

The Impact of the Fall of Kabul on the World's Tourism Industry

By Dr. Peter Tarlow

There can be little doubt that historians will debate the follies of both U.S. and European policies vis-à-vis Afghanistan for decades to come. Multiple nations have attempted to subdue Afghanistan, from the Ancient Chinese to the British, from the Russians to the Americans. In all cases Afghanistan has lived up to its reputation as the “graveyard of empires”. The recent fall of Kabul is only the latest in Western failures and from a geo-political perspective this defeat’s impact will be felt for years or decades to come.

It should not be surprising to anyone that the impact of events during the last few days, starting on August 14th might well also impact the world of tourism in ways not yet understood or assimilated by tourism industry officials.

Yet despite the fact that there is much we will need to learn about the latest Afghan debacle it is importance that political experts, public policy officials and tourism scientists develop an understanding of how a relatively small and “poor” nation has played, and might in the future continue to play, such a major role on the world stage and also in world tourism.

To understand what the Kabul debacle means we need to examine the country both from a geographic and historical perspective. Real estate agents often cite the refrain that there are only three words that determine the value of a piece of property. These words are “location, location, and location” In other words in the world of real estate location is everything. To a great extent we can say the same thing about nations. Much of a nation’s destiny is determined by where it is located in the world. For example, the American nations, and the United States in particular, have had a huge advantage in that they are separated from Europe by an ocean. The United States’ lack of

hostile borders has meant that the US has had the luxury of what we might call “splendid isolation”. Its natural borders, as distinct from many European nations that live with multiple borders in relatively close proximity, served not only to protect many of the American nations from military invasions but until the onset of Covid also from medical illnesses. Although the late twentieth century and the twenty-first century have seen a decline in this geographic advantage due to mass tourism and the current U.S. administration’s lack of desire to protect the US southern border, the principle still holds true. Canada has had the advantage of having a long peaceful border with the US which has permitted Canada to expend minimal resources on military defense.

Afghanistan is a completely different situation. This landlocked nation is in the heart of what historians call the “silk roads”. To a great extent these are the lands in the heart of the world, and it is in these lands that much of the world’s economic history has occurred. Afghanistan not

only sits in the middle of the silk roads, but the nation is also incredibly rich in mineral resources. According to Peter Frankopan¹ citing the US Geological survey reports that Afghanistan is rich in copper, iron, mercury, and potash. The nation also has major reserves of what is known as “rare earths”. These “earth” include lithium, beryllium, niobium, and caesium. With the fall of Kabul these rare minerals and valuable substances are now in the Taliban’s hands and these mineral have the potential to make the Taliban incredibly rich. We should not be surprised if the Taliban do not use this economic windfall as a way to further their stated objective of creating a worldwide Islamic Califate.

Few Westerners and even fewer tourism officials understand the value of these rare earths and minerals and the fact that China also possesses large quantities of many of these substances. We use these substances in everything from computer production to talcum powder.

¹ See *The New Silk Roads* by Peter Frankopan, published 2019 by Vintage Press, page 47-48

This control over rare and necessary minerals and rare earths means that a Taliban-Chinese alliance becomes a new challenge for western nations and by extension their tourism industries.

Kabul's fall also has a political price. Its conquest greatly increases not only the Taliban's prestige but that of numerous other terrorism and insurgency groups around the world. From this perspective the conquest of Kabul, and by extension Afghanistan, is a symbol for anyone who opposes European and American influence and power of what they perceive as the west's long road to self-destruction. This symbolism is especially powerful as the Taliban captured Kabul just a few weeks prior to the twentieth anniversary of September 11, 2001. The fact the Taliban flag now flies over the former U.S. embassy speaks volumes to people throughout the developing-world. The symbolism throughout much of the Middle East and the nations of the Silk Roads could not be more poignant. Due to the United States and its allies

abandoning the Bagram airfield some of twenty years after the attacks on New York and Washington, Westerners, and their Afghan allies are reduced to imploring the Taliban for safe passage to the only airport out of which they can fly to safety. Tourism has long been an industry in which many women have held prominent positions. Women in a Taliban dominated Afghanistan are sure to lose even their most basic rights. Women's groups around the world not only worry about the safety and freedom of Afghan women but also have noted the silence of the first US female president. As of August 19th, Vice president Harris has not made a public pronouncement regarding the state of insecurity in which millions of women now find themselves.

