

Taliban Advances in Afghanistan Could Bring Political Peril for Biden

The president had hoped to win credit for ending one of America's "forever wars." But new risks are coming into view.

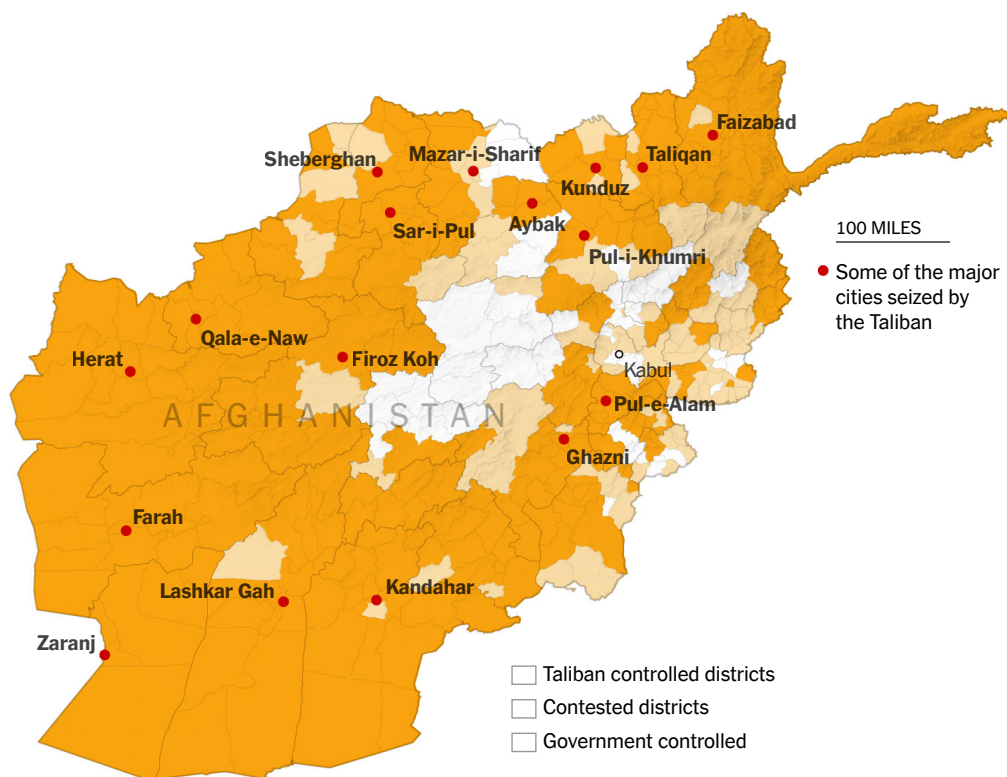


By Michael Crowley

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When President Biden announced his plan to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, the politics seemed relatively simple: Many polls showed that Americans supported ending the country's nearly 20-year involvement in a war whose goals had become obscure.

But four months later, with the Taliban storming across the country much faster and more ruthlessly than expected, new political risks are coming into view for Mr. Biden, who had hoped to win credit for ending what he has called one of America's "forever wars."



Now U.S. officials are racing to evacuate Afghans who assisted the American military and may be targets of Taliban reprisals, and are contemplating the prospect of hastily evacuating the 4,000 Americans at the U.S. Embassy in the capital city of Kabul.

The threat of a Taliban conquest and new risks to U.S. personnel and allies in the country could cause Americans who had been paying little attention to Afghanistan for the past several years to reconsider their views, particularly if Republicans amplify a message of American failure and capitulation.

"Everybody's worried about a repeat of the Saigon images," said Brian Katulis, a foreign policy expert at the liberal Center for American Progress, referring to the chaotic April 1975 evacuation of the American Embassy in South Vietnam's capital. Desperate Vietnamese clung to the struts of departing helicopters as the city was being conquered by Communist forces.

Americans remain focused on domestic matters like the coronavirus and the economy, and are unlikely to care much that the Taliban have captured unfamiliar cities like Kunduz, said Mr. Katulis, who has studied public opinion about foreign policy.

“But this could change,” he added. “If you have a parade of horrors continue to unfold in Afghanistan, it could seep into the public consciousness the way Iraq did in 2013 and 2014” when the Islamic State stormed across that country after American troops withdrew.

Speaking to reporters at the White House on Tuesday, Mr. Biden said he did “not regret” his decision, noting that the United States continued to support Afghanistan’s government and security forces but adding, “They’ve got to fight for themselves.”

Officials in the Biden administration have repeatedly expressed hope that negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government might produce a peaceful resolution short of a Kabul-based Taliban emirate, but prospects for successful talks are swiftly fading.



President Biden expressed no second thoughts about his decision, noting that the United States continued to support Afghanistan’s government and security forces. Stefani Reynolds for The New York Times

Fortunately for Mr. Biden, many Republicans in Congress have turned against foreign military adventures and supported a full exit from Afghanistan, to which President Donald J. Trump first committed last year when he struck a deal with the Taliban. Under the agreement, the group halted its attacks on U.S. forces and began peace talks with the Afghan government.

