



Afghanistan: Learning from History?

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ABSTRACT

Policymakers could have concluded from Britain's three wars in Afghanistan and the Soviet defeat that the Americans were likely to be defeated there too. It is mountainous, poor and turbulent. Even successful invaders have found it ungovernable. The British imposed their foreign policy requirements on the Afghans, but then quickly withdrew. The Russians installed a Communist puppet, but withdrew after a long war against determined Muslim guerillas. Afghanistan descended into civil war until the Taliban imposed their version of law and order. America began with a stunning victory, ejecting the Taliban who had backed Bin Laden's destruction of the Twin Towers in New York. But after twenty unsatisfactory years they too withdrew and the Taliban returned. Three old lessons were reconfirmed. Liberal interventionism – the attempt to reengineer someone else's society by force – very rarely works. Policies of counter-insurgency rarely work either. Pouring aid into a poor country raises expectations, but raises corruption even higher. But the lessons need to be applied critically, not blindly.

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KEYWORDS:

Interventionism; Counter-insurgency; Aid; Afghanistan

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Braithwaite R. Afghanistan: Learning from History? *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2022; 2(3): 2, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.56>

INTRODUCTION — “THIS TIME IT WILL BE DIFFERENT”

As the Russians were going into Afghanistan in December 1979, a senior official is said to have reminded Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko of the trouble the British got themselves into when they invaded the country a century earlier.

“Are you comparing our gallant Soviet warriors with those mercenaries of British imperialism?” Gromyko responded furiously. “No, no, minister, of course not,” the official replied hurriedly. “The soldiers are quite different. But the mountains are the same”.

Governments can be like adolescents. Their judgements are often coloured by wishful thinking and a belief in their invulnerability. They very rarely listen to advice, but have to learn for themselves. Some are quicker and better at it than others.

But a knowledge of the history can illuminate the mistakes of governments not only with the benefit of hindsight, but at the time or even before they are committed. America’s defeat in Afghanistan was foreseeable by anyone who was paying attention, and who had bothered to look at the Soviet war in the 1980s or Britain’s three Afghan wars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

THE BACKGROUND

Afghanistan’s modern rulers have always faced four main tasks: to preserve a semblance of national unity; to preserve the independence of the state from the depredations of outside powers; to modernise their country; and to stay alive.

The last has been the most challenging. Between 1842 and 1995 seven of Afghanistan’s leaders fell victim, whether to family feud, palace coup, mob violence, revolution, or outside intervention. Over five more were forced into exile. Others prudently abdicated while the going was good.

The country these individuals fought to control is extremely poor, sparsely populated, and ruggedly mountainous. In places, it is impassable, with its considerable mineral resources barely exploited. Afghans are devout and occasionally fanatical Muslims, divided between Sunnis and Shias. They fight bitterly among themselves, within and between families, tribes, and ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras.

Outsiders sometimes maintain that Afghanistan is not a real country at all, that it is too fissiparous, too unwilling to submit to central direction, too prone to disintegrating into dissent and rebellion. Past Afghan governments nevertheless held it together reasonably well. Their methods have never been pretty: a combination of bribery, ruthlessness towards the weak, compromise with the powerful, keeping the Muslims in balance, and leaving well alone. Such methods may not have been what the West would regard as good governance. But they worked.

Because Afghanistan stands at the crossroads of ancient trade routes, it has always attracted the attention of neighbouring predators despite its poverty. Its foreign policy has primarily consisted of distancing itself from one predatory rival in return for a guarantee of security from, and a large bribe to, the other. In terms of deterring invasions, this is a policy that has often failed. The course of history shows a country that is frequently successfully invaded.

But while the invasions are often successful, the subsequent occupation of the country has never been equally so. Despite their domestic quarrels, Afghans are almost always willing to unite against foreigners. They may have disorderly military methods, but Afghans are good at dying for their country and at fighting for it effectively. The invaders have usually preferred to cut their losses and pull out. That has always been Afghanistan’s ultimate defence.

THE BRITISH LESSON

Contrary to myth, Afghanistan was not the grave of the British Empire. Though it embroiled the British in three unsatisfactory wars, British policy towards Afghanistan was a qualified success. They quickly learned that the imperial formula that worked so well in India would not work in Afghanistan, and sensibly settled for their minimum objective, a monopoly of Afghan foreign policy—a goal they sustained for eighty years.

