

NIALL FERGUSON: First, Biden betrayed the Afghans to the Taliban. Now, he's thrown Ukraine to the wolves

By Niall Ferguson For The Mail O Sunday

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Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Western world entered a strange interlude in which we forgot about the realities of great power politics. In a way, 79-year-old President [Joe Biden](#) personifies that forgetfulness.

During the 1990s, the West turned a blind eye to genocide in Rwanda and only woke up to the Balkans War after a great deal of dithering. In Bosnia and Kosovo, belated US intervention bailed out Europe.

After [9/11](#), we became laser-focused on a threat from an ideology – political or radical Islam or Islamism – not from a great power. We ‘went to war against terror’. The US led and Europe mostly followed.

In the end, we succeeded, and failed.

We succeeded in preventing another 9/11, killing Osama Bin Laden, and crushing Islamic State. We mostly failed to create a stable Iraq and utterly failed to create a stable Afghanistan.



President Joe Biden abandoned the people of Afghanistan to the Taliban.

But the real failure was to ignore the resurgence of two of the old great powers, China and Russia. Not just to ignore, but to enable their rise.

Americans helped China's rapid growth, especially after the Beijing government was allowed into the World Trade Organisation. Americans told themselves a fairy story that China would liberalise.

As for Russia, its return to military power was enabled by Europeans buying Russian natural gas and oil and turning a blind eye to Putin's increasingly despotic rule. Europeans told themselves a fairy story that Russia would liberalise.

We had ample evidence that we were making a mistake.

First, the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war, which followed Barack Obama's absurd declaration in 2013 that 'America is not the world's policeman'.

Then came the Russian annexation of Crimea and the first Ukrainian war in 2014, to which the West responded with feeble sanctions.

Joe Biden was Vice-President then. Has it slipped his mind how that played out?

There was a brief interruption to this story of collective amnesia under President Donald Trump.

Europeans were disgusted. But did Russia invade anywhere between 2017 and 2020?

Unfortunately, despite grand claims that the Biden administration would be a transformative presidency on a par with Roosevelt's, this has swiftly turned into a rerun of Jimmy Carter's weak presidency, with added dementia.

DOMESTICALLY the administration is in disarray with inflation higher than at any time since 1982, violent crime surging and the Southern border overwhelmed with illegal immigrants.



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But the picture abroad is worse.

Last year, Biden abandoned the people of Afghanistan to the Taliban. This year it is the turn of the people of Ukraine to be thrown to the wolves.

There was never the remotest chance that the threat of sanctions would deter Putin from invading.

It didn't help when Biden seemed to suggest he wouldn't necessarily penalise a 'minor' incursion.

The only thing that would have made Putin think twice was the presence in Ukraine of significant military hardware, but the Biden administration slowed deliveries of arms to Kyiv.

Last year, it removed sanctions on companies building the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, designed by Russia and Germany to bypass Ukraine. What's more, Biden discovered that China and Russia are hand in glove after he tried to get President Xi Jinping to dissuade Putin from invading Ukraine.

The naivety would beggar belief if Biden was not manifestly in his second childhood.

What happens next? First, despite spirited defence, Ukraine's military seems likely to be overwhelmed. There is heroic resistance but Russians will surely control the country's capital within days.

Second, the EU and US seem likely to impose the sanctions that cost themselves the least, and therefore hurt Putin the least.

Instead, Europeans should be cutting energy imports from Russia and the US must hammer Russian banks and arm Ukraine to the teeth. But that can't happen fast enough.

Inevitably, Putin will ask himself: Who's next? For the reconstruction of the Tsarist empire, which is his life's work, will not stop with the subjugation of Ukraine.

NATO will need to get serious, and fast, about bolstering the defences of the Baltic states and Poland.

Already, Putin is reminding the West of the old reality that only 'tactical' nuclear missiles could credibly check Russian conventional forces in case of a full-scale war – and those in turn would invite Russian nuclear retaliation and the possibility of Armageddon.

Next we could see a desperate scramble by Biden to resuscitate a nuclear deal with Iran in the hope of readmitting Iranian oil to the world market and easing the pressure on petrol prices.

Finally, and most importantly, if Putin can triumph in Ukraine, it significantly raises the probability that China will seek a similar triumph by invading Taiwan.

Malaise often takes the form of a cascade of reverses, as Jimmy Carter learned in 1979, when the Iranian revolution was followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

I fear we are at the early stage of just such a cascade today – and, as he watches it unfold, Joe Biden will helplessly wonder why it seems faintly familiar.

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