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Afghanistan: A Window onto a Potential Harris-Walz Pivot on Foreign Policy ^[1]

The third anniversary of the US pullout from Afghanistan offers an interesting template to consider how US foreign policy might shift under a Harris-Walz administration. President Biden's approval ratings sank, and never recovered after the catastrophic execution of the withdrawal. Harris supported ending the US military presence in Afghanistan, but would she have clung to the Trump-negotiated deal with the Taliban, ignoring the advice of the US military and the pleas of Afghan women? In her 2019 campaign she spoke about the need to "protect the gains that have been made for Afghan women and others."

Harris's comments on the war in Gaza, including her suffering in her Democratic National Convention acceptance speech, suggest a greater sensitivity than Biden to humanitarian concerns. Also, that the Vice President is more in tune with the sentiments of her party: her statement about the Palestinian "right to dignity, security, freedom and self-determination" drew some of the loudest applause of the convention. And Walz's perspective on China, focusing on its people and their human rights, points to a similar direction.

From Walz's thirty plus trips to China has emerged a clear-eyed perspective on the autocratic regime in Beijing and the potential threat it poses, coupled with empathy and affection for the Chinese people and their culture. Separating the people of a country from their politics occurs less often in the US than elsewhere. On my first visit to Pakistan, I was greeted warmly by a student leader at LUMS (Lahore University of Management Sciences) who declared with a broad smile, "Welcome! When we say we hate America, we never mean the people."

From Trump's demonization of Chinese people during COVID, to Biden's indifference to the humanitarian disaster in Gaza or the catastrophic fate of Afghan women under the Taliban, the lives of the people of a country (or their counterparts living in the US) too rarely factor into foreign policy calculations. This makes no sense in an age of soft power, twenty-four seven news, citizen journalism, and social media. Hypocrisy matters. The Biden administration's blanket support for Israel and continued provision of arms despite findings that Israel is committing war crimes undermines the credibility of US officials on human rights and the international rules-based order. Nor can they speak about advancing the status of women and girls, given the dire state of Afghan women, confined at home with their rights stripped away, after the US's precipitous exit.

On this dark anniversary, looking at Afghanistan from the perspective of its people, and what they accomplished in the twenty year interlude between Taliban regimes, yields a very different picture than the one painted by President Biden and his administration of a corrupt, feckless government and an incompetent, cowardly military. This is not to litigate whether or not the American military presence should have ended, but rather to suggest a different approach to understanding the country.

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This new strategy of weighing people as much as policy might help avoid future blunders, such as the poorly executed Afghan withdrawal, which resulted in the complete decimation of all the progress made during twenty years of US investment in lives, funds, and dedicated work to help the Afghan people.

Vice President Harris and Governor Walz appear to favor a more people-centered approach to foreign policy than has the Biden administration, even if the contours and details of this approach are still unclear. Afghanistan offers a good case study for understanding how analyzing a country through its people and culture, instead of through its government and political-military actions, yields different conclusions. In Afghanistan, what media, sports, music and other forms of creative expression tell us contrasts dramatically with the Taliban's extremist, restricted ideology and rule.

In March 2019 these two opposite versions of Afghanistan took center stage. Representatives of the Taliban – a terrorist group with no governing power— began negotiations with the Trump administration about the withdrawal of American forces, excluding the Afghan government. At the same time millions of Afghans were voting for a very different kind of future when they cast their ballots in the wildly popular *Afghan Star* singing contest for Zahra Elham, an eighteen year-old Afghan woman from the minority Hazara group. Think of it: the US government sits down with the Taliban, while the Afghan people break a glass ceiling, propelling a woman to nation-wide victory on the highest profile show on TV—a program the Taliban despised.

In another [CPD blog](#), I discuss *Afghan Star*—Afghanistan's version of American Idol—and [the new podcast about it by the same name](#) hosted by music star John Legend. Legend chronicles the improbable success story of the musical competition that transcended Afghanistan's tribal and ethnic differences, revived Afghan music after it had been banned by the first Taliban regime, and gave war weary Afghans an escape into the relatively democratic and meritocratic world of a crowd-voting talent show.

Afghan Star was just one example of many progressive developments in the spheres of culture, education, and media in the twenty years of the US presence in Afghanistan, as I [reference in the other blog](#). American funds supported many of these advances, so US officials must have known about Zahra Elam's breakthrough, the award-winning [Afghan Girls Robotics Team](#), the renown all female ensemble [Zohra](#) of the [Afghan National Institute of Music](#) (ANIM), and other outstanding cultural developments.

Yet, these signs of change from an Afghan population that was embracing the principles and values of democracy seem to have made little impact on western policymakers, who tend to analyze countries through politics rather than culture. So, in Afghanistan, American decisionmakers saw [corruption](#), [weak institutions](#), and flawed elections that registered a

decline in the number of voters. Easy to conclude that democracy just doesn't work in Afghanistan.

If a President Harris and Vice President Walz pivot from the Biden administration's focus on military intervention and move towards a policy that incorporates humanitarian concerns and a recognition of the lives and aspirations of the people, not just their governments, then the case of Afghanistan suggests that analyzing a country through its culture – creative expression, sports, media - might be a good place to start.
