

Exploring the Impact of Embedded Feminism on U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Afghanistan in the Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries

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Abstract. In 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan to depose its Taliban regime, leading to a protracted military conflict that ultimately resulted in a Taliban victory in 2021. While the invasion was officially in response to the September 11 attacks, this paper seeks to explore whether the theory of embedded feminism may also have played a role in motivating the U.S. to attack the Taliban regime of Afghanistan and to attempt state building in the country. By investigating whether feminist beliefs in the need to save Afghan women from Taliban mistreatment might have led to the U.S. war in Afghanistan, a better understanding of decision-making process in U.S. foreign policy, especially when the important questions of war or peace are concerned, could be obtained. To determine the main arguments used by the U.S. leadership to justify war against the Taliban regime, remarks by influential U.S. politicians and feminist groups as well as resolutions passed by the U.S. Congress and the UN Security Council are analyzed. The conclusion is that the invasion was officially a measure to exercise the right to self-defense after the September 11 attacks, but the embedded feminist principle of using military interventions to uphold the rights of women in other countries, including Afghanistan, in conjunction with accounts of harsh Taliban treatment towards women, were also used to justify and legitimize war at least from the perspective of the Bush administration, with all the implications and reactions from more traditionally pacifist feminist groups that come with such a use of embedded feminist theory in the conduct of foreign policy.

Keywords: Embedded Feminism, Imperialism, Foreign Policy, International Relations, Afghanistan.

1. Introduction

With the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and the immediate collapse of the Afghan government, it has been worthwhile to explore the reasons why the United States launched the war in Afghanistan in the first place. Doing so would help with understanding the methods by which the U.S. government decides whether to go to war with certain groups or not. Furthermore, by learning about the motivations for initiating (and then losing) certain wars, it might be possible to avoid similar policy failures in the future. By making sure that one does not get misled by domestic interest groups into going to unnecessary wars, international peace and security as well as the rights and security of all persons around the world could be better preserved.

Officially, the George W. Bush administration's reason for launching the Global War on Terror, including the U.S. war in Afghanistan, was to exercise every country's inherent right to violent self-defense in response to terrorist attacks like the September 11 attacks (9/11). As the Taliban supported 9/11's perpetrator, al-Qaeda, the U.S. should be allowed to prevent similar attacks from happening in the future by fighting the Taliban as part of a global campaign against terrorism [1]. Nevertheless, this paper seeks to argue that feminist concerns over the plight of Afghan women also had a great effect on U.S. foreign policy towards Afghanistan. In other words, embedded feminism played an important role in convincing the U.S. government to oppose and later go to war against the Taliban, whose misogyny and harsh treatment towards the Afghan women under its rule were widely publicized by feminist groups in the US and in Europe [2].

The use of feminist rhetoric during the War on Terror before 2021 has been discussed in several papers, some of which are summarized here. Ho explores the parallels between the rhetoric used to justify Western colonialism and Western-initiated conflicts in the Middle East [3]. Peterson argues

that the contrast between masculine and feminine values and ideologies, such as how militarism and heroism are associated with men, portrays the War on Terror as a just war between good, which is represented by white men, and evil, which is represented by Middle Eastern men, thus explaining the shock that would be generated when reports surfaced of Arab men being tortured in prison by white women [4]. Kinsella takes issue with the morality of using violence and self-defense purportedly to preempt terrorist threats within and without, arguing that whether a person qualifies as a violent terrorist or not is determined solely by whether the person supports Western interpretations of feminism [5].

Feminist arguments are also found outside of the United States. In Germany, Norway, and Australia, foreign policy was also orientated in a way such that it allowed the use of force to support women's rights worldwide [3, 6, 7]. This paper seeks to provide more political and cultural background to the history of Afghanistan and of women's rights in the country. In addition, this paper would also emphasize the official discourse of the George W. Bush administration on the question of Afghanistan's women while recognizing the main feminist critiques to embedded feminism, the international relations theory that enables Bush to justify its armed invasion of Afghanistan on the need to protect Afghan women. This paper would finally consider recent developments in U.S. foreign policy towards Afghanistan after the Taliban victory in the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Feminism is a broad set of social, political, and cultural frameworks that seeks to realize gender equality by empowering women [8]. Feminists seek to eradicate all forms of misogyny and oppression towards women and to create the conditions whereby women could seek independence, justice, and equal rights and access to opportunities [9]. The modern feminist movement has its origins in the nineteenth century and expands from a movement whose main aim was to win the fight for women's political rights and suffrage to a campaign that seeks to reform literature and society to fully liberate women from a past that had been dominated by men [10].

