



Afghan lessons and Taiwan's need for closer EU-U.S. security coordination

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Abstract

As the U.S. pursues strategic retrenchment from the Middle East in order to address the rise of China in Asia, this provides an opportunity for closer EU-U.S.-Taiwan coordination for regional security in the Indo-Pacific.

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Analysis

On January 19, 2022, Open Door USA – a California-based religious persecution watchdog organization – released its annual report revealing Afghanistan is officially the world's top religious persecutor, having replaced North Korea as the No. 1 country most dangerous for Christians.¹

North Korea had topped the list for 20 consecutive years, but with the fallout from U.S. troop withdrawal and Taliban takeover, Afghanistan has been pushed to the top spot.

Henrietta Blyth, CEO of Open Doors UK and Ireland, warned that the fall of Kabul has emboldened Islamist extremists worldwide, and "Factions like Islamic State and Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF) now see their goal of an Islamic caliphate – once thwarted in Iraq and Syria – as, once again, achievable."²

Blyth believed that "The withdrawal of these troops said to the people that the symbol of freedom was gone and it made them despair and feel hopeless," and she is not alone. Since Afghanistan's collapse in August 2021 and the hastened U.S. withdrawal, many allies have been re-evaluating the credibility of America's security guarantee, spurring animated debates in Japan, Taiwan, Israel and the EU.

Allies debate U.S. security guarantee

In Tokyo, some pundits at the Japan Institute for National Fundamentals (or Kokkiken, 国基研) called for Japan to become militarily self-reliant, and lamented how China will benefit from the U.S. vacuum in Afghanistan.³ For example, Takashi Arimoto noted how U.S. Afghan withdrawal is emblematic of a larger trend of U.S. retrenchment, and cautions that "Japan cannot defend itself with its 'exclusively defensive posture'." While clarifying Japan and Afghanistan are not identical cases, Arimoto nonetheless called for Japan to acquire new weaponry to defend itself "even without U.S. help in the event of an armed conflict over Senkaku Islands or on the Korean Peninsula."⁴

The Vice President of the Institute, Tadae Takubo, held a more somber view.⁵ He sees that the "U.S. military, the most powerful in the world, was defeated in a 20-year war with Afghan Taliban", and expressed concern Afghanistan may again be a safe haven for al-Qaeda and Islamic State terrorists. As such Takubo believes the shared interest of counter-terrorism in Afghanistan may temper current Sino-U.S. friction, and "provide some room for cooperation and elasticity to the U.S. China confrontation framework of democracy vs. autocracy." Others in a *Nikkei Asia* article echo concerns over Washington's perceived failure in Afghanistan, with former U.S. commander in Afghanistan David Barno decrying that "as allies look

¹ Open Door USA World Watch List 2022, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/>; Julia Duin, "Afghanistan tops North Korea as World's Worst Religion Persecutor Nation, Report Says", *Newsweek*, January 20, 2022.

² "Afghanistan replaces North Korea as most dangerous place for a Christian", *Christian Today*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/afghanistan.replaces.north.korea.as.most.dangerous.place.to.be.a.christian/138061.htm>

³ Takashi Arimoto, "Japan Should Become Self-Reliant in the Wake of Afghan Defeat", Japan Institute for National Fundamentals (JINF) *Speaking Out #821*, August 23, 2021, <https://en.jinf.jp/weekly/archives/8650>; Tadashi Narabayashi, "China Eying Afghan Mineral Resources", *JINF Speaking Out #822*, August 23, 2021, <https://en.jinf.jp/weekly/archives/8653>

⁴ Takashi Arimoto, "Japan Should Become Self-Reliant in the Wake of Afghan Defeat", Japan Institute for National Fundamentals (JINF) *Speaking Out #821*, August 23, 2021, <https://en.jinf.jp/weekly/archives/8650>

⁵ Tadae Takubo, "Taliban Victory May Change U.S.-China Confrontation Framework", *JINF Speaking Out #820*, August 23, 2021, <https://en.jinf.jp/weekly/archives/8641>



at this, they are going to wonder not just about America's credibility, but I think America's will to lead."⁶

