

How the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan Could be a Russian Propaganda Win

Introduction

On April 14, 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden announced the full withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the 20-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Biden is seeking to move on from the long conflict in Afghanistan in order to refocus American foreign policy and address the challenges posed by geopolitical adversaries like China and Russia. However, this paper will examine how the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan might instead damage the U.S. position in the global competition between the United States and Russia. Under Russian President Vladimir Putin, Russia has aggressively tried to undermine the U.S. on multiple occasions such as its interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. Accordingly, this paper will analyze how Russia might exploit the American withdrawal in Afghanistan through efforts to subvert or undermine the status of the U.S. as a great power (“great power subversion”), particularly if the U.S. withdrawal can be characterized as an abandonment of the Afghan people to the Taliban or otherwise cast in a negative light. Under such circumstances, Russia would have the opportunity to launch a two-pronged propaganda campaign to attack U.S. credibility abroad and promote isolationism in the U.S. This paper will draw comparisons to the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and also consider Russia’s recent malign influence propaganda efforts against the U.S.

Background

For almost 20 years, the U.S. and its NATO allies have been embroiled in armed conflict in Afghanistan. The War in Afghanistan has resulted in the deaths of 2,442 U.S. troops and spending costs of over \$815.7 billion according to the U.S. Department of Defense.¹ Despite these enormous costs, by 2017, the Taliban had rebounded to controlling almost a third of

Afghanistan.² In late 2018, the Trump administration began US-Taliban Peace Talks to withdraw U.S. forces. With Biden's decision to unilaterally withdraw remaining U.S. forces, the Taliban is generally expected to resume control of Afghanistan once the U.S. and NATO withdrawal is complete. If that occurs, there is little hope that the Taliban would preserve a democratic government, the Afghan constitution or advances in women's rights. Afghanistan is on the verge of tragedy.

As of the beginning of July 2021, the U.S. has completed more than 90% of its withdrawal from Afghanistan.³ Meanwhile, the Taliban have been on the offensive and have seized district after district.⁴ The U.S. withdrawal has had a demoralizing effect on Afghan security forces. Most government forces have fled or surrendered to the Taliban. A recent U.S. intelligence assessment stated that the Afghan government could fall within six to twelve months to the Taliban.⁵ The security situation is deteriorating at an alarming rate. In one week alone, the Taliban were able to seize 10 districts.⁶ It is likely the Taliban will take over as it encircles cities closer and closer to Kabul. Recently, General Austin Scott Miller, the last U.S. commander for the US-led mission in Afghanistan, stated there could even be civil war after the U.S. withdrawal.⁷

The United States is not the first great power to struggle in Afghanistan. The country has been described as "the graveyard of empires."⁸ The "Great Game" was the great power competition between Great Britain and Russia to expand their spheres of influence in greater Eurasia in the 19th Century.⁹ The British, fearing Russian encroachment into British India, fought the First Anglo-Afghan War and the Second Anglo-Afghan War to keep Afghanistan as a buffer. However, these efforts were costly and ultimately the British lost control of the territory.¹⁰ Similarly, the Soviet Union faced a costly 10-year war when it invaded Afghanistan

in 1979 to install a pro-Soviet government. By the end, the Soviet Union had lost over 13,000 troops and was forced into a demoralizing retreat.¹¹ The Soviet withdrawal had far reaching damaging effects. The invasion contributed to the Soviet Union's ultimate disintegration with its great financial costs and unpopularity with the Soviet public. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan also has the potential of far reaching effects both at home and abroad.

Russian interests in Afghanistan today are grounded in its revanchist foreign policy and its security interests. Afghanistan borders the Central Asian nations of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. These former Soviet republics are part of Russia's Near Abroad and Russia seeks to maintain influence over these states. Russia believes Afghanistan's stability will affect its control over Central Asia and views the Afghan border as a vital strategic interest.¹² Russia also views the security of Central Asia as part of its own security interests. Particularly, Russia is concerned about the threat of terrorism spreading from Afghanistan into Central Asia and then parts of Russia. Northern Afghanistan is currently a refuge to the Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), a branch of the Islamic State. The terrorist group currently attracts fighters from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.¹³ However, Russia particularly fears ISK and the greater Islamic State's appeal to Muslims in the Northern Caucasus region. Although domestically Russia designates the Taliban as a terrorist organization, it views the Taliban as a force that is better able to fight ISK than Afghan security forces.¹⁴ Russia has developed relations with the Taliban due to Russian security concerns as well as its desire to increase Russian influence in Afghan domestic affairs. Infamously, in 2020, U.S. intelligence services assessed that Russia had allegedly offered bounties to the Taliban for killing U.S. and coalition forces.¹⁵ The threat of narcotics is another area of Russian security interest in Afghanistan. Russia recognizes Afghanistan as a hub for drug trafficking and the source of many of the illegal narcotics in Russia such as opium. It believes the

current Afghan government and the U.S. have not done enough to address Afghanistan's role in drug trafficking. Russia has military bases in all three Central Asian countries on the border with Afghanistan and currently works with Tajik military forces to conduct counter narcotics operations.¹⁶

Beyond Central Asia, Russia believes Afghanistan's stability also affects its wider policy in the Greater Middle East.¹⁷ It seeks greater influence in the Gulf, the Levant, North Africa and South Asia through Afghanistan.¹⁸ Russia has already attempted to gain a role in Afghanistan and thereby increase its global influence by hosting the Intra-Afghanistan Dialogue in 2019 and a peace conference this year with delegations from surrounding nations. Russia's current foreign policy goals are to restore its former spheres of influence and status on the world stage. Russia contends that Afghanistan has been used for Western expansion into the wider Central Asian region.¹⁹ It views its role in Afghanistan as an opportunity to diminish the United States' influence and role in the world.

Past and Ongoing Russian Malign Influence Propaganda Efforts Against the U.S.

This section will discuss past and ongoing Russian anti-U.S. malign influence propaganda efforts by Russia for the purpose of considering how Russia might exploit the situation in Afghanistan. Although not directly aimed at achieving great power subversion, the most notorious example of Russian malign influence against the United States is Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. In 2014, Russia began its efforts to influence the election with the goal of helping elect presidential candidate Donald Trump. The Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) created its own troll farm, which made fake accounts on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter.²⁰ Through these fake accounts, the IRA and freelance workers posted about divisive issues and encouraged Americans to look at false news

sites.²¹ Russia had the IRA use fake accounts to stage Trump rallies and create fake organizations on social media to further influence voters such as one named Black Lives Issues that called for African Americans to not vote.²² It additionally had the IRA buy political ads to attack and spread false information about opposing candidate Hillary Clinton.²³ Russia also had its military intelligence agency, the GRU, hack the Clinton Campaign, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and the Democratic National Convention.²⁴ GRU agents under the pen name Guccifer 2.0 then uploaded damaging, personal emails to the platform WikiLeaks to further persuade American voters.²⁵ Russia has continued to apply these subversion tactics to sow division among Americans. This year, social media researchers uncovered a six-year long Russian information operation called Secondary Infektion that spread pro-Russian propaganda around the world, impersonated U.S. officials and promoted disinformation about the 2020 U.S. election.²⁶ In addition, this year, Facebook also released a report that found Russia had “disinformation campaigns in more than 50 countries since 2017.”²⁷

An instructive example of Russian malign influence propaganda efforts aimed at great power subversion against the U.S. is that of the tactics Russia has employed in Syria. Russia currently has two prominent media outlets *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* that promote Russia’s narratives to Arab speaking audiences.²⁸ *RT Arabic* is concerning because of its popularity in the Middle East. According to a 2015 survey, *RT Arabic* was among the top three most watched news channels in six Arab countries.²⁹ Through these media outlets, Russia has been able to project its own narrative of the Syrian Civil War. It has used these outlets to spread news stories that blame Syrian rebel forces for chemical weapon attacks on Syrian civilians instead of the Assad regime.³⁰ Russia has also used its media outlets to promote the narrative that the U.S. is an occupying power in the Middle East. For example, Russian media outlets have spread news