Underlying Britain's interest in Afghanistan was the fear that a rival power, like Persia, France, or Russia, might use Afghanistan to steal their Indian empire away. Their solution was to install their own puppet first. They defeated the Afghan army in 1839, but their own force was massacred by irregulars as it attempted to return to India. They sent a new "Army of Retribution" to revenge the humiliation. It sacked Kabul and hanged the notables in the market place. Honour satisfied, the British then sensibly withdrew. Their puppet Shah Shujah was murdered, but his successor, Dost Mohamed, agreed to consult them in matters of foreign policy.

Before their next Afghan war, the British had defeated the Sikhs and annexed the Punjab, a chunk of Sikh territory around Peshawar which had formerly belonged to Afghanistan. The Afghans never accepted the change. It involved the British, and in due course the Pakistanis, the Russians, and the Americans, in a great deal of trouble.

Disorder in Kabul led to a fraying of the British tutelage. To reassert it, the British returned in 1879. The main body of their army was successful, but a large detachment was badly mauled at Maiwand in Helmand province. Once again the British devastated Kabul, hanged a lot of people, and withdrew.

Abdur Rahman emerged from the chaos. He agreed with the British to keep the Russians out in exchange for material and political support. A brutally effective ruler, he set up the rudiments of a modern state bureaucracy, modernised his army with the help of the British, and struck a skilful balance between them and the Russians.

This cozy arrangement lasted until 1919. With the Indian army deployed to fight in World War I, Rahman's grandson Amanullah invaded North West India in the hope of recovering the Punjab. The British expelled him. But they were running out of imperial steam and agreed to give up their hold on Afghan foreign policy.

Amanullah was a reformer. He established a Council of Ministers, promulgated a constitution, decreed a series of administrative, economic and social reforms, and unveiled his queen. He thus angered religious conservatives and provoked a rebellion. In 1929 he was chased into exile in Italy.

His grandson Zahir Shah reigned from 1933 to 1973, the longest period of stability in Afghanistan's recent history. During his rule, further reforms were made, including an elected parliament, the introduction of political parties, some freedom of speech and votes for women. The emancipation of women was a notable achievement, with women attending university, work unveiled as airline hostesses and receptionists, as announcers on Kabul Radio, and as diplomats at the United Nations. Inevitably, Zahir was also overthrown, by his cousin Daud in 1972, and also took flight to Italy.

Daud continued the reforms. By now Afghanistan was reasonably secure, with a substantial army and the bureaucratic paraphernalia of government. Foreigners and the tiny middle class who lived in the big cities later looked back on this time as a golden age. But for the vast majority little had changed, and at its core the system remained the same combination of ruthlessness, compromise, and decentralisation it had always been.

THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION

The story long persisted, and perhaps still persists, in the West that the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979 in order to threaten the West's oil supplies, to acquire a warm water port, or to incorporate the country into the Soviet Union, and that they were chased out in 1989 by a bunch of gallant mujaheddin guerrillas armed with little more than Kalashnikovs and Stinger missiles supplied by the CIA. Such a narrative is almost entirely mythical.

By the 1930s, the Soviet Union was Afghanistan's most important commercial and political partner. After the Second World War, Zahir and Daud manoeuvred successfully between the Americans and the Russians. The Americans were first persuaded to build a large irrigation project in Helmand province, but then became distracted by Vietnam, so Afghanistan looked to the USSR. The Soviets increased their provision of loans, grants, training, and technical and military assistance. Large numbers of young Afghans went to the Soviet Union to further their education.

These delicate balancing acts were derailed when the Afghan Communists overthrew and killed Daud in April 1978. The Soviets were taken by surprise, though they naturally had to welcome this addition to the Socialist bloc. The new rulers announced that they would leap direct from feudalism to a prosperous, just society, giving land to the peasants, food to the hungry, education to all, and freedom to women so that they should no longer have to live shut up like pets in their homes. They would move before the landlords and the mullahs could stop them. If that meant taking short cuts on the way, so be it.

But they were deeply split between two factions. The first faction, from the city, held Nur Muhammad Taraki as President, and the second, from the country, followed Hafizullah Amin the Prime Minister. In their impatience to establish control, they turned to terror. First, it was used against others, then against one another. When the Russians advised moderation, they retorted that what had worked for Stalin would work for them. Soviet officials compared them to the murderous reign of Pol Pot in Cambodia.