In international relations, feminism is a critical theory that seeks to understand how social constructs, such as sex and gender, influences the identities, thoughts, and actions of the various actors on the world stage [4]. Even though traditional theories in international relations, such as the different varieties of realism or liberalism, are not mainly concerned about gender, the treatment of women by different states may and does influence policymaking in other states towards that state. In this paper, a specific branch of feminism, known as embedded feminism, would be addressed. An idea often connected to the arguments used to justify Western colonialism of the past, embedded feminism generally believes that it is justified for states to intervene in other states for the express purpose of freeing women in these other states from oppression by their governments or cultures [5].

The ideology of embedded feminism, and the foreign armed interventions made under its name, are often controversial both within and outside of feminist organizations, such as when foreign powers are using feminism to support armed groups that purportedly are more moderate and amenable to women's rights [6]. For example, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) opposed both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban pro-U.S. Afghan faction that came to power after the U.S. invasion. It argues that the U.S. invasion was supporting a faction that was also very oppressive towards women, so the U.S. had not liberated Afghan women by invading their country [11]. As it turned out, this argument would later be supported by U.S.-backed Afghan president Hamid Karzai's support for a "code of conduct" that used Islam to justify Taliban-like rules such as sex segregation and allowing husbands to beat their wives under certain circumstances [12]. Among feminist circles, the debate over whether feminist interventions using violent means mostly revolves around what it meant to be liberated and free from oppression.

3. Case Study

When Western societies are involved in conflicts against non-Western societies, “the protection-of-women-and-children scenario” has always been a very powerful argument in portraying a war as just [7]. A particular case of armed intervention legitimized in part by feminist ideals would be found in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy towards Afghanistan in the later 20th and early 21st centuries, especially in 2001, when the George W. Bush administration ordered the invasion of Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban regime. This paper would seek in elaborate more in depth the influences of feminism on this ultimately ill-fated decision.

3.1. Case Description

Over the course of thousands of years, the land that would become Afghanistan had seen numerous successful or attempted foreign invasions and conquests. By the nineteenth century, Islam, brought to the region by Arab conquerors of the preceding centuries, had become the largest religion in Afghanistan. It was also during this time when the British Empire tried but failed to subjugate Afghanistan in three wars, setting the stage for an independent Afghan nation [13].

By 1926, the various tribal and ethnic groups had coalesced under a monarchy with Amir Amanullah Khan as king [13]. His eventual successor, Mohammad Zahir Shah ruled as the king for the next forty years before being deposed by his prime minister, general Daoud Khan, in a bloodless coup in 1973. This led to an end to the stability that had held Afghanistan together since 1933 [13, 14].

In 1978, president Daoud Khan was overthrown and killed in a coup launched by the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA, however, was plagued by factional disunity, and its radical Communist agenda alienated many in the vast Afghan countryside, which openly rebelled against the new regime [13]. Seeing that the situation in its southern neighbor was getting out of control, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to stabilize the situation. Afghan guerillas, also known as the mujahideen, fought and eventually defeated Soviet forces and took power by 1992 [14].

Part of the reason why past (modernizing) Afghan regimes faced conservative opposition was that the traditional patriarchal society in Afghanistan, especially in its rural regions, has never been receptive to gender equality and empowering women, ideas which are sometimes considered foreign [5]. King Amanullah was overthrown due to his desire to impose a modernization plan that was radical by Afghan standards, and this paved the way for Zahir Shah to accede to the throne. During his reign, Daoud Khan enacted more modest social reform plans, and women were gradually granted the right to work and to attend university, among other rights. During the Communist era, the PDPA’s ruling faction’s belief in absolute equality between the sexes in addition to land reform caused many mujahideen to see the government as intent on overturning long-established cultural and religious customs and traditions, thereby leading much of the countryside to openly revolt [14].

