

RICHARD: As we record this in the days after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, there are reports of chaos, confusion, and panic in Kabul and elsewhere. We spoke to our guests as the U.S. military was preparing to withdraw before the final outcome was known. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Coming up, a broad-ranging discussion about U.S. foreign policy and the many challenges facing President Biden. We look at what's changed and the similarities in his approach and that of former President Trump.

RICHARD: We speak with two veteran foreign correspondents from The Christian Science Monitor. They've both traveled widely in many parts of the world.

ASHLEY: Ned Temko writes the weekly international affairs column, Patterns, and Scott Peterson is The Monitor's Middle East Bureau Chief. They're now based in London. Let's start with you, Ned. How would you describe the Biden vision for American foreign policy?

NED: America is back, and I think that's their guiding principle, that after four years in which the United States under Donald Trump was in deliberate retreat from a lot of old alliances, from large parts of the world, I think his first priority has been to basically reintroduce a little bit of normalcy, a degree of stability. And I suppose the other theme is something that began under President Obama when Biden was Vice President, and that is the famous tilt towards Asia.

RICHARD: Scott, have there been any surprises, though, in the Biden approach, for instance maybe a departure from President Obama's foreign policy?

SCOTT: I think that two of the biggest surprises, which I'm sure we'll discuss in this program, are the policies that so far have been exhibited both toward Iran and getting back into the nuclear deal, and also with Afghanistan with this fairly precipitous withdrawal of American troops. Now, both of those are basically extensions of the Trump plan. So maximum pressure against Iran has pretty much continued even though there are talks to get both sides back into the nuclear deal when the U.S. pulled out of the nuclear deal. Trump did in 2018.

In Afghanistan, too, President Biden adhered to Trump's timeline, mostly, in terms of pulling out. He did delay it by several months. The deal that Trump had actually put together with the Taliban, they had set up a withdrawal agreement, agreed on it. It was supposed to happen on the 1st of May. Essentially maintaining that same policy of a very quick pullout, he set another date of September 11.

Now, of course, we've had most of those troops pulled out already, even two months in advance of that, but the bottom line is that both of those policies actually continued under the Biden administration for all intents and purposes as they have done under Trump. That was a surprise.

ASHLEY: Usually when they enter office, new presidents focus first on domestic policy, but this administration has been different. It's been very active on foreign policy. Do you think this is the result of necessity, or is it related to Joe Biden's past experience as both Vice President and Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Ned?

NED: I think it's a little bit of both, actually. He's still very, very much aware that what matters both to his own political fortunes and his ability to make American foreign policy credible overseas is to focus on some key domestic priorities, above all, the pandemic. But also, there are other examples. For instance, in Cuba when there were these unprecedented demonstrations in the streets, on the one hand, Biden was quite forthright and public in keeping with a deliberate attempt to make human rights issues, at least in words, much more a priority than in the past four years. But on the other hand, he recognized the limits of any real practical action not least because he or whoever runs in 2024 would very much like to win Florida.

Cuban exile politics is quite complicated, and it's focused to an extraordinary degree in Florida, which has a lot of electoral college votes. I think Afghanistan, as well. I think the two motivating factors are that even when Biden was Vice President, he was kind of an outlier. He was much, much more skeptical about American involvement in Afghanistan, I guess concerned that there was no endgame. A pullout from Afghanistan is one of those issues that even in partisan America is broadly popular with American people.

RICHARD: Nevertheless, Scott, that policy has big risks. Continued bloodshed, executions, and repression in Afghanistan will continue to get media coverage and may backfire on the Biden administration.

SCOTT: I think that this is already beginning to happen. All of a sudden, we are seeing an emboldened Taliban, a Taliban that feels that it has been legitimized by the original secret U.S. Taliban talks which led to the February 2020 U.S. Taliban withdrawal agreement. So those things, which were aimed at yielding a kind of face-saving American withdrawal ultimately ended up being something which the U.S. caved in on most of the Taliban demands, which would have released thousands of their imprisoned fighters, which they have done, and also gave them a degree of legitimacy and platform that they simply didn't have before.

RICHARD: In the 1990s when the Taliban last ruled Afghanistan, its rules were very harsh. Girls were prevented from going to school. Women were banned from leaving home without male guardians.

SCOTT: But now, after 20 years of American and Western presence, billions of dollars spent working on civil society issues and things like that, all those things raised Afghan expectations in ways that were extraordinary, and there are many manifestations of

this. You see this not only in human rights groups but also women's rights advocates. There is now a much more educated population, and this isn't just Kabul. This is all over the country, and they are even less interested in having the Taliban back.

