

Biden Rattles U.K. With His Afghanistan Policy

Britain was the second-largest supplier of troops to Afghanistan, and the United States' rapid withdrawal from the country has left some embittered.



By Mark Landler

Published Aug. 18, 2021 Updated Aug. 20, 2021

LONDON — In Britain, the chaotic departure from Afghanistan has drawn comparisons not to helicopters flying out of Saigon but to an earlier debacle: the 1956 Suez crisis, in which a humiliated Britain was forced to pull out of Egypt, having failed to dislodge its nationalist leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The problem is, Britain had very little to say about the timing or tactics of the most recent withdrawal, even though it suffered the second-most casualties among Western nations in the Afghanistan war after the United States. That has left British officials embarrassed and embittered at President Biden. Some say he behaved more like his predecessor, Donald J. Trump, than an ally who promised a new era of American partnership.

“He hasn’t just humiliated America’s Afghan allies,” said Rory Stewart, a former British cabinet minister with lengthy experience in Afghanistan. “He’s humiliated his Western allies by demonstrating their impotence.”

Now, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has labored to cultivate a good relationship with Mr. Biden, must deal with the fallout from a crisis in which he is largely a bystander — and which led to the Taliban’s lightning reconquest of the country.

On Wednesday, Mr. Johnson faced an angry Parliament, recalled from summer recess, to discuss his government’s plans to evacuate thousands of British nationals and offer sanctuary to Afghans who helped British soldiers and diplomats in their two decades of engagement there.

He announced Britain would accept up to 5,000 refugees from Afghanistan, giving priority to women and girls who are at risk of persecution by the Taliban. The policy will allow for a long-term goal of 20,000 immigrants — a number that opposition leaders said was inadequate to the humanitarian threat unfolding there.

Mr. Johnson came under harsh criticism, even from members of his own Conservative Party, including his predecessor, Theresa May, for failing to mitigate the upheaval following the American withdrawal. But he said it was an “illusion” to think Britain could have prevented the collapse of the Afghan government.

“We must deal with this position as it now is,” Mr. Johnson said. “Accepting what we have achieved and what we had not achieved.”

The unrepentant tone of Mr. Biden’s speech on Monday rattled many in London, who noted that he ignored the contribution of Britain, which was the second-largest supplier of troops to the war and lost 454 soldiers there. (The United States had five times the casualties, with 10 times the number of troops.) It raised broader doubts, some said, about the reliability of the United States as an ally.



Britain is deploying additional military personnel to Afghanistan on a short-term basis to provide support to evacuation efforts. Sharon Floyd/British Ministry of Defence

"I hope 'America First' hasn't become 'America Alone,'" said Tom Tugendhat, a Conservative member of Parliament who serves as chairman of the foreign affairs committee. He said the experience should prompt Britain to rethink the terms of its relationship with the United States in future security operations.

"The lesson for the U.K. is that interdependence must not become overreliance," said Mr. Tugendhat, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. "We are better partners to others if we have options and can help shape decisions."

Britain's defense secretary, Ben Wallace, and some British generals had been vocal in their criticism of the American policy, dating back to Mr. Trump's outreach to the Taliban and his initial announcement of an American withdrawal in February 2020.

Mr. Wallace has said Britain sounded out other NATO members about the possibility of organizing a stabilization force in Afghanistan after the United States left. That idea went nowhere, and even if it had, security experts said a NATO force without American participation would never have been sufficient to hold off the Taliban insurgency, given the massive air power required.

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Mr. Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, pointed out that all NATO members were consulted and had "signed up" to the American timetable for withdrawing from Afghanistan.

"I'm a soldier," said Mr. Wallace, who served as a captain in the British Army, in an emotional radio interview on Monday, in which he seemed near tears at the prospect of some British allies not being able to get out of Kabul, the Afghan capital. "It's sad that the West has done what it's done."

But there are few signs that Mr. Wallace's boss, Mr. Johnson, shares his commitment to the Afghan project. In recent remarks, he echoed Mr. Biden's sense of futility, saying, "We've known for a long time this was the way things would go." Last summer, he called Afghanistan the "chronicle of an event foretold."

Mr. Johnson has avoided any direct criticism of Mr. Biden. A senior official in Downing Street said on Tuesday that the United States remained a vital British ally, however difficult the circumstances in Afghanistan.

The two men spoke by phone on Tuesday — the first contact Mr. Biden has had with a foreign leader since the crisis erupted — and Mr. Johnson "stressed the importance of not losing the gains made in Afghanistan over the last twenty years," according to Downing Street.

Mr. Johnson has good reasons to avoid a rift with Mr. Biden. The prime minister has lobbied the president on issues like the coronavirus pandemic and climate change. He needs the United States to play a major role at the United Nations' climate change conference, which he is hosting in Glasgow in November.

As with Mr. Biden in the United States, it is not clear there is a political cost for Mr. Johnson in abandoning Afghanistan — unless, of course, it becomes a seedbed for future terrorist attacks in the West.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Britain withdrew its last combat troops in 2014 and has kept only a vestigial security presence there since. As an issue, Afghanistan had faded from the headlines every bit as much in Britain as in the United States.



David Cameron, Britain's prime minister at the time, addressing British troops in October 2014 at Camp Bastion in southern Afghanistan. Pool photo by Dan Kitwood

"Boris Johnson and Joe Biden will be calculating that this is a two-week wonder and that only a handful of military veterans and Afghan hands will care," said Mr. Stewart, who set up a foundation in Afghanistan that restored buildings, established a clinic and operates a center for traditional crafts.

Britain, historians point out, has forsaken Afghanistan before, after ill-fated wars in the 19th century, a period of colonial adventurism known as the "Great Game." In 1963, the departing prime minister, Harold Macmillan, famously declared that the first rule of politics ought to be "never invade Afghanistan."

This episode, however, dramatizes the waning influence of Britain on the world stage.

At a recent Group of 7 summit meeting in Cornwall, Mr. Johnson debuted a new post-Brexit foreign policy that he promoted as "Global Britain." But Mr. Biden's lack of consultation of Britain on Afghanistan, following on the heels of Mr. Trump's unilateralism, suggest its key ally is not taking it all that seriously.

"The U.S. has quite different interests and an unreliable political system, at least as far as foreign policy is concerned," said Jeremy Shapiro, the research director of the European Council on Foreign Relations. "When there is a massive tragedy or cock-up, that's when these things become public."

After a honeymoon following his defeat of the unpopular Mr. Trump, the chaotic images in Kabul have earned Mr. Biden his first skein of negative headlines in Britain's tabloids. "Joke Biden," said the Sun, which is owned by Rupert Murdoch. "Biden: It's the Afghans' own fault," said the right-leaning Daily Mail.



An armored personnel carrier driven by Taliban fighters on Monday making its way through traffic near the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Kim Darroch, who served as British ambassador to Washington when Mr. Trump was president, said Britons should not read too much into Mr. Biden's Afghanistan policy because it would probably not carry over to other issues, like climate change, where he is likely to be more collaborative.

"Biden has basically implemented Trump's policy," Mr. Darroch said. "But it's about the only area where he has done that. In every other area, he has ripped up the policy."

Still, other former diplomats said America's go-it-alone approach in Afghanistan was part of a broader and worrisome trend.

"Four years of Trump had already started even Brits asking themselves whether it was time to begin reducing levels of dependence on the U.S. for foreign and security policy," said Peter Westmacott, another former ambassador to Washington.

"This week's fresh indications that America really doesn't see foreign policy as much more than an extension of domestic politics means people are once again asking those difficult questions," he said.