The Communists were never welcomed by the Afghan people, not least because of their attacks on Islam. In March 1979, an army unit mutinied in the provincial capital of Herat, and was backed by the locals. The government panicked, and asked the Russians to send troops.

But the Soviet leaders were clear: the central role of religion, the low standard of literacy, and the backwardness of the economy all meant that Afghanistan was not ripe for revolution. Any attempt to impose it with Soviet bayonets would lead straight into a quagmire. So they told Kabul to sort Herat out for themselves.

That they did. But revolts continued to break out all over the country, and the murderous strife within the Afghan Communist Party got even more vicious. In September 1979, Amin had Taraki murdered, took sole control, and stepped up the terror against his opponents both inside and outside the Party.

By now Andropov, the head of the KGB, had convinced himself that the Americans had recruited Amin when he was studying in New York, and that he was on the verge of switching alliances. A small clique around the senescent Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, concluded that Amin would have to be ejected by force.

The Soviet military were aghast. The Chief of Staff, Nikolai Ogarkov, told his civilian bosses that a military intervention made no sense. He was slapped down. The Defence Minister told him it was not his place to teach the Politburo its business. He should do as he was told.

On 27 September Amin was killed by the Russians in a special forces operation and replaced by their puppet, Babrak Kamal. But even before this, the 40th Army had begun to cross the frontier. It was an improvised force of about eighty thousand conscripts, its officers trained to fight sophisticated armies in Germany and unprepared for the infuriatingly unorthodox Afghan way of war. The Russians' limited aim was to train the Afghan security forces to defend the regime, and then leave.

But they soon discovered that large numbers of Afghans were entirely unwilling to accept an atheist Communist government backed by foreign troops. Just as the Soviet military had feared, they got bogged down and kept in Afghanistan for the next nine years. Their attempts to negotiate a settlement at the UN were consistently frustrated by the Americans. The war in which they now found themselves was a brutal matter of small-scale raids, ambushes, roadside bombs, and air strikes, with appalling atrocities committed by both sides. The mujaheddin rebels fought with practised skill. Their simple weapons were generously supplied over the mountains from Pakistan, supplemented by sophisticated weapons from the CIA. The Russians fought with ferocity, matched by willingness to take casualties. They won most of their battles. But they never had enough troops to hold their ground, and when they withdrew, the rebels moved back.

When the Russians entered Afghanistan, Soviet "socialism" was still seen as a model in some parts of the developing world. The Soviets had brought Soviet style law and order, economic and agricultural development, and higher education (including for women) to their Central Asian republics. The idea that they could help the Afghans construct a modern society was not wholly absurd. Their civilian advisers, many speaking the language, fanned out across the country, and got on well with the Afghans, with many of their projects proving successful. It did not take long

for them to learn that there was little point in going against the grain of Afghan society. They advised the Afghan government to abandon the idea of rapidly making the country “socialist”. Even despite the stress of war, Kabul was still a flourishing and vibrant place when the Soviets left, where women could play—and were playing—an increasingly substantial role. Nostalgic Afghans would later say that they had lived better under the Russians than they did under the Americans.

But by the time Gorbachev came to power in 1985, Soviet public opinion had turned against the war, as the body bags piled up at home. The military were clear that they could hold territory, but only as long as their soldiers remained. Otherwise eighty percent of the country was dominated by the rebels. The Soviet Chief of Staff told Gorbachev in 1986, “We have lost this war.” Gorbachev was anxious to leave as soon as possible. But the Americans were anxious to hold their opponents’ feet to the fire. And he faced the dilemma that all face when they try to disengage from an unsatisfactory war. A million Soviet soldiers had passed through Afghanistan. Thousands of them had died, said Gorbachev, “and it looks as though they did so in vain.” There is a widespread belief that portable anti-aircraft missiles provided by the Americans, called Stingers, enabled the mujaheddin to turn the scales. It is a myth. The Stingers had no impact on Gorbachev’s decision-making: he had already decided to withdraw before the first Stinger appeared on the battlefield. The Stingers were an inconvenience to the Soviet airforce, but little more: the Russians rapidly modified their tactics to meet them.

