynamics in East Asia with a unique mix of

¹⁰ Hakim Almasmari and Asa Fitch, **“Yemen’s Houthis Seek Iran, Russia and China Ties”**, *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 March 2015; **“Syria Conflict: What Do the US, Russia, Turkey and Iran Want?”**, *DW*, 23 January 2019; James M. Dorsey, **“Fragile Big Power Ties Add to Uncertainty in the Middle East”**, *WION*, 19 June 2020; **“Astana Trio Turkey, Iran, Russia Pledge to Cooperate in Syria”**, *Daily Sabah*, 8 July 2021.

economic, territorial and strategic irritants along with the Chinese backing for Pyongyang's menacing behaviour that worries Tokyo. The border disputes, the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project that passes through disputed territory, trade imbalances and military and strategic support to Pakistan while ranking among India's core concerns, the Australians have, for their part, got into an intense slugfest with the Chinese over numerous differences which has transformed what was once a decent working relationship into a fiery rivalry. Few of these challenges can have a consolidated response through the Quad framework, which, in turn, makes the Indo-Pacific a fabled theatre of imponderables.

It is therefore not surprising that none of the Quad members has shown the inclination to go beyond symbolism and nominal military postures. The AUKUS deal, which has the potential to drive deep wedges in both EU and Quad relationships, however, also embodies this phenomenon of each player in the region seeking multiple pathways, whether through mini-laterals or singular approaches, to deal with the Chinese challenge. Beijing, in turn, has already girded its loins against the Quad and is now pushing the envelope further after the AUKUS deal as demonstrated in the provocative violation of Taiwan's air defence zone in recent days.

What Augurs the Global Order?

At stake is the core question that is in nuanced debate for the last many years: will the aggressive Chinese rise, its collaborative statecraft with other illiberal powers and the potential displacement of the US from its hegemonic supremacy transform the global order from its current rules-based and democracy-centric normative structure? And if so, what will be the character of the new order that would emerge from the current churning. While it might still seem premature for many to discuss the advent of an illiberal global order, the numerous catalytic events of recent years and the apparent decline of American heft in shaping global norms and structures might indicate that the international system is on the cusp of a major transformation.

Washington's withdrawal and diminishing roles in key conflict zones, its inability to develop potent ideas to take on China or shape the Indo-Pacific architecture, the much-touted Asia pivot remaining a non-starter and the propensity to alienate allies, or rather, the failure to foster concrete alliances, only confirm the fact that the predicted decline is real and happening. That the allies are also seeking autonomous paths to secure their strategic interests including some of them looking beyond "extended deterrence" for their self-defence could only aggravate this conditioning further. While the French protest against AUKUS could be among the many signs that the liberal security community is falling apart, there is also increasing scepticism on Biden's ability to either restore the US global leadership or give muscle to the liberal order. With Donald Trump preparing to stage a dramatic comeback in the next few years, the catalyst for illiberalism could, in fact, start from the American soil itself.

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