After the end of the Soviet-Afghan war, disunity among the mujahideen factions led to renewed violence, setting the stage for the rise of a new Islamic fundamentalist armed group, the Taliban, to take power over most of the country [13]. The Taliban regime faced global condemnation for its harsh treatment of its own people in general and of women in particular [14]. After coming to power in the late 1990s, it, overturning past government policies, prohibited women from getting educated or going to work. The requirement for women to be fully veiled in public was also reinstated after having been made optional under Daoud Khan. Violations of Islamic law were often punished with public amputations or executions, which caused international outrage [13].

However, what also generated concern was how Osama bin Laden, the leader of a global Islamic terrorist network al-Qaeda, was believed to be hiding, with the Taliban’s approval, in Afghanistan from arrest by the U.S. On September 18, 2001, seven days after the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush signed an Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) enabling the president to use military force against al-Qaeda, other terrorist groups, and their supporters [1]. The United States and its allies then launched a war against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Within three months, the

Taliban regime was overthrown, and a new government was instituted at Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan [15]. The invasion and occupation were then formalized in a resolution by the UN Security Council, which called on member states to contribute resources to militarily secure Kabul while also “stressing that all Afghan forces must adhere strictly to their obligations under human rights law, including respect for the rights of women”, which gave the war a feminist aspect [16].

3.2. Case Analysis

After the Bush administration was determined to go to war against Afghanistan in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the perceived need to save Afghan women from Taliban mistreatment became another argument in support of launching a military conflict.

Table 1 lists remarks made by many within the Bush administration that condemns oppression of women, praises improvements in women’s rights after the U.S. invasion, or does both. While descriptions of the situation of Afghan women might be true, it is important to note that the Taliban did not directly attack the U.S.; instead, 9/11 was committed by al-Qaeda, a group that received support from the Taliban. Even though the Taliban’s support for al-Qaeda and the Taliban’s refusal to hand over terrorists to the U.S. were cited as the main reason for invading Afghanistan, pointing to the U.S. responsibility to protect women from brutal treatment was one method by which the invasion was further justified.

Table 1. Remarks by U.S. leaders on Taliban treatment of women and U.S. efforts to improve the status of women in Afghanistan after the U.S. invasion of the country.

Name	Office or Position (in 2001)	Remarks
George W. Bush	President	The terrorists were “some of the murderers” whose directive “command[ed] them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans and make no distinctions among [...] women and children” [17]. “Women [in Afghanistan were] not allowed to attend school”, and the U.S. “condemn[ed] the Taliban regime”, calling on “the civilized world” to rally “to America’s side” [17].
Colin Powell	Secretary of State	The U.S. was committed to “the defense and promotion of the human rights of women worldwide, rights that [U.S.] founding fathers [said] are inalienable, God-given, and [...] truly universal”, so “brutality against women [...] can never be justified, [...] whatever the country”, whatever the religion [18]. Under the Taliban, “the women of Afghanistan were made prisoners in their own country, even in their own homes. [...] There [was] absolutely nothing in the faith of Islam to justify their cruel treatment” [19]. The Office of the Senior Coordinator for Women’s Issues was responsible for “the development and implementation of [a] pro-women foreign policy agenda”, and the Bush administration “commend[ed]” the U.S. Congress for “the speedy enactment of the Afghan Women and Children Relief Act” in 2001 [18].
Condoleezza Rice	National Security Adviser	In Afghanistan, the President and his administration were “also providing basic training for 4,000 teachers, at least half of whom are women. March 23[, 2002] was a special day in [U.S.] efforts [to improve the issues facing women]. That was when Afghan girls returned to school for the first time in nearly six years. Pictures and words from Afghanistan capture the significance of this achievement better than any speech” [20]. “Stories like [an Afghan girl who wants to go to school rather than eat breakfast were] a reminder that the fight against terror is everyone’s fight -- not just every American’s, but every Afghan’s, and every person on the planet who values hope and opportunity” [20].
Paula Dobriansky	Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs	Mrs. Bush, Secretary Powell, Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and others had “been vocal about the need to restore their rights, ever since the Taliban began its repressive rule”, and the U.S. was “to work for the restoration of human rights, particularly women’s rights, in Afghanistan” by ensuring “the full participation of women” in the “reconstruction and rebuilding” of Afghanistan” [19].