Despite deliberate foot-dragging by the Americans, Gorbachev managed to negotiate a withdrawal deal by 1988. The Soviet forces departed in an orderly fashion, with bands playing and flags flying. The details were agreed in advance with the Afghan authorities and the rebel commanders, so there was a bit of fighting, but not much. They were gone by February 1989, little more than nine years after they arrived.

Soviet occupation was replaced with a competent government under Mohammed Najibullah, a former Communist and secret policeman who reinvented himself as a Muslim patriot. He had a substantial army, armed with fairly modern Soviet equipment, with many of its officers having been well trained in the Soviet Union. This was the army that had fought alongside the Russians adequately, if not brilliantly, and despite its weaknesses, it continued to fight on its own against the rebels for more than two years after the Russians left. But throughout this period, it depended on supplies of Russian food, equipment, and ammunition. After Najibullah was overthrown in 1992, the Russians cut these off, and the mujaheddin leaders turned on one another. Orderly government disintegrated, and Kabul was practically destroyed in an atrocious civil war.

The Soviets failed in Afghanistan because their force was too small to hold the ground; they were unable to seal the frontier with Pakistan; their opponents received massive foreign aid; and the governmental and popular will collapsed inside the Soviet Union. Most Afghans were determined not to accept the transformation of society which the Russians had to offer. A Russian commentator summed it up: “We tried to teach the Afghans how to build a new society, knowing that we ourselves had failed to do so [in Russia?] Our army was given tasks which it was in no position to fulfil, since no regular army can possibly solve the problems of a territory in revolt” [1].

He was right. Much the same lessons could have been drawn from the British experience. You can invade Afghanistan, you can defeat Afghan armies, and you can negotiate workable arrangements with the authorities. But if you stick around for too long, the Afghan people will turn against you, and you will find yourself having to pull out.

FIASCO

A new force now arose in Afghanistan: the Taliban. Backed by Pakistan, they defeated the remnants of the mujaheddin and took over the country. They were welcomed by many ordinary people as good Muslims who brought law and order after the appalling chaos of civil war.

But in 2001 the Twin Towers in New York were destroyed by a group of terrorists, largely Saudis directed by their countryman, Osama Bin Laden, whose Al Qaida terrorist network was headquartered in Afghanistan. When the Taliban refused to hand him over, the Americans

invaded, toppled them and chased Bin Laden out of the country. Their campaign was brilliantly effective: but it depended as much on Afghan allies on the ground and small contingents of American special forces on horseback as it did on the sophisticated weapons at which the Americans were so adept.

The Americans then had to decide what to do next. There were two alternatives. One was to pull out, warning the Afghans that they would be back if the terrorists returned. The other was to stay, to help rebuild and modernise the country, in the belief that turning Afghanistan into a modern state (whatever that might mean in practice) would prevent it once more from becoming a base for international terrorism fuelled by Islamic fundamentalism.

The Americans decided to stay. Hamid Karzai, a courageous but comparatively minor Pashtun grandee, was parachuted into office as president. He did not live up to expectations. Rather than help create a democratic modern government in Afghanistan, he adopted the traditional Afghan methods of government: nepotism, compromise, bribery, and the occasional threat. But he lacked the ruthlessness of his more brutal and effective predecessors, earning only the contempt of his own people and his American sponsors.

Aid money poured in, backed by innumerable expensive consultants and official experts, few of whom had much understanding of the way Afghanistan worked. Much of the money went on fees to the foreigners or as bribes to local officials. Much of the rest was spent on ill thought-out projects which failed to deliver.

Many well-meaning volunteers arrived too, with strong ideas about rights for women, good governance, and sustainable agriculture. Despite their courage and dedication, they found it hard to accept that most Afghans had their own firm views about religion, the role of the family, the position of women, and the right way to conduct everyday affairs, and that they had no intention of abandoning them at the behest of another bunch of outsiders.

At first the Taliban lay low. But they began to make their presence felt in 2006, just as NATO deployed its “International Security Assistance Force”. The British chose to go to Helmand, forgetting that this was where they had been roundly defeated during the Second Afghan War. The Afghans remembered and assumed that the British were coming to take revenge.