Both Mr. Trump and Mr. Biden were in sync with public opinion. Polls have shown for years that a plurality of Americans support withdrawing from Afghanistan, with a majority supporting either a full exit or a smaller U.S. presence.

But as the U.S.-backed Afghan government in Kabul appears more imperiled, some prominent Republicans are increasing their criticism of Mr. Biden.

“Reality was clear to everyone but the very top of the Biden administration,” Senator Mitch McConnell, Republican of Kentucky and the minority leader, said in remarks on Monday on the Senate floor, as he noted prior warnings that the Taliban might quickly overwhelm the Afghan government’s security forces. “From their bizarre choice of a symbolic Sept. 11th deadline to the absence of any concrete plan, the administration’s decision appears to have rested on wishful thinking and not much else.”

“No one should pretend they’re surprised the Taliban is winning now that we abandoned our Afghan partners,” Senator Ben Sasse, Republican of Nebraska, said in a statement on Tuesday.

But Mr. Sasse also nodded to the complicated political dynamic in which Mr. Biden is delivering on a promise made by Mr. Trump.

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“Our troops served America and our allies admirably, but the last administration and the present administration chose to give up the fight,” Mr. Sasse said.

It may be a consolation to Biden administration officials that Mr. Trump is unlikely to join in the attacks. The former president, who made U.S. troop withdrawals a key campaign theme in the 2020 election, pressed his generals in vain to accelerate the American exit.

And Mr. Trump reiterated his support for leaving Afghanistan as recently as April, when he attacked Representative Liz Cheney, Republican of Wyoming, in a statement as a “warmongering fool” who “wants to stay in the Middle East and Afghanistan for another 19 years, but doesn’t consider the big picture — Russia and China!”

“If Trump is the Republican nominee again, I think it would be hard for him to criticize Biden for executing a plan that Trump put into motion,” said Richard Fontaine, the chief executive of the Center for a New American Security and a former foreign policy adviser to the hawkish Republican senator John McCain.

“Trump didn’t just open the door” to a withdrawal, Mr. Fontaine added. “What he did was force the issue in a way that it hadn’t been forced before.”

But Mr. Fontaine, who opposes the American troop withdrawal, said that major political and security risks remained for Mr. Biden. He argued that domestic support for leaving Afghanistan had never been intense, coming nowhere near the mass demonstrations opposing the Vietnam and Iraq wars.

And he said that the possibility of a Taliban takeover followed by a return to the country of the group’s longtime Qaeda allies would be a huge liability for Mr. Biden.

“Polls show that a majority of Americans want to leave Afghanistan,” Mr. Fontaine said. “But they also show that if you ask Americans about their foreign policy or national security objectives, they will almost always rank preventing terrorist attacks on the United States as No. 1 or 2, and they will rank extracting America from military operations overseas far below that.”

Mr. Trump’s top lieutenants, who frequently lead political attacks on Mr. Biden, are similarly constrained in their ability to turn events in Afghanistan against him.

Mike Pompeo, who as secretary of state attended the signing ceremony in Qatar of Mr. Trump’s deal with Taliban leaders, has repeatedly attacked the Biden administration as weak on foreign policy.

In an appearance this week on Fox News, however, Mr. Pompeo — who is contemplating a 2024 presidential bid — called the troop withdrawal “the right thing to do.”

In language that closely echoed Mr. Biden’s recent remarks, he added: “This is now the Afghans’ fight.”

Some prominent supporters of a military withdrawal from Afghanistan say that Mr. Biden has little to worry about in political terms, noting that his decision enjoyed broad bipartisan support, including from politically diverse veterans’ groups.



A crowd in Kabul this week applying for a special immigrant visa program that resettles thousands of Afghans and their family members. Paula Bronstein/Getty Images

“I think that the American public is much more likely to see what’s happening right now, as tragic and worrisome as it is, as ultimately the failure of two decades of war and occupation in Afghanistan,” said Kate Kizer, the policy director of the anti-interventionist group Win Without War.

“It’s important to remember that the reason the public supports a military withdrawal from Afghanistan, as well as from Iraq, is that they think these wars themselves are a mistake and failure,” she added.

Ms. Kizer said she worried that some “members of the foreign policy establishment in Washington took the lesson from Iraq that chaos ensues when the U.S. withdraws” and would be quick to press for renewed American intervention.

Mr. Katulis said he could imagine pressure for an American return to Afghanistan, years after President Barack Obama reluctantly sent troops back to Iraq after the Islamic State began to capture and execute American hostages.

Such a scenario would likely require worst-case outcomes, he said, like the killings of Americans or senior Afghan government officials. (After the Taliban first conquered Kabul in 1996, militants captured the country’s president, Mohammad Najibullah, shot him in the head and hung his beaten body from a tower.)

For now, Mr. Katulis said, “people care more about their bridges and roads getting fixed. Afghanistan right now is out of sight, out of mind.”