But it's the way that the U.S. has pulled out that's making the difference here. No one is suggesting that the Americans should stay in forever. It's the way it's happened that has enabled the Taliban to basically kind of leapfrog several of the steps that they weren't able to achieve on the battlefield, and with that political extra gravitas that it has now acquired, been able to also marshal its troops, send a message for months, in fact for over a year now, to its own front-line fighters saying, "We have won. That infidel government in Kabul that the Americans back is going to fall. We are going to do this in God's name. We're going to make everyone who ever worked for it and worked for the Americans, and in fact any of those people who have bought into this kind of Westernized idea, we are going to make them pay a price." And that is exactly now what the Taliban are moving toward.

RICHARD: Scott has talked about what's happened in Afghanistan. Ned, what are the risks in terms of U.S. politics of this hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan?

NED: Well, there will be criticism, and I think justifiable criticism among some of the usual suspects on Capitol Hill. The question is: will it resonate with ordinary Americans? I think the jury's still out on that. I would add, and I think Scott's absolutely right, we're in an appalling situation particularly for women's rights, for translators and other people who worked for the United States, and let's not forget NATO allies and others who were there who were basically blindsided by at least the rapidity of this decision, that we now have to... It illuminates a larger conundrum for the Biden administration.

On the one hand, they want to say America is back, and they genuinely are making efforts to restore old alliances and the like. They still labor under a trend ever since the Iraq War, and that is the direction of travel for both the main parties has been to avoid significant military presence in any of these conflict areas. I think the open question is: if you're going to be a superpower, and if, quote/unquote, "America is back," once you take that option off the table and are seen by the outside world as having very little appetite for at least the potential for military engagement, do you weaken your diplomatic, political, and other heft as well?

ASHLEY: Part of the reason that the administration wants to wrap up in Afghanistan, is part of that the fact that much of the attention of U.S. politicians now is focused on the threat posed by China?

NED: I think that's part of it, but Afghanistan is a neighbor of China's, as well. That's one of the great ironies. There has been this tilt towards the Asia-Pacific region, and, for all the reasons Scott mentioned, it is highly unstable in Afghanistan now, deeply worrying.

SCOTT: One of the broader points about Afghanistan is that this war, which has gone on for 20 years, and it is America's longest ever war, President Biden points out again and again, I've always heard advice that there should be more troops there and that that will somehow make a difference. Now that has absolutely been proven not to be the case. All it's done is actually prolong the war.

So the question isn't, "Should the Americans never leave?" They absolutely, at some point, should leave. But the question is: should they also have frittered away, and should President Biden have continued with President Trump's frittering away of the leverage that the United States did actually have in terms of how this war was going to wrap up? Did it have to be done in such a way that would give the Taliban so much strength that they could gain battlefield momentum against our own allies, the Kabul-backed government, which wasn't even included in that Taliban U.S. withdrawal deal and was forced by the U.S. side to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, most of whom we now know are back in the battlefield doing their thing? And when President Biden actually announced an unconditional final withdrawal, the only question was when it was going to happen.

That was also a further gift to the Taliban, and that is what is actually in danger of harming those gains over the last 20 years and yielding a country that, almost certainly, the U.S. is going to have to continue dealing with because we will be literally back to where we were 20 years ago. I was there when Kabul fell. I was there watching the residents of Kabul literally dismember Al Qaeda and Taliban members. They were so happy the day that city fell. And today, now they are living in fear of the Taliban takeover, and, respectfully, I really don't think it needed to end quite the way it's currently ending.

NED: Can I pick up on what Scott said? I think, again, one of the ironies is there is a middle ground or even a lower ground that doesn't involve all-out military surges, Iraq-War-scale American combat involvement. And where it's been proven, Syria's another example, where rather than just say, "Okay, let's just pack up and leave tomorrow," the well-planned, judicious use of limited military presence makes a huge difference on the ground.

ASHLEY: Moving on, is China the biggest challenge for U.S. policymakers at moment, or do they see it that way?

NED: I think unequivocally, yes. Basically, China is the key rival superpower of the United States. It's likely to remain that way for a very long time. China is the second-largest economy in the world. Under Xi, it has become increasingly ambitious internationally. It sees itself not only as a rival of the United States but as an eventual substitute as the dominant influential power on the world stage.

So I think, inescapably, that's the main dot on the foreign policy radar screen, and so far there has been continuity on one level with the Trump administration. That is to say the tariffs are still in place. Any expectation in Beijing that there would be a pivot to a much softer, more engaging American policy with China was unrealistic.

I think the fundamental change, and, again, it has to be tested in the real world, is that the Biden administration is much more engaged in building up international alliances so that it's not just the United States vis-a-vis China, but that there is a shared understanding particularly with allies in Asia, in the neighborhood, but also more generally, for instance, with Western Europe, on China issues.

RICHARD: Scott, you've traveled extensively in Asia. Are there any signs that this new approach of rallying the allies in a common cause to perhaps resist the most aggressive impulses of China is working?

