

Kabul 2021

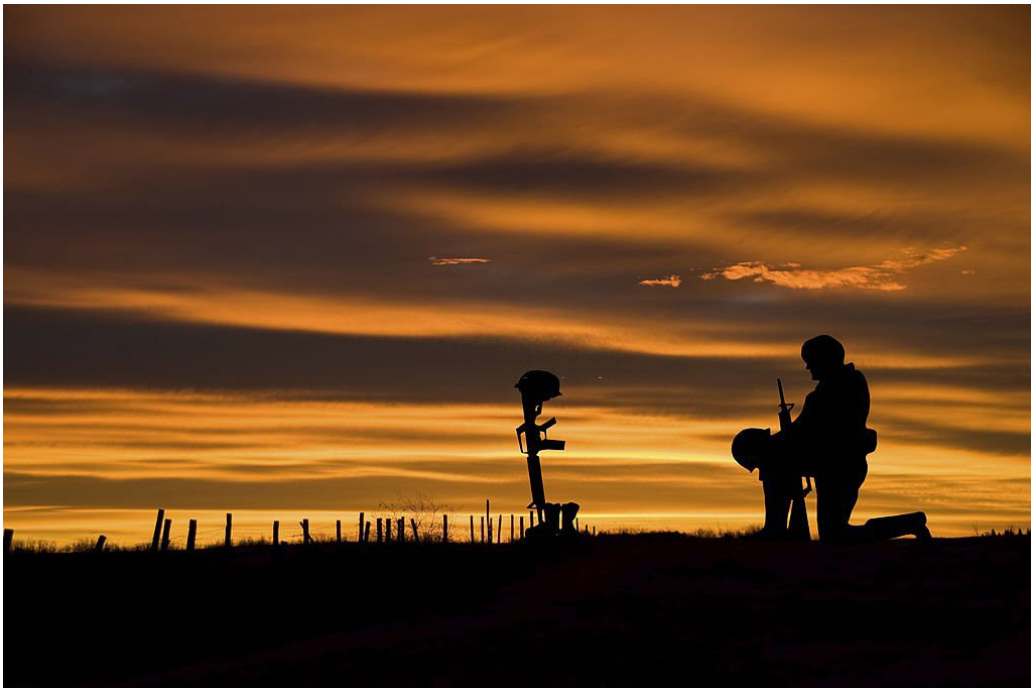
Our Generation's Saigon and the Future of America's Military Focus

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The soldier reading these pages would do well to reflect on the wisdom of the statement exhibited in a Japanese shrine: "Woe unto him who has not tasted defeat." Victory too often leads to overconfidence and erases the memory of mistakes. Defeat brings into sharp focus the causes that led to failure and provides a fruitful field of study for those soldiers and laymen who seek in the past lessons for the future.

—MAJ GEN Orlando Ward, US Army, Chief of Military History



August 2021 will go down in history as marking a new beginning in the future of American foreign affairs in the twenty-first century. The fall of the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban seizure of Kabul sparked reminders of North Vietnamese Army tanks breaking through the gates of the presidential palace in Saigon, April 1975. The parallels of American helicopters lifting off the embassy in Saigon and the helicopters rescuing Americans from the

embassy in Kabul called to mind a stark similarity that seemed almost too real to imagine. The scenes of Afghans clinging to the wheel wells of American C-17 transports as they lifted off from Hamid Karzai International Airport and falling to their deaths from hundreds of feet as the overloaded planes ascended into the sky lit up our Twitter and Facebook feeds. These scenes reminded us of the South Vietnamese hanging on for dear life to commercial airliners at Da Nang as the communist North Vietnamese Army closed in for final victory. The disaster of America's closure of its Afghan experience was just as humiliating as any other great power's adventure there, and now time will tell what the total consequences of our leaving will bring.

The countless human rights strides that the International Security Assistance Force was able to secure will now be ripped away from the people that our society and our allies have sacrificed both blood and treasure. With the Taliban in control, a sharp increase in terrorist activity and sanctuary will be readily available, reversing the gains made by the 73,438 American, Afghan, and Allied forces who lost their lives in Afghanistan over the past 20 years.¹ The Taliban takeover has sparked not only an increase in terror cultivation but also leads to the plausible possibility of Afghanistan becoming a narco-state.² Although the American forfeiture will sting in the hearts and minds of most Americans for years to come, the other international consequences may be more than many Americans are prepared to bear.

A Test of National Wills

The will of Americans to fight on behalf of their allies and partners will now be called into question. Just as with Washington's post-Vietnam geopolitical retreat in the face of Soviet proxy expansion, American reliability will be calculated and tested. As Kabul fell and Americans sipped their iced lattes in outrage, the government in Taipei watched in fear, looking east at the Chinese powerhouse which may very soon miscalculate the resolve of the United States to defend its commitments and the future of democracy in Asia. The great-power struggle between the United States and China will undoubtedly increase in complexity with the withdrawal from Afghanistan, which tarnished the American reputation. The pain of the defeat in Afghanistan will fade away as the months and years go by, shrinking in the short memories of Americans and their inflammatory media apparatus. Political divide and the domestic COVID crisis will retake the stage, followed by a new round of political turmoil surrounding the midterm elections that will increase the divide among Americans.

However, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Central Military Committee in Beijing would be unwise to seize the moment to fulfill their long-term

dream of reuniting the mainland to the rebel province of Taiwan. The military and strategic impact of the American departure from Afghanistan will go beyond the destruction of basic human rights for Afghan citizens. The PLA will continue to take a note from Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, which stipulates, "Winning a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the best possible outcome. The best is to subdue the enemy's troops without ever engaging them on the battlefield."³ The political and economic competition that the PLA wages upon the Americans and US allies across the world continue to leverage the strategy of creating hesitation and disunity among the West, while the Beijing moves to win its localized information joint operational goals. The common voice among the politburo in Beijing exhausts the narrative that Americans are impatient people and are more prone to fight among themselves than confront China's offensive. The reassurance that the People's Republic of China (PRC) provides to its rouge province in Taiwan that America will not come to its rescue was immediately reiterated after the Fall of Kabul when Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the state-controlled *Global Times*, said on Twitter, "After the fall of the Kabul regime, the Taiwan authorities must be trembling. . . . 'Taipei officials need to quietly mail-order a Five-Star Red Flag from the Chinese mainland,' he tweeted, with a smiley-face emoji. 'It will be useful one day when they surrender to the Chinese army.'"⁴ Randy Phillips, a former CIA officer who worked in China, said, "There is no doubt that the Afghanistan debacle represents a major hit to U.S. credibility and will only further strengthen the belief in the Chinese leadership that the U.S. is a declining power and a paper tiger. The risk of miscalculation in the South China Sea just went way up."⁵

Counting the Costs

The miscalculation and breakdown of regional deterrence caused by this perceived American weakness may lead to a confrontation that neither America nor China wants, and neither can control. The danger here is believing that America will hesitate to respond to an invasion of Taiwan by the PLA, coupled with the American belief that US military capabilities in the Pacific will be sufficient to deter and defeat a Chinese attack. The political consequences upon the administration may also entail a stiffer response because of comments made by critics after the fall of Afghanistan to prove strength in the face of aggression. The genie may indeed be taken out of the nuclear bottle once a situation becomes untenable, with very few options to put it back inside.

Counting the costs of Afghanistan will include the necessity of re-establishing Washington's credibility among US allies and partners in the twenty-first century's center of strategic gravity, the western Pacific. A renaissance in military thought like the post-Vietnam doctrinal revolution now has a motivation with a weight of

memory like Southeast Asia's: Afghanistan. The scenes of our route from Kabul should inspire a new generation of American military leaders who may make a pledge similar to those of Colin Powell, Don Starry, Norman Schwarzkopf, Chuck Horner, and John Boyd following America's defeat by the communists in Southeast Asia—to never fight another Afghanistan again. Let us hope for a newly revitalized and conventionally focused military designed to defeat the PLA in our time in the air, on land, at sea, in space, and in cyberspace. The consequences of hubris now, just as in 1975, will occupy debate for the foreseeable future. Let us hope that our strategic shift can reposition the US military to provide a reliable and survivable deterrent against a PLA invasion of Taiwan. America will get back up, dust itself off and carry on—it always has. For our junior officers, we must take this moment to share new ideas instead of memes, to think about how we will dominate the battles of tomorrow instead of how we will win our next fantasy football league. Ultimately, we must focus on how we will fight and win America's wars that may lurk around the next corner.

A Renewed Focus

A renewed focus should be placed on the integration and cooperation between United States Forces and our Pacific allies and partners, which are highly trained, motivated, and well-equipped to face the PLA threat. In particular, the development and modernization of Taiwanese Armed Forces will be paramount for Taipei to defend the island, whatever the cost may be, to demonstrate resolve to Beijing that China's reunification effort will be too costly and uncertain to attempt.

As a joint force, we must refocus on a great-power confrontation mind-set in which the future enemy maintains an economic, military, and technological parity that creates an uncertain outcome if both sides clash in a force of arms. The lessons of history and a deep analysis of pivots in military realities are required to prepare for our next adversary. We must not fail to retain what we have fought and bled to learn within the dangerous doctrinal development of counterinsurgency, but we must build a force to match the strategic threat we currently face within the context of great-power competition. Examining great conventional thinkers like Ariel Sharon, Matthew Ridgeway, Omar Bradley, Chester Nimitz, Carl von Clausewitz, Helmuth von Moltke, and Sun Tzu—as well as thorough understandings of the great campaigns that shaped the many revolutions in military evolution—are now required. Studying the collapse of France in 1940 is a critical start for modern war fighters to investigate why the Allies were defeated—despite all the odds against German Panzer divisions—and the price a nation may pay when allowing complacency and hoping for peace. Understanding and applying the lessons from Plan D to the great sickle cut and spearpoint breakthrough in the Ardennes Forest

can assist our joint force in innovating new methods for dealing with the contemporary forward edge of the battle area in the Taiwan Straits and Eastern Europe.



Hope is not a planning tool.

—Mark August

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Notes

1. Ellen Knickmeyer, “Costs of the Afghanistan War, in Lives and Dollars.” *AP News*, 17 August 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-afghanistan-43d8f53b35e80ec18c130cd683e1a38f>.
2. Soumyodeep Deb, “The Rise of Taliban and Its Security Implications,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 27 August 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2752879/the-rise-of-taliban-and-its-security-implications/>.
3. Sunzi, *The Art of War*, trans. Michael Nylan (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020).
4. “Chinese State Media Rips U.S. over Chaotic Afghanistan Exit,” *NBC News*, August 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/>.
5. Ibid.

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