Afghan debacle prompts bitter recriminations from UK military, Tories and Labour

Jean Shaoul, Chris Marsden
17 August 2021

The United States pullout from Afghanistan has met with an outburst of jingoistic outrage from prominent military figures and Conservative ministers, with the opposition Labour Party joining in chorus.

The continued value of Britain's relationship with the US was openly questioned, while others assumed a Churchillian pose, issuing splenetic calls for independent military intervention or possible alliances with European powers to counter dependency on Washington.

The *Times* featured an article by Conservative MP Tom Tugendhat, a former Territorial Army officer and now chairman of the parliamentary Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. He wrote that the UK was facing its biggest overseas disaster since the Suez crisis of 1956 when the UK failed to regain control of the canal in Egypt because of US opposition. This set the stage for the end of the British Empire. He warned that Britain was now "impotent" in the face of the US withdrawal policy, and that cuts to the armed forces must end if this situation were to be reversed.

Ben Wallace, Secretary of State for Defence and another former officer in the British army, told the media that London was so horrified at Washington's decision to withdraw completely from Afghanistan that it had tried to get support from other NATO allies to continue some sort of stabilisation force without the US. Asked if he was worried that the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan could lead to terror attacks in the UK in the future, he replied, "Of course I am worried, it is why I said I felt this was not the right time or decision to make because, of course, al-Qaida will probably come back," but, "When the United States as the framework nation took that decision, the way we were all configured, the way we had gone in, meant that we had to leave as well."

Tobias Ellwood, chairman of the House of Commons Defence Committee, wrote in the *Mail on Sunday* that the UK was making a "shabby withdrawal" and, together with allies, should retain an assistance force of 5,000 troops to give ground, air and intelligence support to the Afghan army in their fight against the Taliban or risk giving up a "strategically crucial space to an expansionist China."

Gavin Barwell, the former chief of staff to ex-Prime Minister Theresa May, said it was "time to wake up and smell the coffee" and understand that Democrats and Republicans no longer believe "the US should be the world's policeman… The lesson for Europeans is clear. Whoever is president, the US is unlikely to offer the same support that it used to in parts of the world where its vital interests are not involved. Europeans are going to have to develop the capability to intervene without US support. That's not going to be cheap. And the [European Union] and Britain are going to have to work out how to cooperate on this because we face the same threats."

Former leading military figures were also vocal in blaming the US for pushing the UK into a military debacle. Richard Dannatt, a former head of the British Army, speaking on Saturday before the Taliban had taken control of Kabul, said that he shared the anger of many veterans who had served in Afghanistan over the way the country was being abandoned. Gen Sir Richard Barrons, who was head of UK Joint Forces Command, told the BBC, "The withdrawal now is a strategic mistake. I don't believe it's in our own interest." It sent a "really unfortunate message" to allies in Asia, Africa and the Middle East that "we don't have the stomach to see these things through…"

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer spoke the same language, blaming the Biden administration for the

Taliban's swift takeover of the country. He wanted to see "our government stepping up and leading this, and calling for an urgent meeting of NATO and an urgent UN security council meeting." He added, "We have obligations to Afghanistan, we made promises to Afghanistan and we cannot walk away… and undermine the legacy of the last 20 years."

Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy told the BBC, "One of the fallouts from the decision to withdraw and to withdraw very quickly by the US and then by the United Kingdom, is that it sent a message to the Taliban, that they could roam across Afghanistan, with relative freedom with very limited consequences."

This explosion of militarist rhetoric left Prime Minister Boris Johnson to pose as the voice of reason ahead of today's recalled session of Parliament on Afghanistan. "The critique is perfectly reasonable that we didn't see this coming," he told BBC Radio 4. "But unless someone's going to explain how many extra UK troops we should put in, in the absence of the US commitment, I think the right thing for us to focus on is the evacuation effort, and how we now use every lever that we've got at our disposal with all due realism, to try and moderate the influence and the impact of the regime that comes next." He urged instead a diplomatic offensive to ensure that that no country should recognize the Taliban, as Afghanistan's neighbours China, Russia, Pakistan and Turkey all appear set to do.

The vicious infighting within and between the major parties is a measure of the crisis facing British imperialism. The failure of the US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan is an unmitigated disaster for the political, corporate and financial elite, which has relied on its "special relationship" with the US to assert its own imperialist interests in the world arena. It was to strengthen this reactionary alliance and support the predatory interests of its own corporations that Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair joined the US-led "war on terror," deploying 55,000 combat troops to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014.

This criminal war has cost the lives of 457 British army personnel, stationed in the southern Helmand province where there were frequent armed clashes. More than 2,600 soldiers and airmen were wounded, while a further 5,000 suffer from psychological trauma.

As well as combatants, British troops are estimated to have killed at least 500 civilians and contributed directly to the ravaging of the country. According to Frank Ledwidge's 2013 book *Investment in Blood*, the war in Afghanistan had cost Britain at least £37 billion—nearly double the official figure.

In the face of the threat of an outburst of anger among working people at the bitter end of a deeply unpopular war, it is left once again to Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour "left" to try and smooth things over.

The former chair of the Stop the War Coalition issued his first and only anodyne tweet yesterday, which accepted the narrative that the two decades of war had aimed to "achieve security for the Afghan people or prevent the spread of terrorism," but had failed.

He added, "The War on Terror and its architects' reckless use of force to deal with complex political issued has had profound, uncountable, and unacceptable human costs," while tactfully failing to mention that one of those architects, and of the subsequent illegal war against Iraq, was his predecessor as leader of the Labour Party, Blair.

When he joins Blair's followers in the parliamentary debate today, Corbyn's message will consist of appealing "for the UK to play its part in a robust diplomatic effort that engages regional powers to ensure stability"—a position indistinguishable from that which will be advanced by Johnson.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact