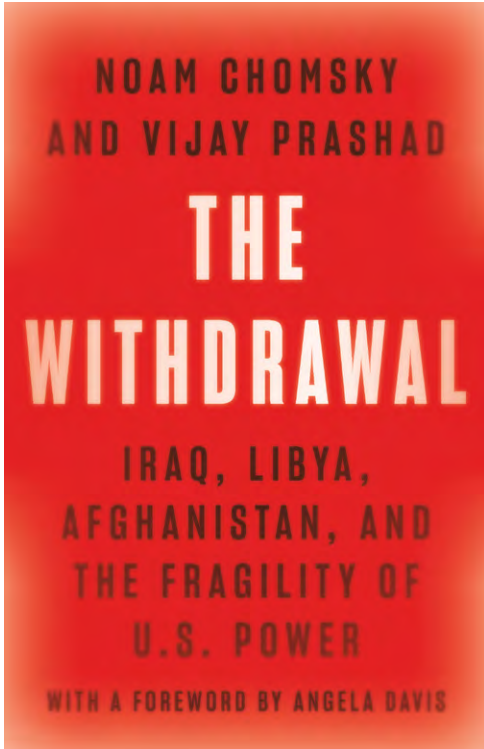




The Withdrawal:

Iraq, Libya,
Afghanistan,
and the Fragility
of U.S. Power

By Noam Chomsky and Vijay Prashad

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The fall of Kabul in August 2021 exposed a problem that had troubled American interventions long before the war in Afghanistan. The United States had the military resources to remove governments, defeat organised forces and sustain an extensive foreign presence. Still, those advantages had repeatedly failed to produce political settlements that could survive without its protection. In *The Withdrawal*, Noam Chomsky and Vijay Prashad examine this disparity through a series of conversations about Vietnam, Laos, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Their concern reaches beyond the failures of individual campaigns. They ask how a state with such formidable instruments of power can find its political authority increasingly contested.

However, the relationship between failed intervention and declining hegemony is neither automatic nor straightforward. Military setbacks may expose the limits of coercive power without necessarily diminishing a state's wider economic, diplomatic or institutional influence. Indeed, the ability to absorb costly failures while retaining a dominant international position may itself testify to the resilience of hegemonic power. The more consequential question is whether repeated interventions erode the legitimacy, alliances and political consent that allow military superiority to be translated into sustained international leadership. This distinction provides a useful framework for assessing the book's larger claim about the fragility of American power.

The book is an edited dialogue rather than a conventional academic study. Prashad frequently supplies historical context and introduces questions drawn from his research, while Chomsky draws on decades of criticism of American foreign policy. An introduction sets out their central argument, and a concluding chapter turns to China, Russia, and the changing international order. The authors describe Washington's disposition towards other states as a "Godfather attitude" (p. 10), under which force, economic pressure, and control over institutions discipline governments that resist American preferences. The language is deliberately provocative, but it identifies an important distinction. An intervention may fail to establish a durable political order while still demonstrating the costs of challenging a dominant power. Whether that demonstration was the principal intention of a particular war, however, requires more evidence than the analogy itself can provide.

The opening discussion of Vietnam and Laos establishes both the strength of the book's historical approach and the method underlying Chomsky's criticism. The Tet Offensive in 1968 shattered official assurances that the Vietnam War was approaching a favourable conclusion, even though the offensive imposed heavy losses on the forces conducting it (p. 31). Chomsky's recollections of travel in Vietnam and Laos add a personal dimension to the account. In one revealing episode, he describes requesting the evidence behind American claims that tens of thousands of North Vietnamese troops were present in Laos and discovering how little the available documentation supported the public figure. The episode captures his larger argument about intellectual responsibility. Governments produce claims about the necessity of war, but journalists and scholars must investigate how those claims were established before accepting the political conclusions attached to them.

This emphasis on evidence also explains the authors' interest in public consent. They return to the media's uneven attention to civilian suffering and to the language through which wars become humanitarian obligations or strategic mistakes rather than questions of political and legal responsibility. These observations are persuasive because they connect foreign intervention with the institutions that make it acceptable at home. Yet the conversational format has a limitation. Prashad's questions usually extend Chomsky's interpretation rather than confront it with the strongest competing explanation. Readers encounter a sustained critique of official narratives, but less often see the same degree of scrutiny applied to the authors' own causal claims. That imbalance becomes more consequential as the book moves to the post-9/11 wars.

Afghanistan occupies the most substantial part of the discussion. The authors trace the origins of the conflict through Cold War competition and Washington's support for armed opponents of the Soviet-backed government, then question whether the invasion of 2001 was the only available response to al-Qaeda. They are particularly effective in recovering Afghan voices that received less prominence in Western accounts. Their discussion of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan and Malalai Joya complicates the claim that women's rights could straightforwardly legitimise military occupation. Chomsky also recalls the experiences reported by UN official Rasil Basu, which challenge the tendency to narrate Afghan women's history as beginning with American intervention (p. 57). The book thus exposes

the selectivity of humanitarian arguments without denying the oppression that Afghan women faced under the Taliban and other armed groups.

The account of the occupation's institutional failures is equally important. Financial dependence, corruption and the influence of contractors and local power brokers made it difficult for the Afghan state to develop authority independent of its foreign sponsors. The problem of 'ghost soldiers' shows how a military force's size on paper could conceal its weakness in practice. The authors also examine the crisis caused by the collapse of external support and restrictions on Afghan reserves after the Taliban's return. These passages place Afghan society at the centre of the consequences of withdrawal. A fuller assessment might nevertheless have distinguished more carefully among the Taliban's military strategy, the choices of Afghan political elites and the failures of American policy. All three affected the outcome, and an account of foreign intervention alone cannot establish their relative importance.

One of the book's most revealing disagreements concerns the motives for entering Afghanistan. Chomsky argues that Washington had little direct strategic interest in the country and wanted above all to display its force capacity. His characterisation of Afghanistan as a war with no substantial geostrategic purpose is unusually categorical (p. 76). Prashad, by contrast, identifies advantages that might have followed from successful American control, including mineral resources, regional military positioning and constraints on Chinese infrastructure projects. The two positions can be reconciled if the motives for launching the invasion are distinguished from the opportunities anticipated during a prolonged occupation. Yet that distinction also identifies an evidentiary weakness. Possible strategic benefits do not establish policymakers' intentions in 2001, just as the occupation's eventual failure does not establish that strategic interests were absent. The exchange is valuable precisely because it raises a question that neither author fully resolves.

The discussion of military Keynesianism adds a domestic political economy dimension to this analysis. Chomsky describes how defence spending can support private industry and technological development while placing fewer demands on public participation than comparable social expenditure (p. 84). This helps explain the institutional durability of America's military apparatus across administrations. Still, the existence of powerful economic beneficiaries

should not be treated as sufficient proof of why particular interventions were initiated or extended. A more convincing explanation would connect the structural incentives of the defence sector with identifiable decisions, security assessments and political pressures. The distinction matters because the authors are strongest when they show how military power is reproduced, not when broad structural interests stand in for the causes of individual wars.

Iraq provides a more direct account of strategic interests. Chomsky and Prashad recall Washington's support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War, the devastation produced by the 1991 war and subsequent sanctions, and the changing justifications for the invasion of 2003. The book's discussion of the sanction regime, including the objections of senior UN humanitarian officials, makes clear that civilian suffering was neither incidental nor confined to the period of open warfare (p. 112). The authors then examine how the failure to find weapons of mass destruction left democratisation occupying a more prominent place in the public defence of the invasion. Their account offers a compelling criticism of the political language used to legitimise war, particularly when that language changes as earlier claims collapse.

The argument about Iraqi oil is also important, although the distinction between strategic interest and demonstrated intention deserves greater attention. Iraq's energy resources and regional position plainly made it significant to Washington, and Chomsky challenges the suggestion that the invasion would have occurred for identical reasons in a country without oil (p. 120). That is a forceful objection to accounts that detach the war from the political economy of the Middle East. It does not, by itself, establish the relative weight of oil, regional security calculations, ideological ambitions and the decisions of individual officials. Nor can the political consequences of the occupation be explained without the actions of Iraqi parties, militias and neighbouring states. The authors successfully show that removing a government differs from securing an acceptable political successor. Still, their explanation of why that successor failed to emerge remains less comprehensive than their criticism of Washington.

Libya presents a distinct problem because the 2011 intervention followed UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorised measures to protect civilians. Chomsky and Prashad argue that the operation developed into support for the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, exceeding the protective purpose used to

justify it. Prashad's account of the African Union's attempted mediation is one of the book's strongest contributions. He records both the difficulties faced by its delegation and the fact that Gabon, Nigeria and South Africa voted in favour of the resolution that enabled military action. Gaddafi subsequently accepted an African Union peace proposal, while the rebel leadership rejected it amid continuing NATO operations (p. 168). These details reveal a diplomatic history that is easily lost when attention centres exclusively on the air campaign.

The Libya chapter also demonstrates why criticism of an intervention's consequences should be distinguished from conclusions about the alternatives available at the time. The African Union's proposal for negotiations is significant, especially given the obstacles it encountered. Yet the proposal's existence does not establish that a sustainable settlement was within reach. The rebel leadership's rejection, Gaddafi's record and the competing interests within Libya all require consideration when judging whether a ceasefire could have held. Chomsky acknowledges that the outcome in Benghazi without intervention cannot be known, although the chapter does not fully explore what follows from that uncertainty. Similarly, speculation about French economic and regional motives should be separated from the better-documented evidence concerning the intervention's conduct and aftermath. More sustained attention to these distinctions would make the criticism of NATO's decisions harder to dismiss.

