

IN DEFENSE OF THE AFGHAN ARMED FORCES

Rosendo Fraga

Director of CARI's Foreign Relations and Armed Forces Committee

Historically, the Afghans have shown clear signs of successfully fighting against world powers. During the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, between 1839 and 1919, three wars were fought between Great Britain (the leading global power back then) and the Afghans. Afghanistan was a key country for being a "buffer state" between the United Kingdom and Russia as they were fighting for hegemony in that region, which was called strategically the Great Game. The Afghans fought successfully in those six decades and achieved their independence.

In the second half of the 20th century, the Soviet Union –which was in dispute with the United States over the global military hegemony in the framework of the Cold War- invaded the country in 1979, to bring its communist allies to power again. The shooting of 27,000 pro-Soviet Afghans in a jail was the trigger for this invasion. The USSR troops fought unsuccessfully for a decade, supported by a local military force organized by them. In 1989, they retreated without having achieved their goal.

Finally, in the 21st century, between 2001 and 2021, the United States -the leading global military power- is retreating despite Biden's rhetoric and without having achieved its objectives after two decades of intense military operations. Under the Obama Administration, the number of troops deployed in the country reached 100,000. In less than two centuries, the United Kingdom on several occasions, the Soviet Union and the United States acting within the framework of NATO, were defeated in Afghanistan.

President Biden was surprised at the collapse of the Afghan regular military forces, unaware that it was actually a "logistical collapse". The US president said that the rapid defeat of the 300,000 men of the Afghan Army, Air Force, and Police by 70,000 Taliban was only explained by the unwillingness of the pro-US Afghan government military forces to fight, since they were perfectly equipped and organized.

It is true that over the past 20 years, the United States invested \$ 82 billion in organizing these Forces. Perhaps it was based on the fact that the US military has 450,000 men and the number of armed Afghans in the pro-US government accounts for two-thirds of them. The armed forces had been formed following the American model of doctrine, organization, and equipment. Sustaining such a force involves huge amounts of ammunition, gasoline, food, salaries, and technology today. In many of the operations of the United States and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past two decades, logistics support employed more men than what the operations *per se* did employ.

Protecting depots and convoys took up much of the military effort. However, without it the logistical flow of a modern regular force becomes impossible. Logistics is a word of military origin that the business world has borrowed, and is particularly used in activities related to electronic commerce deliveries. The high degree of corruption in the pro-American Afghan government is true. Nevertheless, this was known when the former president -now a fugitive- was elected years ago with the support of Washington.

The key issue is that the military withdrawal on the part of the United States and its allies implied the consequent halt of this enormous logistical effort to sustain the regular Afghan forces. Deprived of ammunition, fuel, food, wages, and technology, any large, modern armed force would immediately and inevitably collapse.

Unless the logistical effort was stopped, the military withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan was not possible. The depots were emptied as the military retirement took place. The shipment of supplies was cancelled. Against this backdrop, the dismantling and military collapse of the Afghan forces takes place. Faced with a logistical halt of that kind, any military force would have collapsed.

Political needs did play a role. Biden's intention to carry out the full withdrawal before September 11, marking the passage of two decades since the attack against the Twin Towers, has led to this denouement. Withdrawing troops from Afghanistan was indeed a successive goal shared by Bush (Jr.), Obama, Trump, and Biden. However, the negative political impacts of the Taliban's seizure of

power in Afghanistan only affect the current president. The fate of the 300,000 men is unknown.

Some will be captured and executed; others have already fled to neighboring countries, including the vice president, who has been in Tajikistan for more than a week. Others will seek to join Afghan tribes settled in the hinterland, which will surely confront the Taliban as irregular forces. It is also clear that the hasty US withdrawal was a decisive blow to the fighting resolve of the Afghan forces.

However, the geopolitical effect is clear: China has won. In recent months, when the negotiations between the United States and the Taliban in Qatar, without the participation of the Afghan government, were perceived as the beginning of the conflict's end, China then established relations with the Taliban.

The geographical location of the country is strategic. The country is bordered by Iran and Pakistan in the south; by three Central Asian countries in the north: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan; by China through a narrow land corridor in the east. The three mentioned Central Asian countries were part of the Soviet Union until 1990. Now, China's relationship with Pakistan will surely become closer, and Beijing's influence in Central Asia, which serves as a "buffer" between Russia and the Asian power, will be stronger.

The first international message from the Taliban was aimed at establishing good relations with China and Russia. It will not be easy with the latter, due to the recent bloody war between the two countries. The United Nations Security Council called for a global effort to prevent the fall of Afghanistan into the hands of the Taliban from allowing international terrorism to have a base of operations in this country once again, as Al Qaeda did at the time of the attack on the Twin Towers.

For his part, the US president has warned that if that happened, the United States would once again take a strong and compelling military action. Now, the US troops that remain in Iraq are expected to withdraw before the last day of 2021. There are a few thousand men, like those left in Afghanistan, but there are those who fear that this new withdrawal will hasten the country into a new civil war, such as the one waged in recent years against the Islamic State.

In conclusion: the Afghan military forces have defeated the British, Russians, and Americans for almost two centuries, showing a distinctive will to fight. The collapse of the Afghan regular forces is fundamentally explained by the halt in the logistical flow that supported it. Any modern regular force facing a similar situation would collapse as well. Finally, the immediate consequence of the Taliban's takeover of the country is an increase in China's geopolitical influence in the region and the risk that Islamic terrorism returns to the scene.

Rosendo Fraga

Director of CARI's Foreign Relations and Armed Forces Committee