Taiwan also had spirited discussions, with Kuomintang (KMT) members such as Jaw Shaw-kong (趙少康), Johnny Chiang (江啟臣) and Eric Chu (朱立倫) voice their unease over whether U.S. is a reliable ally, while the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in the main argues that Afghanistan and Taiwan cannot be compared.⁷ Indeed as J. Michael Cole argued in a *Global Taiwan Brief*, U.S. mission in Afghanistan was one of countering the internal threat of terrorism and insurgency, while Taiwan is a stable and vibrant democracy facing an external threat.⁸ Stephen Nagy in *The Japan Times* also argued that U.S. has enduring interests in East Asia, and thus will remain committed to the security of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, especially given Taiwan's geostrategic location "connecting critical SLOCs in the ECS and SCS and its position in the technology supply chain."⁹

Meanwhile, Israel has a less sanguine view of the Afghan debacle, with former Israeli ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren warning that "the loss of Afghanistan has dealt an historic blow to America's prestige" and "will encourage the Islamic radicals who seek to destroy Israel and overthrow moderate Arab governments."¹⁰ At this inflection point, he questioned whether the U.S. will bounce back from this setback or pursue an isolationist policy, with many EU countries pondering the same question.

Several experts at the European Council on Foreign Relations also weighed in, and argued that after the fall of Afghanistan "the United States is clearly no longer willing to serve as the 'world's policeman'."¹¹ Jeremy Shapiro, the Council's director of research and former member of U.S. Department of State's policy planning staff, called for Europeans to develop "the will and the capability to exercise their own strategic sovereignty, including the capacity for military intervention with little or no American support", and warned "it is time to wake up and smell the post-American coffee."

In light of these uncertainties, the question invariably arises of whether the U.S. is truly returning to isolationism, and therefore no longer a reliable ally?

Chain Isolationism, or Strategic Retrenchment?

The answer is no, according to Charles Kupchan, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a former adviser to both the Obama and Clinton administrations.¹² But, a strategic retrenchment is inevitable, as laid out in his recent book *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself from the*

⁶ Andrew North, "Taliban triumph: anatomy of a disaster in Afghanistan", *Nikkei Asia*, August 18, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Taliban-triumph-anatomy-of-a-disaster-in-Afghanistan>

⁷ Brian Hioe, "Afghanistan's Collapse: The View from Taiwan", *The Diplomat*, August 25, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/afghanistans-collapse-the-view-from-taiwan/>

⁸ J. Michael Cole, "The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Future Stability in the Taiwan Strait", *Global Taiwan Brief*, Vol. 6, Issue 17, August 2021, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2021/08/vol-6-issue-17/#JMichaelCole08252021>

⁹ "Afghansitan is not Japan, South Korea or Taiwan", *Japan Times*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/08/24/commentary/japan-commentary/u-s-security-commitments/>

¹⁰ Michael Oren, "The Taliban win forces the question: What's next for the U.S.?", *Times of Israel*, August 18, 2021, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-taliban-win-forces-the-question-whats-next-for-the-us/>

¹¹ "The fall of the Afghan government and what it means for Europe", European Council for Foreign Relations, August 25, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-fall-of-the-afghan-government-and-what-it-means-for-europe/>

¹² "Isolationism by Charles Kupchan—charting a solo course", *Financial Times*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/150c3ca0-f108-41d3-b4d5-e2a13f484699>



World.¹³ As Kupchan views it, American history is largely defined by two big periods, one of isolationism from 1789 to 1941, and the other of pursuing liberal internationalism from 1941 to the election of Donald Trump.¹⁴ Now, after decades of costly unnecessary embroilment with “forever wars” abroad and domestic economic woes at home, Kupchan sees the Biden administration’s task is to find a middle path between doing too little and doing too much, one of judicious retrenchment rather than hemispheric isolation.¹⁵