Taken together, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya reveal a limitation in the book's comparative approach. Although all three interventions illustrate the difficulty of converting military superiority into durable political authority, markedly different domestic conditions shaped their trajectories. Afghanistan's institutional dependence and the Taliban's organisational resilience differed from Iraq's fragmented post-invasion political order and Libya's competing centres of armed authority. These differences matter because external intervention does not operate upon a political vacuum. Its consequences emerge from the interaction between foreign objectives, domestic institutions and the strategic choices of local actors. A more systematic comparison would therefore ask not simply why American intervention failed, but why similar instruments of coercive power produced different forms of political instability. Such an approach would preserve the force of the authors' criticism while offering a more convincing explanation of the outcomes they examine.

The final chapter broadens the discussion from failed interventions to the changing international order. China appears as an increasingly important source of finance, infrastructure and economic relationships that do not depend on Washington. The Belt and Road Initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank feature in this account, alongside closer relations between China and Russia. The authors carefully acknowledge that the erosion of American predominance should not be confused with the disappearance of American power. The United States retains enormous military, financial, diplomatic and cultural resources, even as other states acquire greater room to manoeuvre. This is one of the book's most useful corrections to sweeping declarations of American decline.

The analysis is less satisfactory when it turns from describing alternatives to evaluating them. Chomsky and Prashad contrast a US-defined rules-based order with one grounded in the UN Charter, making international law a central standard for judging the conduct of powerful states (p. 16). Their criticism of selective American adherence to that standard is consistent with the preceding chapters. Yet China's economic reach and Russia's geopolitical ambitions receive comparatively little examination through the same lens. New financial institutions may widen the choices available to smaller states, but that does not determine whether the relationships they create are equitable or free of coercion. The discussion of Russia's invasion of Ukraine also leaves room for a fuller consideration of Russian decision-making and the security concerns of states situated between major powers. An international order cannot be judged only by whether it is less dependent on the United States. The conduct of the powers seeking greater influence must be assessed independently.

This points to a broader distinction between the redistribution of power and the transformation of international order. A more multipolar system may give smaller states more diplomatic and economic options, but more powerful actors do not necessarily produce more equitable rules or greater political autonomy. Much depends on whether emerging powers reproduce the coercive practices they criticise or help establish arrangements based on more consistent principles of sovereignty, accountability and international law. The appropriate measure of a changing international order is therefore not simply the extent to which American predominance recedes, but whether the rules governing relations between powerful and weaker states become more equitable

and are applied more consistently. On this question, the book offers a compelling critique of the existing order but a less developed account of what might replace it.

This imbalance is relevant to the book's treatment of time and political change. Published in 2022, *The Withdrawal* captures the moment when the collapse of the Afghan government was still fresh, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was transforming European security. Its closing pages also warn that military confrontation can divert political attention from the climate emergency (pp. 191–192). Four years later, the book is most rewarding not as a fixed prediction of American decline but as an invitation to examine the difference between capabilities and outcomes. A state's departure from one theatre may be an admission of strategic failure, a decision to redirect resources or both. Each possibility has different implications for the distribution of international power.

That question also connects the book to a wider debate about hegemony. In my earlier discussion paper, *Twilight of the Hegemon: Trump, Turmoil, and the End of American Order?* (2025), I drew on Antonio Gramsci to consider how American leadership depends not only on material superiority but also on institutions, alliances and a measure of consent. The erosion of legitimacy can weaken an international order before the state at its centre loses its military or economic advantages. Chomsky and Prashad illuminate one part of this process by showing how the exercise of force may generate resistance and undermine the political relationships that power is meant to secure. Their cases also suggest that legitimacy has to be examined at several levels. Among the populations subjected to intervention, within the institutions created or supported by outside powers, and among the states expected to accept the resulting order.

These considerations illuminate both the achievement and the limitations of *The Withdrawal*. Chomsky and Prashad offer a powerful reminder that military superiority cannot, by itself, secure political authority, and that the consequences of intervention must be judged against the promises used to justify it. Yet their critique is more persuasive in exposing the failures of American power than in explaining why those failures occurred, how far they signify hegemonic decline or whether the emerging alternatives promise a more equitable international order. Answering those questions requires greater attention to local political agency, the distinction between military outcomes and structural power, and how states seek to challenge American predominance. The book's lasting

contribution is therefore not a definitive account of America's decline, but a challenge to the assumption that military dominance necessarily confers political legitimacy. Power may determine the outcome of a war; it does not necessarily determine the order that follows.