stories claiming that U.S. forces were illegally deployed in Syria to seize oil fields.³¹ In addition to its media outlets, Russia's IRA has also used troll campaigns on social media platforms to promote anti-U.S. sentiment and false stories about the U.S. such as its ties to terrorist organizations or its role in a chemical weapons attack on civilians.³² Russia's malign influence propaganda efforts could explain the shift in Middle Eastern mindsets against the US. In 2017, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey among 5 Middle Eastern countries with 6,204 respondents.³³ In the survey, on average across all countries 35% responded they had a favorable view of Russia while only 27% responded they believed the U.S. was a force for good.³⁴ Although close in number, it is interesting Russia was higher than the U.S. and could speak to the success of Russia's efforts at great power subversion.

Russia has also used propaganda on Russian-sponsored media outlets to promote itself as the de facto leader and great power in Syria. After the U.S. withdrawal from Syria in 2019, Russian special forces and mercenaries occupied former U.S. military bases.³⁵ Images and reporting of the takeover were spread across Russian sponsored media outlets. In response, a NATO military official remarked, "This footage will play on endless repeat, not just around Russian state media. The notion that 'Americans fled Syria leaving behind perfect military bases for the Russians' will also receive massive play around the Middle East as Putin makes the case that he's now the real superpower in the region."³⁶ Russian news outlets such as *RT Arabic* also exploited the U.S. withdrawal from Syria by spreading images of Kurdish civilians pelting rocks and other objects at withdrawing U.S. forces.³⁷ Through these stories, Russia sought to reinforce the idea the U.S. betrayed its Kurdish allies in order to portray the U.S. as an unreliable partner. It is important to consider these tactics when thinking about how Russia might try to improve its

standing in the Middle East after the U.S. withdraws from Afghanistan and how Russia could portray the withdrawal as yet another U.S. betrayal.

Another area of Russian anti-U.S. great power subversion efforts is the ongoing Russian propaganda within Europe to sow division among the West and promote Russia's image. Russia has promoted an ongoing false narrative that the United States is "dangerous" in nations where U.S. troops are currently deployed.³⁸ For example, in Poland, Russia has tried to promote this narrative on its media outlets by creating false stories about the criminal behavior of U.S. soldiers or sensationalizing road incidents.³⁹ It has also created fake accounts on social media platforms to steer the Polish national discussion or fuel animosity among Poles with the U.S.⁴⁰ Russia has used its media outlets to falsely portray European opinion on the U.S. For example, it utilized a report published by the European Council on Foreign Relations to promote the false notion Russia had significant recognition in Europe as a partner and could surpass America.⁴¹ However, although 35% of respondents answered that Russia is a "necessary partner," the original report made it clear Europeans did not view Russia as an ally and the U.S. was significantly more popular among respondents from across Europe.⁴² Russia might seek to use the "abandonment" of Afghanistan to further its narrative that the U.S. is "dangerous" and create domestic sentiment within ally nations to work with the U.S. less.

Possible Russian Propaganda Attacks on U.S. Credibility Abroad

The following section will discuss how the U.S. withdrawal in Afghanistan could be exploited by Russia to attack U.S. credibility. The Trump Presidency harmed America's global image by creating long term distrust and fear about American commitment. Even with the election of Joe Biden, U.S. credibility has not fully recovered. There is still widespread belief among nations that the United States does not consider other nations' interests.⁴³ A poorly

executed U.S. withdrawal that abandons Afghanistan to a humanitarian crisis and the Taliban's violent take over and oppressive rule could reinforce this sentiment and be exploited by Russia to further attack U.S. credibility. Current Russian propaganda narratives could be expanded to increase distrust in the U.S. and promote Russia as a global leader.

The nation of Afghanistan is at the crossroads of three regions: South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Geography poses unique opportunities for Russia to exploit an American withdrawal. Through greater power subversion, Russia has the opportunity to attack U.S. credibility in multiple theaters. Russia has already been laying the groundwork in the Middle East to discredit the United States and its intentions in order to increase difficulty for the U.S. to remain in the region after its withdrawal. Russia has both through official commentary, sponsored media outlets and social media accounts promoted the idea that the U.S. has ties to extremist groups including the Islamic state.⁴⁴ Russia has done this to support the narrative that the U.S. uses the threat of terrorism as a disguise for its own ambitions and a “neo-colonial agenda.”⁴⁵ Although seemingly far-fetched, Russia could portray American counterterrorism efforts as simply U.S. expansionism and try to disincentivize surrounding nations from working with the U.S. It is important to consider how the Islamic State emerged after the Iraq War and how the U.S. involved itself in both Syria and Afghanistan for counterterrorism reasons. Although the U.S. intervened in Iraq and Syria with good intentions, its departure left these populations with no long term improvement. Afghanistan now faces the same fate.

Another current Russian narrative on Russian media outlets is that the problems in the Middle East are the fault of the West, particularly the United States.⁴⁶ Russia could reinforce this anti-US sentiment and the ongoing narrative of “American decline” among Middle Eastern audiences and other surrounding audiences by sensationalizing Afghanistan's deteriorating

security situation. Greater instability in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal and greater lack of U.S. leadership would provide Russia with more material to employ. Russia's propaganda could be particularly damaging if the U.S. were to withdraw dishonorably and forsake the region entirely. The U.S. would appear as an unreliable partner to other governments if it simply abandoned the Afghan government to handle the transition and fall at the mercy of the Taliban. Russia has already promoted the notion to surrounding nations in the region the U.S. acts only on its terms. For instance, after promising peace talks between U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban leadership, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov used the Russian subversion tactic of amplifying existing uncertainty in his remarks. He claimed, "countries of the region, who are far from indifferent to what will happen to Afghanistan, remain in the dark about what plans our American partners may be developing."⁴⁷ This statement again plays into the narrative that the U.S. is "dangerous" but also the U.S. acts only for itself and a "neo-colonial agenda." The U.S. would also look like a poor ally if it abandoned the Afghans who helped the U.S. to the Taliban's retribution. Russia could portray such a tragedy with a sense of betrayal similar to that of the Syrian Kurds after the U.S. withdrawal from Syria and spread news stories of the Taliban's massacre. Furthermore, if the U.S. were to not follow through on enforcing negotiated commitments and terms of the peace deal, U.S. credibility would also decline. Russia could expand outside one target region and more effectively attack U.S. credibility by using Afghanistan as another example of the U.S. permitting instability in the world.

Besides theaters where Russia is seeking a greater role, there is also a risk of Russia attacking U.S. credibility among our allies. Russia has been conducting ongoing subversion with propaganda and disinformation campaigns attacking NATO and the United States within its ally nations. Russia has promoted narratives characterizing the U.S. as "dangerous" and an

“occupying power” in ally nations.⁴⁸ It has also spread the narrative that NATO is a “cover for U.S. imperialism” and members are “subservient” to a U.S. agenda.⁴⁹ This narrative could be applied to Afghanistan given the U.S. involved NATO allies in an “endless war” and then the U.S. made the decision to pull out on its own. Depending on how the U.S. includes its NATO allies in Afghanistan’s transition and U.S. involvement in the region moving forward, Russia could influence whether the U.S. is perceived as a reliable partner. The U.S. must account for NATO forces also stationed in Afghanistan and NATO allies' concerns about Afghanistan after the U.S. coalition leaves. If the U.S. does not consult or include NATO in its plans, Russia could have greater receptivity to its propaganda in European theaters. It would be able to portray the U.S. as a “dangerous” partner and decrease U.S. credibility among its allies. This could intensify fears in the international community that resulted from the actions of the Trump administration. Russia could further the belief the U.S. acts out of its own interests with little regard for those of other nations. The impact of Russian subversion could be reduced willingness among European allies to work with the U.S. in the future out of fear of being dragged into another costly but ultimately fruitless war.