To that end, Kupchan, who is an informal adviser to the Biden administration, clarifies that the U.S. should retrench, not retreat, from global engagement.¹⁶ He argues that the U.S. can no longer be the world policeman but can still play the role of great power pacifier, pulling back from regime change wars in the Middle East to focus on Russia in Europe and China in East Asia. Kupchan believes that “dealing with China will probably be one of the most challenging tasks for the Atlantic community”, and Washington will need to look for partnerships to help burden sharing in addressing global security challenges, as it retrenches judiciously with the goal of “bringing the country’s role in the world back into line with its means.”¹⁷ Just as Britain had to adjust its hegemonic role in the postwar world as America ascended in power, the U.S. would likewise need to retrench – or rebalance – its priorities to address rising powers such as China in order to sustain a liberal order in a “post-Western world” in which the U.S. no longer has primacy globally.¹⁸ And as Washington pursues strategic retrenchment, this will have important implications for U.S. allies such as Taiwan.

Improving Defense Readiness and Regional Security Burden-Sharing

Presently, the general consensus among European and Asian allies seems to be continual reassurance of Washington’s commitment to regional security, yet there is a need for allies to step up in their own defense readiness and to help shoulder global security burdens as the U.S. retrenches. Speaking at Taiwan’s fifth Ketagalan Forum-2021 Asia Pacific Dialogue on August 31, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Craft reaffirmed Washington’s commitment to Taiwan’s security, but also exhorted the island democracy that “there is no better guarantor of freedom than one’s own people” and that “now is not a time for complacency.”¹⁹ Vincent Chao, former director of the political division at the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office of the United States, also encouraged Taiwan to demonstrate its readiness

¹³ Charles A. Kupchan, *Isolationism; A History of America’s Efforts to Shield Itself from the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. xiv.

¹⁴ Soli Ozel, Interview with Charles Kupchan, “U.S. Isolationism: How to Step back without Stepping Away?” Institut Montaigne, January 12, 2021, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/us-isolationism-how-step-back-without-stepping-away>

¹⁵ Charles Kupchan, ‘The Case for a Middle Path in U.S. Foreign Policy’, *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/15/judicious-retrenchment-isolationism-internationalism/>

¹⁶ <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/us-isolationism-how-step-back-without-stepping-away>

¹⁷ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/15/judicious-retrenchment-isolationism-internationalism/>

¹⁸ Charles A. Kupchan, “Reordering Order: Global Change and the Need for a New Normative Consensus” in *Liberal Order in a post-Western world*, The German Marshall Fund’s Transatlantic Academy Collaborative Report, by Trine Flockhardt, Charles A Kupchan, Christina Lin, Bartłomiej E. Nowak, Patrick W. Quirk, and Lanxin Xiang, April 2014, <https://repository.graduateinstitute.ch/record/296801?ln=en>

¹⁹ <https://www.ketagalanforum.tw/?Lang=en>; John Feng, “If Taiwan is Lost, We Lost Too”, Trump’s UN Envoy Says Amid China Threat”, *Newsweek*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/if-taiwan-lost-we-lose-too-trumps-un-envoy-says-amid-china-threat-1624557>



for self-defense in order to inspire others to commit to its security.²⁰

This appears to address an ongoing concern the past few years regarding Taiwan's military capabilities and resolve, stemming from its rush to move the armed forces toward an all-volunteer military, and drastically reducing compulsory military service from two years to just 4 months during Ma Ying-jeou's administration back in 2013.²¹ South Korea – despite being an U.S. treaty ally – still has mandatory conscription periods between 18-21 months, and Israel – similar to Taiwan as a non-treaty ally – also has mandatory conscription of 30 months for men and 24 months for women.²² Writing in a 2018 *Reuters* article, Yimou Lee observed that given the stigma of Taiwan's past as a military dictatorship, convincing young people to join the armed forces still faces difficulties.²³ However, William Stanton, former director of the American Institute in Taiwan, expressed concern that this then “raises a very difficult question about national morale” in the event of a cross-strait conflict, and as Vincent Chao observed, whether it would inspire others to commit to Taiwan's security.²⁴

