

Quo Vadis, USA? – der Podcast des Heidelberg Center for American Studies

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“Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan – A Sea Change in U.S Foreign Policy?”

Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, retired United States Army officer, Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies at the Center for European Policy Analysis in Washington, DC.

Anja Schüler: Hello and welcome to a new episode of the podcast of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies at the University of Heidelberg, my name is Anja Schüler. U.S. President Joe Biden declared last month that his country has accomplished its mission of denying terrorists a safe haven in Afghanistan and announced complete withdrawal of the roughly three thousand remaining U.S. troops by September 11th. This is, of course, the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States that triggered U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. U.S. troops began withdrawal on April 25th, and it could be completed as early as July 4th. America's war in Afghanistan has seen four presidents and more than thirteen thousand airstrikes. It has cost 2,400 American lives and left 20,000 troops injured. In today's episode of our podcast, we will look back on this conflict and ponder the future of Afghanistan with Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges. He is a retired United States Army officer who served as commanding general United States Army Europe, and he is currently the Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies at the Center for European Policy Analysis in Washington, DcC. Ben Hodges is joining me from Frankfurt today. Welcome to the HCA podcast.

Ben Hodges: Thank you, Anja. Glad to be here.

Anja Schüler: So, let's start with a quick recap for the listeners of our podcast. How did America's longest war on foreign soil begin and why?

Ben Hodges: After 9/11, the United States made the decision to go to Afghanistan to eradicate the source of those terrorist attacks. Osama Bin Laden, of course, and his associates had safe haven in Afghanistan. For the first time ever in its history, in the history of our great alliance NATO, all the members of the alliance agreed that this constituted an Article 5-scenario: An armed attack on one was an armed attack on all. And so, our allies, including Germany, agreed to help go into Afghanistan. So that was the origin of the beginning of the operation. And if we would have left after one year, things would have frankly been much better than where we are right now. We didn't. But as the president said, we accomplished the principal task of eliminating Al Qaida from Afghanistan, though we stayed too long.

Anja Schüler: As you said, initially, this was quite a successful mission. Could you maybe sketch out the strategies that made the military mission successful?

Ben Hodges: Well, the most important thing was that we had a very clear objective, which was to make sure that Afghanistan could not be a safe haven for terrorist attacks against the United States or our European allies. That was very clear. And we had good intelligence, and we also had cooperation with various tribal groups on the ground. It started off with special forces, these kinds of capabilities, and so we had this success in the beginning because of this very clearly defined, narrow objective. That is always so important for the military to understand what the objective is, and, of course, having allies to be able to work together was essential on the ground as well as from Europe.

Anja Schüler: After these initial military successes, it looked like Afghanistan would become a laboratory for democratic modernization. Some early successes include rebuilding infrastructure and improving education and professional development for girls and women. How did the U.S. and, as you mentioned, its allies go about achieving the goals of that second stage?

Ben Hodges: In hindsight, it looks like such an obvious mistake. At the time, it seemed reasonable, I think, for a variety of reasons, all good-intentioned reasons. You get to Afghanistan, and you realize that five decades previously, there had been a large American presence in Afghanistan to help with agriculture, the power generation. These things had worked in the past. And so, I think there was a desire to try to improve the quality of life for people there in the belief that prosperous democratic societies can continue to reject the appeal of extremism. So, that was the philosophical thinking. And, of course, the United States, Germany or other European allies believe in the importance and the value of every human. It was kind of hard to just walk away from a situation where women were treated like third- and fourth-class citizens and children; opportunities for education et cetera were so limited. That's we almost can't help ourselves, we want to try to make things better where we are now. Again, in hindsight, looking back, this was a strategic error. We should have made it clear from the top, from the president, that our strategy is changing, it's now going to be about making Afghanistan look like Slovenia or a smaller European country. Perhaps, that was never clearly laid out for several years. And I think that's how we began to lose focus on the actual purpose.

Anja Schüler: But it was still a military operation, right? Could it be that these tasks of nation building, democratization, establishing an effective police force, defending the rights of women, are beyond the reach of a military operation?

Ben Hodges: Well, your last point is accurate. This is not what the military was designed to do. However, the militaries in all our countries are typically very adaptive. They bring stuff and capability. You have logistics, you have communications, you have a structure with people to do things. And so, there was no question that our ambassador, that the civilian leadership oversaw the operation. We each supported what we called provincial reconstruction teams, which were predominantly civilian, of foreign ministry, economic ministry and so on, to help

accomplish those tasks that were not traditional military tasks. In sum, there was an extensive civilian effort. I would imagine the same was true up in Mazar e Sharif, where the Germany was the lead nation. I was in Kandahar, where the U.S., U.K., and Canada were the lead nations, but we had civilians everywhere working on these as well. But your point is correct, the military's first task is not about culture as our organization and our capabilities are not ideally suited for that, where we are ideally suited to enable to help our civilian leadership.

