

Afghanistan as the Great Game victim

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Eric Walberg

Afghanistan has shaped my career as teacher, writer, journalist, peace activist. It is the central issue of both the collapse of communism or 'real existing socialism' as the Soviets modestly called it, and of the final stage of US empire. Watching the maneuvering of the great powers (the US is really the only 'great' power, but we can suppose China is becoming one, though its role in Afghanistan is still minimal, only as investor) and the regional powers (Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran) is like a reality game show. The great game analogy sees it in three parts, [three distinct phases](#) during the past two centuries.

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I have been asked to address the role of the great powers and regional actors in post-occupation Afghanistan. Indulge me for a few moments to address the question in light of the current campaign by the only 'great power' against a country that looks surprisingly like Afghanistan, at least from a geopolitical and economic perspective -- Venezuela.

At the moment, the chess board activity is in Venezuela. It is enduring what we may call the latest 'colour revolution'.

Massive street protests followed disputed elections□ in Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, and led to the resignation or overthrow of leaders considered by their opponents to be authoritarian. The NED (created by Reagan to do publicly what in Cold War days the CIA did covertly) is a key funder, trainer, supplier.

The US shocked the world (apart from its obedient 'allies' in western and central Europe) by recognizing a minor Venezuelan opposition figure and unabashed US-worshipper, Juan Guaido, as de facto president, and threatening to invade and overthrow the popularly elected government, after inflicting two decades of subversion and economic warfare, all in violation of international law.

The western media screams against the legitimate government in Venezuela, claiming the world is against Maduro. This is patently untrue. I am grateful to Switzerland, not only for inviting me to this important meeting of minds, but for standing up for international law, like most of the world (Asia, Africa, the sensible European and Latin American countries). We could do a quick calculation, but offhand, I would estimate that of the world's 7.5b people, governments representing 85% support recognizing the legitimate government (some insisting on mediation and possibly new elections), and despite the screaming and distorted media coverage of Venezuela in the West, probably half of the citizens in the other 15% agree. So maybe 10% of the world wants to see Maduro overthrown.

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Yanina Welp, Latin America director at the Centre for Democracy Studies (ZDA) in Aarau and co-director of the Latin America Centre at the University of Zurich made the telling point to [SwissInfo](#) last week that in Venezuela at present ‘geopolitical interests weigh heavier on the international chessboard than economic interests.’ That the only solution is an election organized in agreement with both the government and the opposition. Any other will be authoritarian and/or violent.

I cannot speak for the Taliban, but I’m pretty sure they are looking at Venezuela and seeing Afghanistan in 2000-1. Afghanistan was not a pushover and a colour revolution would not do the trick. As Zalmay Khalilzad points out in his memoirs *The Envoy*, plans to invade Afghanistan were well underway by 1999, when ZKh was busy coaxing ex-king Zahir Shah to become the

patragar

to ‘mend Afghans’ broken dishes’. The US was still negotiating with the Taliban on an oil pipeline, even inviting some representatives to Texas, hoping a dose of America would bring them around.

It didn’t work, so the plans to invade went ahead. It was the centrepiece of the “grand strategy” laid out by PNAC (Project for a New American Century) in 2000, calling for the US to maintain its unrivaled superpower status. This required a “new Pearl Harbor” to justify launching preemptive wars against suspect nations that were immune to NED tricks (after Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Somalia, Libya, Sudan, Iran and Yemen).

9/11 happened just in time to proceed with the PNAC plan to invade. ZKh tapped Afghan exiles (California solar engineer Ishaq Shahryar was fundraiser) and unveiled the face of the new new Afghanistan in Rome in November 1999, where Zahir Shah blessed their (and the State Department’s) plan for a new Afghanistan. ZKh insists that the US must maintain its overwhelming military position, and be prepared for more Middle East invasions, "in particular Saudi Arabia," if the oil-rich Shia eastern area erupts.

Venezuela - Afghan redux

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This all looks eerily like what is happening to Venezuela now. A cultural clash with the empire, an ambitious attempt to create a socialist state (Islamic state for Afghanistan - neither of which the US can abide), a plan by the US to extend its geopolitical and economic control over a strategic spot on the chessboard, the plan including boycott, economic war against a starving population, subversion.



As I told Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland on February 18 during her Family Day reception (she is my MP), this is a replay of the US conspiracy to overthrow Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973. 'Is this what you want?' She dismissed this as 'apples vs oranges' and turned and walked away, calling me a Putinist.

She told Masha, a young Ukrainian immigrant, that the situation was like Maidon (Kiev), the 2014 coup against the legitimate Ukrainian government (second Orange revolution), which is absolutely true. Masha told me/her how Ukrainians as unhappy, not only with the current post-coup, pro-US government there, but Ukrainians bitterly regret the collapse of the Soviet Union, when they could travel freely in the Soviet Union, and their lives were secure, their general living standard far better.

Of course Freeland LIKES the mess Ukraine is now in thanks to our meddling. She and western politicians in general are blind to what the common folk think. I ask you to imagine what Venezuela would look like after a US invasion or just a US-backed insurgency. But then you can tell me what hell Afghanistan has been through after a similar invasion, or Chile in 1973, or Ukraine since the 2014 coup. Zealous promoters of US-style democracy like Freeland couldn't care less.