While some of these remarks would reasonably put more emphasis on the feminist aspects of U.S. foreign policy due to the setting at which they were made (such as how some of Powell's remarks were delivered on International Women's Day), the attitudes and priorities of U.S. politicians remarks nevertheless show that the Bush administration's foreign policy was openly motivated at least in part by feminism [18]. Embedded feminism then led to the belief that military action against the Taliban would be justified if the Taliban continue to deny women their basic rights.

Other prominent Americans also presented similar cases. First Lady Laura Bush was "an integral part of the media campaign focusing on women's rights in Afghanistan' and the necessity for US intervention" [2]. She talked about how the U.S. had an "obligation to speak out" against Taliban "brutality" towards its own people, especially women and children. Mrs. Bush also characterized the U.S. war in Afghanistan as "a fight for the rights and dignity of women", thus directly tying feminism into Mr. Bush's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. At the same time, Mrs. Bush assumed that with the Taliban apparently defeated on the field in 2001, "the people of Afghanistan – especially the women – are rejoicing", further reflecting the belief that the war had been popular especially for upholding women's rights in Afghanistan [21]. Mrs. Bush never identifies herself as an embedded feminist, but the belief that the feminist ideals of empowering women were worth violently fighting for represented a key tenet of embedded feminism.

The role of feminist groups in the U.S. has also drawn attention. As an example, before 2001, the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) had a "Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan" campaign and was credited in part for preventing the U.S. from formally recognizing the Taliban regime. After 9/11, the FMF, operating on an embedded feminist platform where military conflicts that further women's rights are not only justified but desirable, welcomed "the Bush administration's cynical appropriation of gender inequality to justify its 'war on terror'", telling Congress that 'we can indeed be the 'savior' and take up our call to 'restore human rights' and bring 'democracy and freedom' to Afghanistan" [2]. As a result, the FMF took an embedded feminist approach to the war in Afghanistan by supporting military action under the premise that one of its purposes was to uphold the rights of Afghan women.

Although the preambulatory clauses of the AUMF specify that the reason the president was enabled to use military force against al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other groups was "the rights to self-defense and to protect United States citizens both at home and aboard" against terrorist attacks, the idea of a violent humanitarian intervention to liberate Afghan women was never lost [1]. Although the Taliban had instituted its harsh policies towards women several years before the U.S. decided to overthrow the regime, embedded feminism played a role in deciding to attack the Taliban and to attempt state building in Afghanistan to help safeguard women's rights in the future, even as the Taliban eventually defeated the U.S. in its war in Afghanistan.

The special attention given to Taliban treatment of women when determining U.S. foreign policy towards Afghanistan was further shown by how none of the 19 hijackers that perpetrated 9/11 were from Afghanistan, and bin Laden was from Saudi Arabia [14, 15]. Thus, the War on Terror could have been limited to fighting against al-Qaeda influence in many other countries alone. Moreover, supporters and financiers of al-Qaeda in countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were not directly targeted, something that could not be explained if America's sole motive in the War on Terror was to counter terrorism [15].

This application of embedded feminism to allow the U.S. to militarily intervene in Afghanistan was formalized in the Bush administration's national security strategy issued in 2002. It unequivocally states that "America must stand firmly for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity", which include "respect for women" among other values. While fighting against terrorists in Afghanistan and around the world would also be important, the U.S. would also commit "to provide the humanitarian, political, economic, and security assistance necessary to rebuild Afghanistan so that it will never again abuse its people", which include the women of Afghanistan as well, despite how state building was not directly related to the military effort against international terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda [23]. The Bush administration thereby commits American military power to defending women's rights abroad, adopting the embedded feminist ideal of presenting gender

equality and women's rights as part of human rights, which are worth fighting for, with non-peaceful means if necessary [7]. In Afghanistan, this was attempted with the overthrow of the Taliban regime and with an ultimately successful effort at rebuilding the country to be free from terrorism and oppression against women.