From the perspective of the United States and Europe the fall of Kabul could not have come at a worse time.

Western national economies are reeling from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The United States (and much of Europe) is suffering from inflation caused by over-

spending. This overspending first occurred during the Obama administration, then continued during the Trump administration and has now greatly increased during the current Biden administration. The fact that the United States is spending trillions of dollars of money that it does not have means that the nation is less able to deal with international crises and potential military threats.

Additionally, the woke-cancel culture (seen in much of the world as mere political rot or social decay) means that the west's focus is on inconsequential internal matters rather than on economic and political threats.

Perhaps nothing speaks to this internal weakness and its impact on tourism more than the US-Mexico border crisis. This crisis should not be seen as separate from the fall of Kabul. As perhaps almost two million illegal immigrants cross the US-Mexico border, the nation's border patrol is overwhelmed and understaffed. Not only do refugees cross this border but many of them are ill with Covid and none are vetted. How many coming into the US, and now once

again Europe, may be stealth terrorists is unknown. As these people are distributed throughout the United States we might well expect to see a rise in Covid rates and lawlessness. As crime increases tourism will once again suffer. Border control agents may also feel the impact of Covid-29. Many of whose agents are now sick with Covid. What we do not as yet know is how many unvetted migrants may also be part of terrorist sleeper cells that can be turned against nations in Europe and the United States and creating another 9-11 tourism crisis.

Possible implications of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

It is of course too soon to realize the full extent of the consequences of the Taliban victory not only on world politics but also on tourism.

We should remember that tourism is a by-product of world's political situation. Although tourism promotes

peace, it also needs peace in order to thrive or merely survive. Wars, human rights violations, illnesses, and natural disasters all dissuade visitors from coming to a specific location.

Below are some of the things that the tourism industry might expect from the poorly executed US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

- 1) Although few would argue that after a twenty-year war and the loss of trillions of dollars and thousands of lives it was time to leave, the US withdrawal's poor execution will be seen as American weakness and ineptitude around the world. Major politicians from US allies such as the United Kingdom and Germany have called this NATO's greatest military defeat and wonder about the US resolve to be a world leader.

- 2) Both China and Russia will applaud the Taliban's victory and will see the western nations defeat as a way to control the regions natural resources.
- 3) The overspending on the part of the current US administration means greater dependency on China and the US' government's inability to stand up to the Chinese. This in turn will lead to an eventual lowering of western standards of living and a pulling back of expendable income expenses such as tourism.
- 4) The control of major resources by the Taliban can easily translate into acts of well-funded terrorism around the world and especially against the tourism industry
- 5) We should expect to see new outbreaks of violence around the world. China might well attack Taiwan and seek dominance over the entire eastern pacific region. Tourism in this region can become totally dominated by the Chinese and countries such as North Korea might become emboldened to act in a reckless manner.

- 6) Latin American nations such as Venezuela might see the Taliban victory and potential largess as reasons to export revolution to other Latin American nations, thus causing a decline in tourism
- 7) The West's ability to deal with Iran will be weakened and we should not be surprised to see the Taliban terrorist state collaborate with Iranian hardliners, especially in the face of weak US administration
- 8) Europe should expect an increase in unvetted refugees who will continue to make Europe less safe and less attractive to visitors. The result will be a decline in European living standards and quality of life.
- 9) Due to an unprotected southern border, the US might well suffer from higher rates of communicative diseases, and a post-Taliban national malaise. Even if there is not a repeat of terrorism due to the open border policies now in place, tourism might well suffer from the US population's continual loss of faith in government. Were there to be additional major

terrorism attacks, these attacks coupled with the fact that the tourism industry has not yet recovered from the Covid pandemic could easily result in multiple tourism industry bankruptcies and necessitating more needs for increased government bailouts and a further decline of the overall tourism industry.

There can be no doubt that the fall of Kabul might become a metaphor for the fall of the tourism industry. On the other hand it can also be a wake-up call and a way in which the west comes together, works together and creates the conditions for an expanded tourism industry and greater safety and security. Let's hope that we have learned the lessons of the last few days and seek new ways to renew our strength and moral fortitude. In reality we in the tourism industry have no alternative.