SCOTT: Well, I'm not so sure that it is. Look at the example of Hong Kong. Everywhere you turn, you see a much bolder, you see a much brasher China exerting itself and basically pushing back against the pressure that it's also feeling from the United States and from others pulling out from what Ned was talking about. One of the questions is: what is China's vision aside from its own actual power?

We look at the investment, for example, the billions of dollars that have been invested by China on both North and South Sudan. They're investigating the kind of infrastructure, oil and petrochemical and other investments there. That is one example of a place where they are looking with a very strategic vision about what they may need 10 or 20 or 30 years down the line in terms of resources, in terms of friends.

These are all transactional relationships. For countries like Iran or like Sudan, the Chinese, of course, are never asking questions about politics, like saying, "Well, I'm not sure we can do this because we don't like how you treat your dissidents," or anything like that. China has made it perfectly clear how it treats its dissidents in Xinjiang and other places. So countries like Iran, Sudan, and many, many others are willing to do those kind of deals because it's purely transactional, and that's the kind of thing they're looking for whereas often, when they are trying to do deals with the United States or with the European Union, there's always some other conditionality involved.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. We're speaking with Ned Temko and Scott Peterson. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. This episode is the latest in a series of interviews with journalists of The Christian Science Monitor. Find other episodes on the environment, foreign affairs, and the 2020 election at our website, [commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts](http://commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts). Now more of our interview.

ASHLEY: You alluded to this, but how much emphasis would you say this administration puts on human rights?

SCOTT: Great question. We see that they are beginning to be a little bit tougher on Saudi Arabia than, for example, President Trump was. What we have now is we have the language of human rights that is back. It is now, again, part of the American lexicon that comes from the White House and elsewhere.

NED: There's actually an interesting test case coming up of this because the United States gives and has long given several billion dollars a year in aid to Egypt. Within that package, there's a discretionary chunk of I think \$300 million which is, by Act of Congress, conditioned on the human rights record of the recipient. Now, I don't think anybody can suggest that the Sisi regime in Cairo is ever going to be a poster child for Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch.

There are appalling violations of human rights going on there, and this will come up for renewal again in the next few weeks. The way it works is that, in order for that \$300 million to be included despite the Act of Congress, the Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, would have to sign a waiver. It will be fascinating to see whether he signs the waiver this year because, as Scott says, there is human rights language, which I think is an important change.

I know from covering the old Soviet Union that even though constant raising of human rights issues in every meeting that the American administrations would have with the Soviet officials didn't have any obvious, immediate effect on the part of dissidents, it did, we know from now, from the memoirs and recollections of the dissidents themselves, how important it was in a sense of morale, a sense of not feeling alone. On that level alone, it's important, but it's always mixed, as Scott says, with realpolitik, that basically the Egyptians, for example, will, as they have always said, "Don't be mean to us because when there's a war in Gaza, you need Egypt to lean on Hamas. When there's problems in the Suez Canal, it is after all on our turf." So it will be an interesting decision to watch.

RICHARD: A common ground question: this is a very different time than, say, after the invasion of Iraq when the neocons in the George W. Bush administration had great power. Things have changed very much since then. The U.S., in some respects, has been in retreat from applying muscle in foreign policy. Do you see, either of you, increasing chances for some area of agreement in Washington between the parties over important aspects of foreign policy?

NED: As the old saying goes, "From your mouth to God's ears." If only it were so. I'm skeptical. I'm hopeful in the sense that I really do think it's essential that we get back or try to get back to some level of bipartisan consensus on the big foreign policy issues. But I think the reality is everything is so politicized in the United States these days, so

polarized that it's hard to imagine critical mass of a momentum that would unify people.

There are exceptions. China is the big exception where both major parties have identical views on Chinese business practices, the theft of intellectual property. China's reputation abroad is potentially taking some knocks, as well. The COVID pandemic hasn't helped. There's a fascinating poll which is done every year on the reputation of heads of state in a variety of countries, and President Xi is not exactly the flavor of the month.

Even on all these infrastructure investments, Scott's absolutely right, it's a huge advance, in many ways, for China, the so-called Belt and Road Initiative. On the other hand, there's been some fraying of support in a lot of these recipient nations. So I think we're in a period of flux here.

ASHLEY: Most of the world is still struggling out of this pandemic if not thoroughly immersed in it, and the U.S., by most accounts, hasn't handled it well. Do you think that has affected its reputation around the world?

SCOTT: I think the danger has demonstrated itself in the fact that there have been other populous leaders that have basically taken the lead of President Trump, who really, when COVID first emerged in the United States, was very reluctant to note its seriousness and really oversaw this remarkable reaction to the disease in the United States, which has meant that we have had such an incredibly high death rate, that we even now have people who are refusing to wear masks or to, in many cases, even note the seriousness of the disease or to get vaccinated against it. But the problem is that how the United States handled it resonated out in countries. President Bolsonaro, for example, and others, it just gave a license to those populous leaders. We've seen this also in India. We've seen this in so many countries, populous leaders who found it much easier to basically deny the science largely for political reasons or ideological ones.