Possible Russian Propaganda Threats to the American Public

This section will look at U.S. domestic vulnerabilities that Russia could exploit to further great power subversion against the United States. Russia could attack U.S. credibility not just through subversion in global theaters, but also by promoting American isolationism to U.S. audiences. Before the World Wars, the U.S. had a generally isolationist foreign policy. It was only after World War II that the U.S. assumed a greater role in the world. Since this shift, there has been a historic pattern of the U.S. becoming more involved in the world after victories like the end of WWII and the Cold War. Conversely, the U.S. reverted to greater isolationism after its

defeat in the Vietnam War. The U.S. still has isolationist tendencies that could be exploited by Russia to weaken public support for American commitment to global engagement.

American withdrawal from Afghanistan has the potential of being portrayed in a similar manner to Vietnam to American audiences. Even with fewer casualties, the War in Afghanistan's drawn out nature and ultimate losing outcome could evoke the same sentiment among the American public, as with the Vietnam War, that American lives were wasted. Russia would likely seek to emphasize this comparison in order to inspire the same subsequent isolationist sentiment in the American public after Vietnam.

It is important to note that receptivity among American audiences to Russian propaganda regarding Afghanistan might be high given current American views surrounding U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. The Pew Research Center compiled survey responses of Americans regarding the War in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2018. The number of Americans who responded that the U.S. made the wrong decision in using military force in Afghanistan increased overtime to 39% while those who responded that it was the right decision dropped to 45%.⁵⁰ In addition, more Americans overtime responded that they believed the U.S. had mostly failed in achieving its goals in Afghanistan than those who responded the U.S. had mostly succeeded.⁵¹ Even worse, another survey by the Pew Research Center in 2019 found that 59% of Americans responded that the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting.⁵² Looking at this landscape, it would not be hard for Russia to promote the idea that the U.S. should not have gone into Afghanistan in the first place. By sensationalizing the Taliban's violence and the undoing of all progress in Afghanistan, it would be easy for Russia to promote the narrative that the War in Afghanistan was a waste of resources and lives like the Vietnam War. Russia could support the sentiment that the U.S. should not involve itself in foreign intervention in the future thus promoting isolationism.

Both Pew Research Center surveys also showed how responses tended to reflect party affiliation upon further inquiry with gaps between Democrats and Republican answers. These results reveal another possibility for Russia to attack U.S. credibility: political division. Even with policy differences between parties, U.S. foreign policy was historically bipartisan and democracies like the U.S. were perceived as reliable given the need for legislative and executive agreement. However, political polarization in the U.S. has disrupted this credibility. With increasing toxic partisanship, there is a lack of the consensus in Congress needed to ratify international treaties.⁵³ It is for this reason that in recent years administrations have shifted to executive agreements or political commitments rather than approval by Congress.⁵⁴ The problem with an executive agreement or a political commitment is that it can be easily undone by another administration, giving U.S. allies and the international community little sense of security.⁵⁵ If unrealized before, the Trump administration showed how the U.S. could easily back out of long term commitments with its withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords and the Iranian Nuclear Deal. It is simply up to the U.S. electorate which has become increasingly polarized and in the case of the right, Trumpist or isolationist. America's current state provides Russia not only with the opportunity to promote isolationism, but more political division. Besides reinforcing the notion Afghanistan was a waste of resources and lives, Russia could also use previous tactics such as online bots to incite arguments and sow division. It could then use American instability at home to promote the narrative of "American decline" abroad. American isolationism was tapped into by former U.S. President Donald Trump in his rhetoric and helped to secure his election in 2016. Fear that "Trumpism" might return every four years has limited the full recovery of U.S. credibility in the world. There is now a lack of certainty that each U.S. administration will honor a prior U.S. administration's international commitments. Nations are

now wary of fully believing the U.S. given its domestic restraints and these circumstances provide Russia an opportunity to increase its influence.

In addition to promoting political division and isolationism in the general American public, Russia could specifically target U.S. veterans with propaganda regarding Afghanistan. Russia has already targeted U.S. veterans. According to a 2019 report by the Vietnam Veterans of America, Russia's Internet Research Agency purchased at least 113 online ads targeting U.S. veterans and followers of U.S. veterans advocacy groups.⁵⁶ Russia has created fake veteran pages on platforms such as Facebook with notable followings such as "Being Patriotic," which at its peak had 200,000 followers, and "Veterans of Vietnam," which has 160,000 followers.⁵⁷ It has been using logos and names similar to real veteran service organizations across social media platforms.⁵⁸ According to the chief investigator of that report, Kristofer Goldsmith, one big reason Russia targets veterans is because they are more likely to participate in democracy like voting and running for office.⁵⁹ A recurring narrative Russia seeks to promote is that the U.S. government does not care about veterans. It has already tried to promote this narrative with the situation in Afghanistan. For example, Russia has produced new stories on its platforms stating the U.S. holding peace negotiations with the Taliban shows complete disregard for the sacrifices of American servicemembers.⁶⁰ Worryingly, there is already a sentiment after 20 years in Afghanistan among those in uniform that there was little reason for the U.S. to be in Afghanistan in the first place. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2019, 58% of veterans answered that the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting.⁶¹ Russia could exploit this sentiment further through its pre-established social media ecosystem. Russia could especially promote the idea that the U.S. should have never been in Afghanistan if the U.S. leaves without honor and create support for isolationism among regular voters.

Besides the impact on future collaboration with the United States, the U.S. abandoning its allies in Afghanistan also impacts the perception of the war to American veterans. Some of the biggest advocates for Afghans who helped the U.S. are U.S. veteran organizations. For instance, in May, the organization Veterans for American Ideals led 15 other veteran organizations in authoring a letter to President Biden urging him to evacuate 17,000 Afghans under the Special Immigrant Visa program.⁶² It is a strong belief in the veteran community that those who served alongside our troops such as interpreters should not be left behind and treated with honor. Russia could present a strong case to the veteran community with images of the Taliban's atrocities after the U.S. departure. It would be able to convey the narrative that the U.S. left dishonorably and that all the progress that had been accomplished was now lost and casualties were for nothing. Leaving America's allies in Afghanistan would be reminiscent of the betrayal that occurred during the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. Congress voted against allowing for the additional evacuation of South Vietnamese by American troops.⁶³ It was the shaming images of South Vietnamese crowds helplessly trying to get in overloaded helicopters at the U.S. embassy that spurred Congress to act afterward.⁶⁴ However, for many, it was too late and a similar spread of shaming images could easily be generated in Afghanistan for Russia's use.

Feelings of dishonor and feelings of disregard from the U.S. government are narratives that have also been successful in radicalizing U.S. veterans. It is important to note that veterans are also targets of white extremism. 20% of those convicted in participating in the Capitol Riots have served in the military.⁶⁵ Although there are no official links to Russia and white extremism online, Russia perhaps might use its propaganda to promote radicalism with hopes of further destabilizing the United States beyond political polarization. Afghanistan poses unique

challenges with the growing threat of domestic terrorism. At the minimum, the withdrawal could be used by Russia to sow distrust between the veteran community and the U.S. government.

Conclusion

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could easily be exploited by Russia to decrease U.S. credibility and potentially even U.S. presence in the world. Russia has the media ecosystem and past experience to launch a two-pronged attack on global and U.S. audiences. The U.S. should expect waves of Russian propaganda on state sponsored news sites and social media platforms capitalizing on the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan as the Taliban takes over. However, the U.S. cannot counter-message Russian propaganda with lies. It is therefore imperative that the U.S. must leave Afghanistan with honor to have a chance at defeating potential Russian malign influence narratives. The U.S. can start by honoring its commitments to Afghanistan by evacuating the Afghans who helped the U.S. before all troops are gone and they are left for the Taliban. The U.S. must also consider how it plans to remain in the greater region and work with NATO allies on a continuing presence. The U.S. likes to view itself as U.S. General James Mattis put, “No better friend, no worse enemy.” Whether or not this perception is true will be seen in Afghanistan by how the U.S. withdrawal is viewed by the world and how it is portrayed by Russia. A tragic withdrawal from Afghanistan is not just a tragedy, but could have far reaching effects from how it will impact the American public and U.S. allies to providing Russia another opportunity to undermine the U.S.

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