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# UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF AFGHANISTAN

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## Summary

Afghanistan has had a long history of conflict and instability. When NATO operations began in the country two decades ago, the hope was for a brighter future for the state and its people. Unfortunately, Afghanistan is now in the same hands as it was before the intervention.

## Key points

- The Afghan people have already signaled that they expect the Taliban to stand true to their commitments of a more inclusive country than their past leadership showed.
- The US and NATO should be prepared to continue to help the Afghan people, whether this means taking in those who helped the allies in the conflict or sending direct aid as the humanitarian crisis worsens.
- The conclusion of the military withdrawal does not mean the end of engagement.

Although only the future will tell the true intentions of how the Taliban plan to govern, the past offers an unsettling insight. For the Afghan people, the withdrawal of foreign forces has resulted in a troubling end that brings memories of oppression and limitations, prompting an immense evacuation. Now, the international community will have to navigate this ultraconservative organization governing a country while trying to help the people through a humanitarian crisis.

## Fall of Kabul

After a 20-year presence in Afghanistan by the US and NATO allies, a military withdrawal deadline of August 31st was finally decided by President Biden following an agreement between the Taliban and the US signed by President Trump in 2020 (The White House, 2021). As the deadline date approached, crucial intra-Afghan talks in Qatar were making little progress. Each side pointed fingers at the other for why an agreement had not been reached. The Afghan government wanted a ceasefire while the Taliban called for a more “Islamic system”, referring to their extreme interpretation of Sharia Law (Saif, 2021). Meanwhile, as summer began, the Taliban started an offensive that was quickly taking over the country. Starting in rural areas, districts fell to the Taliban against Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) faster than expected, and in August, the first provincial capital fell (Kirby, 2021). After this first provincial capital was taken, it took just over a week before the same would occur to the country's capital, Kabul.

When the Taliban took Kabul on Sunday, August 15th, as with many of the other previously fallen cities, there was essentially no fight (“Why didn't they fight? Speed of Afghan collapse surprised even the Taliban”, 2021). The President, Ashraf Ghani, along with other officials, fled the country that morning and the government effectively collapsed, allowing for the Taliban to swiftly install themselves in the presidential palace and claim control while their forces began “policing” the chaos which ensued in the city (Seir, Faiez, Akhgar, and Gambrell, 2021). People feared for what was to come. Those who worked with the Afghan government and its allies, women, minorities, human rights activists, journalists, and others worried about persecution.

## How the Taliban plan to govern

On the Tuesday after the fall, the Taliban quickly announced that amnesty would be granted to those who worked for the Afghan government or their allies, stating the Taliban would not be seeking revenge. Similarly, with regards to women’s rights and their role in society, the Taliban have stipulated that as long as they follow Sharia law, they can continue to work, which was not the case the last time the Taliban were in power (“Taliban declares general 'amnesty' for Afghan government officials”, 2021). They highlighted that their government would be a strong Islamic one; however, the details of how exactly they plan to govern the country entrenched in a humanitarian crisis are yet to be unveiled. Concerning women’s place in this government, the Taliban announced they can return to work; however, the new cabinet would be chosen based on merit, and they do not guarantee any women will be filling those positions (Henley, 2021). The Taliban are clearly attempting to assure people that they are not the same as when they were in power 20 years ago and that people will enjoy many of the same sorts of rights and freedoms as they had been enjoying in the previous government. However, their emphasis on an Islamic government and country is reminiscent of previous leadership, and many people are still justifiably weary.

Already, it is contested whether the Taliban truly will not seek revenge and be the more moderate government they claim they will be. In a report by the Norwegian Center for Global Analyses, the Taliban are said to be going door-to-door targeting and threatening those who worked for the Afghan government and NATO allies, along with their families, putting them at risk of being murdered or tortured (“Taliban conducting ‘targeted door-to-door visits’: UN document”, 2021). This clearly goes against the promises of the Taliban and emphasizes that any promises they make may be far from what will be reality. Religious and ethnic minorities have also unfortunately been the targeted victims of the Taliban. At least nine men who had returned to their homes after fleeing due to the conflict were killed by the Taliban for being Hazara, a group part of the Shia minority in the largely Sunni Afghanistan (“Afghanistan: Taliban 'tortured and massacred' men from Hazara minority”, 2021).

Concerning the future of women’s rights, ultimately, time will tell whether the Taliban genuinely plan to make their society a place inclusive of women. When they previously held power, women had to wear the burka, could not leave their house without a male companion and were not allowed to work or pursue an education. Breaking these rules would mean a beating or even death (Baker, 2021). In a brave showing of determination for the rights the Taliban have promised, a group of women protested in the city of Herat on September 2nd after being asked by the Taliban to stay at home from their jobs until they can “ensure their security” (Mehrdad, 2021). As mentioned, however, many women, along with others, are afraid and not willing to wait to find out their fate, prompting large-scale evacuations from the country.

## Evacuations

As the country fell to the Taliban, embassies rushed to evacuate their citizens. Many others, including interpreters, journalists, and others who were at risk or worked with the US and allies, had also heard promises to be evacuated. As so many people tried to get out so quickly, deciding who was let on those planes has been reported to have been disorganized and inconsistent, with the procedure sometimes changing by the hour as thousands gathered around the airport hoping for a chance to leave (Widakuswara and Babb, 2021). Those who managed to evacuate often landed in Doha, Qatar, one of the first countries to temporarily take in refugees. Out of the over 120,000 people evacuated before the August 31st withdrawal deadline, about 50,000 stopped in Doha, some unsure of where they would be able to go next, including unaccompanied children (“Afghan refugees in Qatar make first-hand appeal to ministers”, 2021). Others were brought to other US bases in the Middle East of Europe or directly to those in the US (Shear, Jakes, and Sullivan, 2021).