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The great game is not for the faint-hearted. The Venezuelans can see their future -- if the US gets its way -- in the travail of the Taliban and the Afghan people -- the prospect of two decades of civil war and tragedy. That can only make them more determined to keep the gringo at bay.

De jure, de facto, de facto...

So I hope that my comparisons help you understand just what the Taliban expect and why they insist on direct talks with the invader. From a strict legal point of view, the last legitimate Afghan government was the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the leftist organization, founded in 1965, which took power in 1978 (yes, in a coup, but legitimate enough to be recognized by all, even the US). The last president was Mohammad Najibullah, who was assassinated while under UN protection in 1995. After a falling out of the mujahideen, the Taliban became the de facto rulers of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, though only officially recognized, with embassies, by states Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Pakistan.

The US invasion in 2001 created another de facto government under US patronage which became the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2004, again maintaining the UN seat and gaining broad official recognition.

Except for the Taliban, who insist they are still the legitimate government of their Emirate. Are they likely to give up? Does it look like it after miraculously maintaining their legitimacy among many (most?) Afghans after 18 gruelling years of resistance? [Their website](#) says otherwise.

What is the reality today? Afghanistan has been turned into a secular western-style nation state, where there is little morality inspiring people (no religion, please), where

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billions of ‘aid’ have disappeared and after two decades, life is arguably worse than even in the 1990s. Certainly worse than it was under the PDPA, for all its bungling. Any Afghan I meet who is old enough to remember, tells me, ‘Najibullah was the best leader we ever had.’

Again, I can’t speak for the Taliban, but I’m pretty sure right now they are following what their invader and avowed enemy is doing right now in the world, and is rooting for the Bolivarian Venezuelans, Venezuelans who are inspired by the morality of social justice, the Christian equivalent of a society governed by Islamic law.

Afghanistan was supposed to be simple. Poof! The Taliban just disappeared and the US set up shop. But then the Taliban resurged. The strategy for the US to hold on was Vietnam-style counterinsurgency, but that didn’t work then or now. Despite their bungling, they are still respect when compared to the current crop of politicians.

What to do? There is only one way out now for Trump. Do a Nixon: negotiate, declare victory, and leave. The Taliban haven’t budged on their terms. They demanded direct talks with the US only to arrange their departure. Only then will they talk to the current ‘government’. This was their position 18 years ago, and they would be crazy to change at this point.

That is essentially what Nixon did in 1975 for Vietnam, though he carried out carpet bombing in Laos and Cambodia at the very end, hoping to cow the Vietnamese. The US is still dropping bombs now in Afghanistan, recapitulating that war crime.

An entertaining film about all this is The Interview, a 2014 American action-adventure black comedy where the CIA uses a popular comedian that the

North Korean leader enjoys watching, in a scheme to assassinate the leader.

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The Hollywood film of course has a happy ending with the collapse of North Korea, but there are some telling lines. The comedian (Seth Rogen) asks the CIA agent -- a honeypot: How long are you guys going to keep bombing and destroying countries to bring democracy? 'As long as it takes.' So Rogen asks: Why do you keep doing it when it doesn't work? 'It's what we do.'

What post-occupation scenario awaits Afghans? The world?

There will be a settling of accounts with the US-installed regime. The current Northern Alliance-based government (the ANA is sarcastically dubbed the Army of the Northern Alliance) will not just disappear, but it will not have an easy time finding a place. Vietnam was liberated in 1975, suffered isolation, victimized by the loser, but survived and is now thriving, no thanks to the 'great powers'. Most Vietnamese stayed, however difficult it was to adjust, and they all take pride now in their hard-won victory.

Like the Vietnamese, the Taliban will never accept a pale, secondary role in a US-installed government. And western-style elections will never be the magic bullet to a happy ending. Elections are so easily rigged, and must be carried out under socialist and/or Islamic governance.

In the first place, a truth and reconciliation commission. Canada can share our experience with our native peoples.

Consensus, traditional tribal meetings, the advice of respected elders, civil society organizations -- this is the way to overcome the sorry legacy of the occupation. The Northern Alliance-based government must resign and accede to a non-coloured political world. There will no doubt be many Afghans who will look to a future in the West, just like the Vietnamese and Venezuelan elites, who looked to the US for guidance and could

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not abide losing luxuries and privilege to allow the broader public to benefit from the oil wealth.

Great game fallout

The other famous example of a tradition of US invasions that sort-of succeeded but then soured is of course Cuba. It was occupied many times, until Castro succeeded in defying the US (only thanks to the then-superpower USSR). More than a million Cubans took up residency in the US, fussed and fumed, but finally ran out of steam. Iran is the Islamic equivalent. Their roads are rocky, but they have managed to prevail.

The US is a hard taskmaster, but it is not the same country it was 70 years ago, when the Monroe Doctrine was de facto international law. The 1940s was the era of the last 'successful' invasions -- of Europe, Japan and Korea. The rich US was able to give them the royal treatment, helping turn them into successful satellite capitalist states.

Those days are past. Trump knows that, and more than once has proposed dismantling NATO, pulling troops out of Europe and Korea, beginning the painful dismantling of empire itself, turning attention to the US to deal with the many crises there.

Time for a new New Deal