Nonetheless, challenges are opportunities, and the post-Afghan juncture is a chance for Taiwan to revamp its conscription and training standard, and upgrade its defense readiness.²⁵ It should also step up security engagement within multilateral fora, whether with the Quad as a “plus one” member as recommended by Ambassador Craft at the Ketagalan Forum, as “NATO plus” to support the transatlantic alliance's new focus on China, or as suggested by former German Minister of Defense Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the EU and U.S. should support Taiwan's international participation whether by “stepping up parliament-to-parliament contacts, participating in the ‘Global Cooperation Training Framework’, promoting Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization, International Civil Aviation Organization, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and Interpol.”²⁶

Global Training and Cooperation Framework (GTCF) for one is a promising platform on which to support Taiwan's international engagement. Leveraging the platform, there is ample room for more informal opportunities of trilateral dialogues such as U.S.-Taiwan-European dialogue, U.S.-Taiwan-Israel dialogue, or U.S.-Taiwan-ASEAN dialogue, where Taiwan and international partners can exchange knowledge and

²⁰ Vincent Chao, “What the Fall of Afghanistan Means for Taiwan”, *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/what-the-fall-of-afghanistan-means-for-taiwan/>

²¹ “Taiwan cuts compulsory military service to 4 months”, *Taiwan Today*, January 2, 2012, <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=2&post=2137>; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/15/china-threat-invasion-conscription-taiwans-military-is-a-hollow-shell/>

²² Yeo Jun-suk, “S Korea military seeks to cut service to 18 months”, *The Korea Herald*, May 3, 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180503000809>; Anna Ahronheim, “IDF: Mandatory service shortened from 32 months to 30”, *Jerusalem Post*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/idf-mandatory-service-shortened-from-32-months-to-30-633397>

²³ Yimou Lee, “For Taiwan youth, military service is a hard sell despite China tension”, *Reuters*, October 28, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-military/for-taiwan-youth-military-service-is-a-hard-sell-despite-china-tension-idUSKCN1N20U3>

²⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-military/for-taiwan-youth-military-service-is-a-hard-sell-despite-china-tension-idUSKCN1N20U3>; <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/what-the-fall-of-afghanistan-means-for-taiwan/>; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taiwan-military-readiness-china-threat-us-defense-11635174187>

²⁵ Hilton Yip, “Can Taiwan learn from what happened in Afghanistan?”, *Hong Kong Free Press*, August 28, 2021, <https://hongkongfp.com/2021/08/28/can-taiwan-learn-from-what-happened-in-afghanistan/>

²⁶ Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, “Sustaining a Balance of Power for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific” in *Mind the Gap: Priorities for Transatlantic China Policy*, joint report by the Aspen Strategy Group, Munich Security Conference and MERICS, July 2021, p.54, <https://securityconference.org/publikationen/bericht-der-transatlantic-reflection-group-on-china/>



expertise in the absence of Taiwan's official membership in international institutions.²⁷ Some issues areas for cooperation include resilient supply chains, semiconductor and data protection as pointed out by EU's Indo-Pacific strategy.²⁸ As Taiwan President Tsai Ing-Wen underscored, 'Taiwan is committed to working with regional actors to ensure regional stability...and will not take our security partners' cavalry for granted', and she further expressed that Taiwan is ready to be "part of the solution" in a post-pandemic era.²⁹ And as Taiwan assumes the promising posture of increased multilateral security engagement and defense readiness, it would likely be well-placed to be part of the solution in a post-Afghanistan era as well.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

²⁷ <https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/global-cooperation-and-training-framework-programs-gctf/>

²⁸ Grzegorz Stec, Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy, "EU-Taiwan ties: Between expectations and reality", *MERICs*, January 17, 2022, <https://merics.org/en/opinion/eu-taiwan-ties-between-expectations-and-reality>

²⁹ <https://www.newsweek.com/if-taiwan-lost-we-lose-too-trumps-un-envoy-says-amid-china-threat-1624557>