The evacuations were also riddled with tragedy. Individuals were separated from their homes and loved ones. On Thursday, August 26th, ISIS-K carried out a terrorist attack in the form of a suicide bomber detonated near one of the entrances to Kabul airport. It killed over 180 people and wounded more than 200 (Kattosova et al., 2021). The UK, US, and Australia had warned of a high terrorist threat and told citizens to stay away from the airport. In retaliation, the US conducted an airstrike targeting a vehicle, which led to the death of 10 family members, of which 7 were children, possibly due to secondary explosions (Sidu et al., 2021). Overall, the evacuations were massive and efficient considering the time frame; however, they were done hastily and haphazardly. As the withdrawal ended and control of the airport has now been left to the Taliban, many have questioned why the process was not planned and launched prior to the complete collapse.

## What went wrong: US and NATO perspective

President Biden has laid much of the blame for the rapid collapse on the ANSF and the Afghan government. In a speech following the fall of Kabul, he cited his suggestions for the divided political leaders to unite, engage diplomatically with the Taliban, and promises he heard from Ashraf Ghani that the security forces would fight back, none of which fully came to fruition (Blake, 2021). The ANSF indeed gave up quickly, often without a fight. However, this was after issues such as corruption and lack of unity greatly lowered morale, especially as US and NATO troops withdrew after creating a military largely reliant on them to function (Basit, 2021).

European leaders have tended to see it as the West's failure in what was always an unwinnable conflict. Czech President Milos Zeman called it a failure of NATO and went as far as to question the alliance's legitimacy ("Czech president: NATO's failure in Afghanistan puts its legitimacy in question", 2021). Although undermining the legitimacy of NATO is not beneficial, this could be a good opportunity to rethink the focus of the alliance and note lessons learned. For example, missions should not be open-ended and have clear goals and time frames, especially when operating out of solidarity. Using the military as a state-building tool should also be questioned, while NATO instead refocuses on more direct threats. This withdrawal has also led to further concerns for how much NATO is reliant on the US. It was exemplified by the lack of US consultation with NATO when deciding to withdraw, which essentially left the allies no choice but to follow, and the execution of the evacuation being so heavily reliant on US forces (Ellehuus and Morcos, 2021).

## Future

There are many questions left to be answered regarding Afghanistan's uncertain future. Most instrumental is how the Taliban plan to govern. This, in turn, will largely decide the degree to which the international community cooperates. For example, will the Taliban regain access to their frozen foreign funds, making up almost half of its economy (Rappeport, 2021)? Cooperation will be necessary to help the Afghan people face a humanitarian and economic crisis despite an already dire state. There is also the sustained threat of terrorism, as various terrorist groups may take advantage of the security vacuum and feed off instability in the country. Hopefully, the Taliban's goal of international recognition will encourage them to suppress terrorist activity on their soil, especially from rival groups such as ISIS-K.

In neighboring countries and Europe, leaders have already expressed concern about a migration crisis. In a speech after Kabul fell, President Macron of France talked about plans to help the people and evacuations but also made sure to mention the challenge of "significant irregular migratory flows" ("Afghanistan: Macron's comments on 'irregular' migration draw ire", 2021). Talks within the EU have already led to the agreement that the union will fund Afghanistan's neighboring countries to take in refugees and provide them with safe harbor, without stating plans to take migrants in within the bloc, stressing security and resulting fears from the last refugee crisis which affected the continent (Burchard, 2021).

## Recommendations

- Concerning the future of NATO, European members should require the US to consult them further when it is making decisions related to NATO operations and assert the importance of

a balanced alliance in terms of who holds power. If the US acts as if it is only concerned about itself in matters which greatly affect its partners, then its allies will surely do the same, and the solidarity of the transatlantic partnership will crumble.

- Just because the EU plans on helping Afghanistan's neighbors to take in refugees through funding, this does not mean it should board up its doors to refugees. Especially not those who helped NATO operations. Security is a necessary concern for the EU, but it has also been a concern for the Afghan people for the past two decades as EU states partook in the conflict. Now it is time to prioritize empathy, learn lessons from the last refugee crisis, and start preparing early.
- NATO states and their allies need to harmonize policy toward the Taliban as the world navigates how to approach the new leaders. A united approach means more power. It is important to let them show the world how they want to lead and engage from there. Complete disengagement will further hurt the Afghan people and surely lead the Taliban to act as enemies.
- Media freedom is now under threat in Afghanistan; however, journalists will now be crucial to unveiling to the world the actions of the Taliban in power. The United Nations' direct assistance needs to include support to journalists and news organizations to continue reporting.

## Conclusion

Although Afghanistan is back in the hands of the Taliban 20 years later, it is no longer the same country. Despite the issues with the previous government, many people have experienced freedoms and rights that they will wish to maintain. Through acts such as the women's protest, the Afghan people have already signaled that they expect the Taliban to stand true to their commitments of a more inclusive country than their past leadership showed. Regardless, the US and NATO should be prepared to help the Afghan people, whether taking in those who supported the allies in the conflict or sending direct aid as the humanitarian crisis worsens. The conclusion of the military withdrawal does not mean the end of the engagement.

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