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Now will both London and Washington listen?

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Now will both London and Washington listen? For more than three decades there have been warnings — in books, articles, speeches, columns on this page — about over-dependence by the democracies on American military might as being the sure way to solve the world's problems.

America as a continued partner and friend — yes. But as a boss-figure, policy-decider, direction-setter, unipolar superpower, to whose coat-tails nations must cling at all costs for their security, and much else — no. That era has passed. In a networked world, in a digitally revolutionized world, old relationships have long since changed.

The big battalions and the mightiest defence budgets no longer decide. The battlefield has largely shifted. The Afghan withdrawal is certainly a botched and tragic muddle, but the first strategic mistake was to believe that occupying armed forces, once they had completed their specific task — in this case, the hunting down of the mass-killer Osama bin Laden — could somehow stay on and change the national culture by their presence.

Instead, the vital war zone has shifted to realms of psychology, communications dominance, cyber ingenuity and superiority, unmanned weaponry, sustained demoralization and discrediting of rival causes and stories, cunning diplomacy, promoting internal dissent within enemy formations, camps and alliances. Technologies, not tanks and boots, are now the spearhead.

Over a decade ago one British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, warned his colleagues that British relations with the U.S., long labelled “the special relationship” from the World War II years, needed overhauling in the oncoming world (that of course was long before Brexit). The future U.K.-U.S. relationship should be, he said, “solid but not slavish.”

But his warning fell on deaf ears. In fact, when then-U.S. President Barack Obama, visited the U.K. in 2011, zealous officials insisted that the Hague phrase be dropped during the visit for fear of offense. So overwhelming was the prevailing wisdom that America was the number one ally, the absolute special relation to which the U.K. was bound by unbreakable ties of defence support, intelligence, technology and coordination, as well as history and experience, that any doubts were unacceptable.

This came hard on the heels of the total U.K. commitment in support of American intervention, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. The British prime minister at the time,

Tony Blair, had assured the then-U.S. president, George W. Bush, that “we will be with you to the end,” and took the U.K. full tilt into Afghanistan and Iraq to prove it.

Now, all these years later, the same Tony Blair, a bit wiser, has swung to the other extreme and calls President Joe Biden’s withdrawal decision “imbecilic.”

Perhaps this is going too far, but Blair also derides Biden’s phrase deploring “forever wars,” and here he is right. The new warfare is continuous and unending. The techniques used by the West’s foes fully appreciate that. They are ceaseless and intrusive. So must be the efforts of its defenders.

The other message that needs to get through is that the Afghan crisis is not part of another Cold War, this time with China. For one thing, an ascending, high-tech China is very different from the crumbling Soviet Union of the last century. For another the clear-cut difference between doctrines — capitalism and communism — is now blurred as the West socializes and China embraces new forms of capitalism.

Interpreting the Afghanistan debacle in an ideological context is a mistake. China and Russia may exhibit a bit of glee at American discomfort. But they will soon see that an Afghanistan which becomes a poisonous fount of vicious terrorism helps them not at all. On the contrary, on this front, as with climate issues, all nations, big and small, are on the same side and have no choice but to work together.

Major nations may disagree about many other things, but all who want a stable civil order and progress for their citizens have a common interest against medieval barbarism and lawless inhumanity. It may be difficult for old-time ideological warriors to swallow, but with the combined cooperation of Russia and China the horror of the Taliban government can, if necessary, be swiftly brought to its knees financially and administratively. The cellphone that every gun-toting Taliban carries can be neutralized. Their command-and-control systems can be deadened

But without that cooperation the West’s sanctioning efforts will always be undermined and the Taliban’s hideous form of governance will prosper.

Is that what China or Russia want? Is that what any nation with pretensions to civility and a wish for some degree of international respect desires?

Of course not. So forget ideology for the moment. This is a central Asian battle for common humanity. Even to call the Taliban “terrorists” elevates them, given the ambiguity that sometimes creeps into that term. On their record, and until they prove conclusively otherwise, they are nihilist butchers, steeped in hatred of women, whom humankind cannot allow to succeed.

If the crucial central Asian region falls to this kind of blood-soaked fanaticism, or if it gets caught up in a self-defeating East-West great power rivalry, that will threaten stability and security across the globe.

This is not a hegemonic battleground and must not become so. When world leaders gather, whether at the virtual G7 that recently took place or at the forthcoming U.N. Security Council event, this is the reality that must from now on be grasped. For some of them, including the Americans, that may prove difficult.

Perhaps the message of hope and unity from last month's Olympic Games, or the current Paralympic Games, all conducted with great success to the eternal credit of Japan, can provide better and wiser guidance than these great international assemblies as this sorrowful saga unfolds.