The Taliban offensive rapidly gathered pace. They performed a succession of attacks on police posts and suicide bombings in markets, quickly making it clear that the American-led occupation was going disastrously wrong. Generals came and went, reinforcements surged in and out. But, in tones eerily reminiscent of official voices in Saigon as the Vietnam war turned nasty, military spokesmen continued to insist that the occupation was on its way to success.

President Obama came to office determined to end what was becoming an open-ended commitment. In 2011 he announced that most American forces would leave by 2014: the Afghans would then take over responsibility for their own security. His unhappy generals argued that he was inviting the Taliban simply to wait out the American departure and invite Al Qaeda back to threaten America.

In 2013 an American think tank said bleakly that the American government “has not laid credible plans for the security, governance, and economic aspects of Transition. It has not made its level of future commitment clear to its allies or the Afghans, and it has failed dismally to convince the Congress and the American people” [2]. Inevitably, the withdrawal went ahead. The domestic need to win votes at home won out against broader foreign policy goals. This withdrawal was continued—and accelerated—under President Trump, who took office in 2016. American forces were steadily reduced from 10,000 in 2011 to 2,500 by the end of 2020. Without consulting the Afghan government, President Trump agreed with the Taliban that by May 2021 they would all be gone. President Biden delayed that date by three months.

The Americans and their allies then scuttled off in unplanned, humiliating disorder, abandoning the Afghan children, the professional people, and above all the women who had trusted their promises of a better life. Adding insult to injury, Biden said: “Afghanistan political leaders gave up and fled the country. The Afghan military collapsed, sometimes without trying to fight” [3].

One thing Afghans can do without any Western training is fight for something they believe in. The Taliban did. The attempt of Western allies to deflect the blame onto the very people

that they had put in place and trained for twenty years was not only peculiarly unattractive: it showed that they never got to grips with the basic problems.

WHY DID WE GET IT SO WRONG?

It all went wrong because of a central flaw at the heart of Western policy. The policy rested on the idea that Al Qaeda could be eliminated if we destroyed the Taliban and reengineered Afghan politics to ensure that the country never again became a base for Islamic terrorist groups. But Al Qaeda have shown that they can operate effectively from many bases. Some of the worst terrorist atrocities have been planned and mounted from within the West. The most effective means for dealing with that are good intelligence, good police work, and the occasional use of unorthodox military force. That does not require boots on the ground in Afghanistan.

The differences between the Soviet and the American wars in Afghanistan were significant. The Soviet generals gave their opinion about the feasibility of an operation without too much souped up military optimism. They were always under firm civilian control. The civilians could and did reject their military advice as they saw fit, sometimes to everyone's disadvantage.

By contrast, despite their supposed subordination to civilian politicians, American soldiers expressed their views in public, and often the public listened. Successive Presidents had to take that into account. Only Obama, who got rid of one insubordinate general, came close to acting as decisively as Harry Truman did when he sacked General MacArthur.

America's overwhelming military power and its victories in 1945 encouraged Americans and their generals to believe that the difference between war and peace is absolute, and that the aim of war is unconditional victory. American strategic thinkers attacked the Soviets for sticking to Clausewitz's view that war and peace are two aspects of the same activity. But Clausewitz and the Soviets were right. The Americans have never lost on the battlefield. But in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan they lost their war, and after Korea they only managed to force a stalemate. And that was because they forgot that you can pursue a war to victory only if you get the politics right.

The American war in Afghanistan lasted twice as long as the Soviet war. The only solace to take from this war is that, thanks to smart weapons, the casualties on both sides were substantially less than they were in the Soviet war, or in the American wars in South East Asia.

The dismal debacle in Afghanistan reminded us of three things that we knew already.

LIBERAL INTERVENTION

Liberal intervention designed to reengineer other people's societies doesn't work. Very expensive American attempts to create democracy failed not only in Afghanistan, but in China, Vietnam, Iraq and elsewhere.

To build a democratic nation in Afghanistan would have required a degree of sustained stamina, clarity of purpose, insight, and generosity that was never remotely likely to be forthcoming. And it wasn't only democracies that failed because of their obsession with the short term and concern with domestic popularity. Fatigue and domestic politics took over for the Russians too.

The Americans successfully presided over long-term change in Germany, Japan and South Korea. They fought and then stayed in all three countries long enough for change to succeed. They did so not for moral reasons, or because they were fond of the three peoples involved, but because they had a Cold War to fight. In Vietnam even that motive was inadequate.