4. Implications

While the most direct cause of the War on Terror was 9/11, the decision to attack the Taliban, which did not directly initiate hostilities against the U.S., was also motivated by disapproval of its treatment of women. While the application of embedded feminism was controversial, being criticized by feminist groups, feminism remains an important factor in influencing future U.S. foreign policy towards the Taliban and Afghanistan.

4.1. Critique of Embedded Feminism

Criticism was made against how the U.S. applied embedded feminism when invading Afghanistan. The FMF was critical of U.S. foreign policy due to the perception that "the U.S. and the world community are using and then forgetting the Afghan people", meaning that the FMF believes that there is too little feminism in American foreign policy. It demanded that the U.S. invest more troops and funding into protecting Afghan women, which implicitly calls for further application of embedded feminism by expanding the war against the Taliban and other Islamic terrorist groups [22].

Ganser argues that the issue of women's rights in other countries had always been subordinated to American national interests despite all the feminist rhetoric. President Obama once said, "As president, my greatest responsibility is to protect the American people" from violent extremism. Even though Obama recognized that much improvement in women's rights would be undone with a Taliban takeover, he nevertheless believed that American national security is more important, and it was more important to protect American lives rather than the lives of Afghan women. In other words, feminism would be used if U.S. actions were justified by it, but if feminism went against other U.S. national interests and priorities, the latter would take precedence [6]. This idea would later implicitly be proven in the peace agreement between the Taliban and the U.S., which made no mention of the rights of women or people in general but merely made the Taliban promise not to "cooperate with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States" [24].

Peterson concurs in part with this assessment, arguing that the official justifications of war often could mask the political agenda and interests of those in power (such as the Bush administration, which defined the War on Terror not as a barely veiled attempt at U.S. imperialism but as a fight between good and evil, where America was good and must act in self-defense to protect itself against evil). Protracted conflict also sought to normalize accounts of atrocities and the superiority of masculine ideals that men should use their capabilities to commit violence [4].

Most feminist groups, which were traditionally pacifist, were critical of the idea of using force to protect Afghan women in the first place. European colonialism in the past was also justified by the need to save women from non-European men. How the West believed that it was their duty to save women in other cultures also implied that the West was more civilized in treating women. This also meant that only the West could decide whether some other people were oppressed or not [2]. Furthermore, embedded feminism mistakenly believed that Afghan women could not save themselves [3]. Peterson, meanwhile, goes a step further by pointing out that the concept of militaries and wars were masculine concepts that reflected values that were associated with men. Thus, by going to war in Afghanistan, the Bush administration was promoting masculine values rather than acting in accordance with the feminist ideals. The idea that only white men should be in control and be able to save women was also rejected as it empowered men at the expense of women when women were already considered to be weaker than men [4].

Another argument based upon cultural relativism is that by claiming that all cultures have to treat women in the same way as the West and by blaming Islam and Taliban totalitarianism as the cause

for the suffering of Afghan women, feminist groups in the U.S. were guilty of cultural imperialism, and this approach was also counterproductive in that many Muslims who would not otherwise oppose the War in Afghanistan would perceive that their culture was under attack and take up arms accordingly [3, 5]. Thus, embedded feminism generated more opposition to women's rights in Afghanistan.

This also meant that even though it was no longer mandated by the Afghan government (all the while the burqa remains banned in many European nations), many women in Afghanistan chose to continue wearing the burqa while outside, fearing for their own safety [5]. And, when the burqa continued to be worn, there would be embedded feminist groups purporting to speaking up for Afghan women and demanding more international intervention, which would make Afghan women risk having their subjectivity erased involuntarily since they had been rendered "helpless objects to be rescued" [7].