NED: Yeah, I think some of that has been recovered under the Biden administration. I think there is a greater sense that adults are in charge again, the reputation of America being a country that, when it puts its mind to something, by and large, it can get big things done. So I think, at least initially in the Biden administration, some of that reputational damage was repaired. I think there are two longer-term problems.

One is the huge disparity between the situation in the United States and other developed countries and the rest of the world, particularly underdeveloped countries where vaccines are either not sufficiently available or the means of administering them. I think the Biden administration does recognize that there is political gain to be made by putting America back in the game of being more engaged in the rest of the world.

The broader issues, and certainly under the Trump administration, pandemic response or the lack of it was very much at the heart of it. But I think it's more crystallized by the attempted insurrection of January 6th. I think President Biden feels passionately, and he's probably right, ideological and political struggle of the coming decades is going to be between the ideas of autocracy and democracy as epitomized by the United States and its allies on the one hand and China on the other. And I think one of the potential weaknesses in the American position is that American leadership of a democratic world, which is what the Biden administration aspires to reassert, is only as strong as democracy at home, and I think that is a vulnerability going forward.

RICHARD: Moving next to Iran policy, the election of a new hardline Islamist president arguably has made it quite a bit easier for the Biden administration to rethink its proposal to rejoin the nuclear agreement with Iran. That deal was signed under President Obama and then rejected by President Trump. What are the implications of the new reality?

NED: I think the broader issue that's raised, and it's one that applies to Afghanistan as well, is the dichotomy between the politics, particularly the domestic politics of American foreign policy, and the realities of the world. Iran's another example, that politically it is probably a good thing in terms of avoiding partisan fireworks and firefights in Washington not to have to deal with getting back into the Iran nuclear deal. But in the real world, what does the United States gain or risk if Iran, on an accelerated timetable, actually gets a nuclear weapon, which seems quite possible?

So the politics are pretty straightforward. Richard's right. Everybody would have a much easier life politically in the United States if they just pretended it didn't make any difference, it was a bad deal. It certainly wasn't a perfect deal. So, therefore, let's just hope things turn out for the best. But it's a problem if you're the incumbent administration because you have to deal with the aftermath, as well.

ASHLEY: Earlier we asked about the surprises we've seen from Joe Biden's foreign policy. What are your predictions for the surprises still to come, Scott?

SCOTT: I think Afghanistan is going to certainly feature because of the way the U.S. has pulled out. It could easily yield much, much more work for this White House and for subsequent presidents. On the Iranian side, I think we've got a lot of issues that are only going to be exacerbated by the fact that now there's a hardline president who is assuming the presidential role.

We will have, of course, the supreme leader, who is 82 years old, Ayatollah Khamanei. He is likely to pass in the course of this presidency. There is no particularly well-organized succession method in Iran, and many would argue that, in the same way that the election of President Hassan Rouhani after President Ahmadinejad basically extended the life of the Islamic Republic by several years. I think many others are also



arguing that the Islamic Republic as we know it, its life will have probably been shortened by the fact that all the levers of power are now in the hands of hardliners.

So, more broadly in this region, I think we are looking at some real dangers that are region-wide that are going to be impacting the decision-making of presidents. So you have disintegration taking place in various degrees in country after country after country. On August 4th, Beirut just recognized the one-year anniversary of that incredible blast. It was literally one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in the history of the world.

This is just one facet of the kind of misrule, the kind of economic collapse that's been going on in Lebanon, the kind of political paralysis, angry protestors on the streets... They are having blackouts, electricity blackouts constantly. There's not enough food. I think that these slow burn, hardly noticeable acts of destruction are the kind of things that are going to potentially come to fruition in the course of this presidency that are going to have to be dealt with.

NED: I would second everything that Scott said and add in Libya, Tunisia, Turkey under Erdogan. I think one of the potential surprises, and it's not a welcome surprise to the Biden administration, is that a corollary of the so-called tilt towards Asia has been a desire to kind of forget the Middle East, which has been a diplomatic graveyard, in some cases a military debacle, for successive American administrations. I think we may see evidence on the ground that just because Washington looks away doesn't mean history stops, doesn't mean these problems go away. The unpleasant surprise for Washington may be that basically forgetting about the Middle East for a few years may sound good but may be very, very difficult.

RICHARD: Ned Temko and Scott Peterson of The Christian Science Monitor on Let's Find Common Ground.

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RICHARD: We publish new podcast episodes every two weeks. Thanks for listening.