Some think that the Americans should have left their small remaining contingent in place to give the Kabul government the breathing space to get its act together. No one has shown convincingly why that would work when a massive effort over two decades had already failed.

WAR AGAINST TERROR: COUNTER-TERROR AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY

The second lesson is that overwhelming military power is not enough to secure victory over people who are fighting for their country or their ideology and have the time, the commitment, the discipline and the appropriate weapons. However many battles they won, the Russians lost in Afghanistan, as did the Americans, in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan; the British in Palestine,

Egypt, and Aden; the French in Indochina and Algeria. As the Taliban used to say: “You have the watches, but we have the time”. In the end, foreigners get tired and go home. The insurgents, as has so often been said, don’t have to win: they simply have to avoid losing.

“Counter insurgency” is not the answer. The theory was developed by the French in Indo-China and was much touted by American generals in Iraq and Afghanistan. The British believed they were rather good at it. It depends on winning the hearts and minds of ordinary people, on persuading them that they are better off with the forces of law and order than they would be with the insurgents. It has rarely worked, if ever. The reason is simple. If you use military force, you are bound to kill people’s wives and children. Saying you’re sorry for the “collateral damage” wins no hearts at all.

You can, of course, suppress a terrorist movement if you are prepared to be sufficiently ruthless. The Russians hammered the Chechens into the ground, then outsourced the management of the place to a unscrupulous local warlord. Other imperial powers have also behaved ruthlessly when they felt they needed to, especially when it was conveniently out of the public eye. But in our modern interconnected world the political price is almost always too high.

THE SEDUCTIONS OF AID

The third thing we already knew from much experience is that if you pump billions of aid into countries which don’t have the necessary infrastructure, a large proportion of the money will end up in the pockets of foreign contractors and in the off-shore bank accounts of the local politicians. The Marshall Plan worked because the Europeans already knew how to run a modern economy, but needed help in rebuilding the ruins. Afghanistan was very far from this. Nor is it enough to say that Afghan government was corrupt, because so are many governments across the world. While the West may celebrate our avoidance of the more obvious forms of corruption, we still practise theories which openly celebrate greed. Poor countries do not have that luxury.

WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?

Those who took part in the Afghanistan intervention have an immediate moral obligation to repair some of the damage they have done, to provide new lives for those who have been forced from their country, and to get medical and other aid to those who remain behind. That means entering into a relationship with the people who now run Afghanistan. Some object to any formal recognition of the Taliban, and regard that as an excuse to freeze Afghan assets abroad. But without informal arrangements which help the Afghan economy to get going again, the people we have deserted face disaster yet again. That would leave the remains of our moral reputation in tatters.

The West’s ability to shape future events in Afghanistan will now inevitably be limited. Its neighbours—Pakistan, India, Iran, China, Russia and its Central Asian associates—have a far more direct and continuing interest in what goes on there than we do. Their mutual rivalries mean they will find it hard or impossible to cooperate effectively. We will now be able to do little more than use our limited diplomatic and political assets to nudge them in the right direction.

But the widespread argument that defeat in Afghanistan marks a permanent decline in American power and influence misses the mark. America recovered from Vietnam and went on to win the Cold War. Their problem lies elsewhere, and has nothing to do with Afghanistan. America’s hegemony lasted a little more than a decade after its victory in the Cold War. But it will remain outstandingly powerful, rich, and ingenious for the foreseeable future, with the key difference being the presence of China, a more versatile and formidable opponent than America has ever faced. China has the largest population in the world and the second largest economy. It is beginning to surpass America in an increasing number of sophisticated branches of technology. Like America, it produces goods that people everywhere want. It already has enough sophisticated nuclear missiles to make the Americans think very carefully before getting into a scrap. George Kennan’s idea of containment worked with the Russians. But it will not enable America to see off the Chinese.

Let us not draw the wrong lesson from history yet again.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Braithwaite
LSE Public Policy Review
DOI: 10.31389/lseppr.56

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Braithwaite R. Afghanistan: Learning from History? *LSE Public Policy Review.* 2022; 2(3): 2, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.56>

Submitted: 24 November 2021

Accepted: 10 March 2022

Published: 02 May 2022

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