Anja Schüler: So, let me ask you this, what did ultimately lead to the withdrawal of the troops? Why did it happen now? Why didn't it happen earlier?

Ben Hodges: This is something I think people are going to be studying for a long time. And of course, Afghanistan didn't happen in a vacuum. The United States got sidetracked. We also invaded Iraq a year after we went into Afghanistan. That took away so many resources, including political energy and momentum, and intellectual capital was focused on Iraq, which was a completely different type of situation. And Afghanistan became the second priority. So, U.S. government and other governments were not able to focus on the mission in Afghanistan, and I think that contributed to us losing focus on our original purpose. Anyway, I was in Kandahar, Afghanistan, for fifteen months between 2009 and 2010. This was when President Obama emphasized what we called the Obama surge. Another 30,000 American troops came into Afghanistan, increased numbers of British soldiers and Romanian soldiers, and we finally had enough capability. I remember thinking: "All right, now we're really going to get this done." This was this was nine years after it started. When we left in 2010, I thought: "OK, but I think we turned the corner." Of course, we were turning the corner every year. But at some point, President Trump wanted to get out of there; President Obama wanted to get out of there; and President Biden wanted us to get out of there. But how do you do that?

I think three things contributed to the final decision. Number one was a recognition that we had, in fact, been turning the corner for all these years, and there was no end in sight. In other words, it takes political courage to do this because the president is certainly getting quite a bit of criticism, but not that much, not as much as one might think. And so, he was smart enough to realize that we have other issues, other priorities particularly inside the United States. We need to end this now. And so, he was smart enough to take advantage of what President Trump had started with. That's number one. Number two, I think President Biden did a good job working with our allies. This was always my concern that the U.S. might do something unilaterally, which is what I think President Trump would have probably done on his own. But it was important that our allies were consulted because Germany and others had invested so much as well. That's the theme of in together, out together. So, that was important. The third thing was a realization that we had never done what was necessary with Pakistan. Pakistan was a haven for Taliban and for Al Qaida for years and years. And we, the West, and particularly the United States, had never been willing to do what was necessary with Pakistan to deny haven to the enemy. And we

know from history that in an insurgency, if they have safe haven, you're never going to ever defeat them. This was an important part of the calculation that we worry about Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of extremists. We're not willing to put the pressure on Pakistan. Then, we cannot in good conscience keep sending young women and men into Afghanistan.

Anja Schüler: Do you think the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan reflects larger, more fundamental change in U.S. foreign policy? Has the willingness of the U.S. to lead wars on foreign soil diminished also because public support of these missions has changed?

Ben Hodges: Excellent question. Two or three points to this. I have to say for me personally, I'm relieved that the decision was made. I think it was the right decision, but I still have been feeling a high degree of melancholy since the announcement, because I think of the lives that were lost, not just American and allied lives, but thousands of Afghans, citizens, civilians. I think about the cost of trillions of dollars that have gone in there and a bit of my own personal pride and disappointment at knowing that as much as we tried that here we are twenty years later, that one can't declare victory. It is mainly just thinking how hard so many people worked for so long, for twenty years, and they did not have a satisfying end. But that's not strategy, strategy is about interest, and it's about the math. And so, the other part and your talk about public support – a huge mistake that our government made, starting with President Bush and then every administration afterwards, was something we never raised taxes to pay for this. American families, unless they had a son or daughter or brother that was deployed never felt it. There was no pressure from the public on the Congress or on the administration because they were not having to pay taxes for this. This was a significant mistake. When you ask, does this change U.S. policy or philosophy about foreign wars for sure? I hope that we will have learned the lesson that if we're going to add or do something like this, you must pay for it, you must bring along the entire public and you must be able to explain it to the public how this helps us.

Anja Schüler: You're saying that domestic policymaking has changed, public attitudes towards those wars have changed. Were these changes due only to the U.S. experience in Afghanistan? You mentioned the Iraq War earlier. Did that maybe play a much more dramatic role?

Ben Hodges: Well, I'll say this: It is going to be a long time before people fully trust public leadership, military as well as civilian leadership, after you look back at what happened in the first couple of years – the decision to go to Afghanistan, the decision to go into Iraq. The Congress and the public will be skeptical if there is another thing like this. Now, we should not learn the wrong lesson as there is a time and a place and circumstances where you must use military force to protect interests and allies. But making sure that the information, the intelligence is correct, working more closely

with allies on sharing intelligence, I think these are important parts of what the foreign policy should be.

Anja Schüler: Let's get back to the timing of this. Initially, of course, it was a decision by Donald Trump and there has been some reporting that Afghans seem to be disappointed that Joe Biden did not reverse Trump's decision. Afghans may see this withdrawal as a kind of betrayal. Do you think Afghanistan will be able to preserve its modest gains towards democracy and women's rights without the U.S. and NATO protection?

Ben Hodges: You ask really hard questions. First, a major concern for everybody that served in Afghanistan is: What will happen to women? What will happen to Afghans who had the courage to accept leadership positions in the Afghan government? What will happen to tribal leaders and district leaders who attempted to work towards a support the Afghan government? What happens to them? And, of course, more personally, what happens to young Afghans who worked directly for the allies, translators, guides, advisors, et cetera? What will happen to them? And I certainly hope that all our nations will fast track visa requests or asylum requests for these Afghans who could be at risk. Now, having said that, one of the mistakes that we made, of course, was we didn't truly understand Afghan society. The tribe, the families, the dominant part of Afghan culture in a thousand years is not likely to become a European or North American nation because of culture. It's not intelligence, it's culture and geography, and so I think I know I personally was very slow to realize the importance of the district level, of a "Landkreis," and its leadership there. What do people want? They want electricity, they'd like to be able to have clean water, and they'd like to be able to get their produce to market. I mean, that's it, and we were slow to realize that. There was too much Kabul-centric effort. Having said all that, I think we did a good job of training Afghan army and Afghan police, we as the collective gave them the opportunity to develop security organizations and to improve governance. There are a lot of good, smart, committed Afghans in security services as well as in government. I think it's not going to be the apocalyptic end that some people have predicted. The Taliban today is twenty years from when it all started. I think that the Taliban leadership today, while none of them are going to be a Nobel Peace Prize winner, are probably a little bit more politically savvy. They know that they need some political legitimacy and I think I have a very, very slight degree of optimism that this can be worked out somehow, but it's not going to be pretty.

Anja Schüler: Let's maybe stick with that last point, and that would have been my last question to you. The peace talks remain deadlocked; the Taliban do not acknowledge the Afghan government. What can the West do to ensure that Afghanistan is never again used to plan and launch terrorist attacks? Can the Afghan security forces hold off the Taliban without troops or have the Taliban maybe, as you cautiously, optimistically said, changed?

Ben Hodges: We are going to retain a modest counterterrorism capability in Afghanistan, which I think is important. I believe that the president is making it clear to the Taliban and hopefully to Pakistan as well that we reserve the right to come back in and smash targets, if necessary. Now it's easier to say than it is to do, and of course, you know, we had the same sort of promises after Vietnam when the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam, and it was not that long, just a couple of years when North Vietnam had overtaken South Vietnam. I don't know that this is exactly the same situation as that, and it boils down to the ability of the Afghan government to inspire their own people. We had given so much equipment to the South Vietnamese Government, and they had so much capability. However, there was a corrupt leadership, and people were not inspired. The North, in contrast, had more motivation. Surely, the Afghan people and the Afghan government are capable. They have the manpower to protect themselves. Do they have the willpower? I think that's going to be an important part of this. I hope that there will be nations, other nations that will reach out to the Taliban leadership and encourage them to look at a different way. Instead of going back over 500 years, they should be encouraged to think about the future in a different way.

Anja Schüler: But it is important for the United States to retain the capability for intelligence in Afghanistan.

Ben Hodges: It is essential. You know, I live here in Frankfurt, and I can almost see the Taunus mountains from where I live. The Romans established the Limes Germanicus along the Taunus, and for over two centuries, they had soldiers on Taunus on the Limes to protect Rome from the Germanic tribes, those barbarians all the way from Hamburg. In over two centuries, Rome invested in that Limes. And I think for the United States, Germany, U.K., France, Netherlands, Poland and other allies, there is a value in maintaining a Limes of some sort to protect Heidelberg, to protect Frankfurt, to protect Berlin, as well as Washington and New York and Dallas.

Anja Schüler: That's an interesting historical analogy. Thank you, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, for helping us to put the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan into perspective. I think we've had some great insights here and we are looking forward to having you back at the HCA in the not-too-distant future.

Ben Hodges: Anja, thank you very much for the privilege.

Anja Schüler: You have been listening to the HCA podcast "Quo Vadis USA?" and this wraps up our 45th episode. Thank you for being with us today. We will be back in two weeks when U.S. Consul General Patricia Lacina will be our guest. She is about to leave her current posting in Frankfurt, and I will be talking to her about her time in Germany. Until then, please stay tuned and please stay healthy.