A more pragmatic criticism unrelated to cultural imperialism rests on whether Afghanistan became a safer place for women due to the War in Afghanistan. While most Taliban regulations on women (possibly excepting Karzai's new "code of conduct", as discussed earlier) were repealed after the overthrow of the Taliban, there was also backlash from civilian casualties from the U.S.-initiated war and accounts of rape by U.S. troops [2, 12]. The Taliban also retained its ability to kill Afghan feminist leaders, such as Sitara Achakzai, while the RAWA highlighted the need for "money the people so desperately need to reestablish health care, irrigation, education, physical infrastructure and all the other aspects" of society, seeing the lack of social and economic rights as more troublesome than the forced wearing of the burqa [3, 11].

As the war continued with no end in sight, the FMF defended its position against some of the arguments listed above. The FMF pointed to its support for local Afghan feminist groups (such as the RAWA) to show that it recognizes the ability of Afghan women to contribute to improving and bettering their own condition. It also continued to call for an "expansion in the number of international peacekeeping troops" so that women and girls could be better empowered [22].

4.2. Effect on Future U.S. Foreign Policy

The U.S. war in Afghanistan would last for twenty years in total. Even though bin Laden was killed in 2011, U.S. counterinsurgency and stabilization efforts against the Taliban were ultimately unsuccessful. After eight years of difficult peace talks, U.S. forces were finally withdrawn in 2021. The Taliban quickly took over the entire country again, deposing the U.S.-backed regime that had been in power for two decades [15].

On the question of whether the U.S. would recognize the new Taliban government, State Department spokesperson Ned Price remarked that the U.S. would work only with "a government that upholds the basic rights of its people [and] that doesn't harbour terrorist groups". He clarified that "the basic rights of its people", according to him, included "the basic, fundamental rights of half of [Afghan] population – its women and girls". Interestingly, he talked about "the basic rights of its people" before "terrorist groups" when listing the main reasons for not recognizing the Taliban government, thus attaching more importance to the former [25]. When the Taliban started to reimpose many of its past policies, despite how Price threatened "repercussions against a government that violates human rights, particularly the rights of women", Secretary of State Anthony Blinken appointed Rina Amiri as special envoy for women and human rights in Afghanistan [25, 26]. He remarked, "We desire a peaceful, stable, and secure Afghanistan, where all Afghans can live and thrive" [26]

This was apparently done in response to backlash for failing to defend women's rights after the Afghan withdrawal, so the U.S. wishes to present itself as remaining committed to feminism in foreign policy even after the war in Afghanistan was lost [26]. While America could no longer invade Afghanistan over the Taliban's abuses, the feminist influence on foreign policy decisions remains, and in the future, the temptation to seek the liberation of non-European women through violent conflicts, initiated by Europeans as part of civilizing missions, would still exist [7].

5. Conclusion

Unlike traditional feminism, embedded feminism argues that military conflicts are legitimate if the rights of women are furthered because of war. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was ultimately spurred by 9/11, but the Bush administration used embedded feminist discourse to garner support and legitimacy for military action against the Taliban in addition to al-Qaeda when the U.S. government correctly recognized that embedded feminism would justify war due to the Taliban's repressive policies towards women.

As the war dragged on, embedded feminist support for the U.S. war in Afghanistan was criticized by traditional feminists over concerns that the war was making violence, a masculine concept, commonplace instead of empowering Afghan women. Afghan feminist leaders continued to be opposed by Taliban violence and even restrictive policies adopted by the post-Taliban Afghan government. Traditional feminists also pointed to the hypocrisy of embedded feminist propaganda on the perceived liberation of Afghan women from the forced wearing of the burqa, as Afghan feminists did not emphasize it, preferring to first address the more urgent socioeconomic issues for Afghan women. Responding to these criticisms, embedded feminists advocated for deploying more troops to Afghanistan to create a secure environment where women's rights would not be threatened.

The U.S. war in Afghanistan ended when the Taliban took over the country again in 2021. However, the U.S. government did not explicitly repudiate the role of embedded feminism in justifying the war. When faced with concerns that Afghan women are having fewer rights under the Taliban regime, the U.S. government indicates that it will continue with its policy of non-recognition of the Taliban regime if the Taliban refuses to uphold the rights of people, including the rights of women. Women's rights issues would continue to be presented as an important part of U.S. foreign policy decision-making in the future.

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