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Afghan Fiasco Raises Hard Questions for Europe

Once again, the United States has dragged its NATO allies into an embarrassing mess they had warned against, bringing calls for more autonomy. But the price of independence is steep.

By Steven Erlanger

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BRUSSELS — President Biden says he hears no criticism from America's allies about the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and the collapse of the government. But the criticism in Europe, at least, is loud and persistent.

Officials from Britain, Germany, Italy and France have complained that despite Mr. Biden's promises of consultation, there has been more diktat than conversation on Afghanistan. He is likely to hear more grumbling in an emergency videoconference call on Tuesday among the leaders of the Group of 7.

The latest fiasco in Kabul, following earlier U.S. missteps in Libya and Syria, not to speak of Iraq, has added greater urgency to a question that has dogged NATO virtually since the end of the Cold War, long before President Trump happened on the scene: Will there be any serious shift in the way the NATO alliance operates, with the United States leading and Europe following behind?

The British prime minister, Boris Johnson, has said that he will ask Mr. Biden during the G-7 call to keep the Kabul airport open for evacuation flights past the original deadline of the end of the month, and this time Mr. Biden seems likely to agree.

President Biden with Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain during the G7 summit in June. Doug Mills/The New York Times

But the allies' demands for a "conditions-based withdrawal" were rejected by Mr. Biden, who insisted, perhaps a bit too hastily, on a firm deadline for leaving Afghanistan. No country stood up and said no, a senior NATO ambassador said.

Mr. Biden took office with a chance to reset relations with Europe after the trauma of the Trump years. While he has said almost all the right things on issues of trade and climate change, the Afghanistan fiasco has left many Europeans more convinced than ever that they cannot rely on the United States to look after their security interests — no matter who is occupying the White House.

Washington's shift of foreign policy focus to countering the rising global influence of China has only deepened their anxieties.

During NATO's summit meeting in June, which Mr. Biden attended, the president of the Czech Republic, Milos Zeman, called the decision to pull troops out of Afghanistan "a betrayal," an official in the room later said. Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO secretary-general, thanked him and moved on to the preferred American theme of challenging China.

Knowing that they could not replace the American military or remain in Afghanistan without U.S. troops, NATO allies largely left the withdrawal up to Washington. NATO had no evacuation coordination plan, and the rapid victory of the Taliban surprised and embarrassed everyone, with key NATO officials on summer vacation and no American ambassador in place.

Some of the calls for change do seem more serious than in the past. Armin Laschet, the German conservative aiming to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor, called the U.S. withdrawal "the greatest debacle that NATO has experienced since its foundation."

Josep Borrell Fontelles, the E.U. foreign affairs chief, told the European Parliament that the departure was “a catastrophe for the Afghan people, for Western values and credibility and for the developing of international relations.’’

Josep Borrell Fontelles, the E.U. foreign affairs chief, speaking in Strasbourg, France, in June. Pool photo by Jean-Francois Badias

Theresa May, the former British prime minister, who rushed to be the first foreign leader to see a newly elected President Trump, asked in Parliament: “Was our intelligence really so poor? Was our understanding of the Afghan government so weak? Was our knowledge on the ground so inadequate? Or did we just think we had to follow the United States and on a wing and a prayer it would be all right on the night?”

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, NATO’s secretary-general from 2004 to 2009, said that European criticism of Mr. Biden was quite accurate, but also somewhat irrelevant, because “we Europeans have become addicted to U.S. leadership.” Given the rise of China, he said, “the trans-Atlantic relationship as we have known it will never be the same.”

Afghanistan should be a lesson for Europe, he told the BBC. America’s focus on China means that Europeans must “develop a capacity to stand on our own feet, militarily and politically,’’ and “should seriously think about what to do for our own defense and spend the money to make that happen.’’ But he added: “We’re very far from that now, unfortunately.”

For all the renewed calls for European independence of action and “strategic autonomy,” some say there is scant evidence much will change.

“Europeans are up in arms but there are no alternative options, so I take this with a grain of salt,” said Rem Korteweg, a senior fellow at the Clingendael Institute, a Dutch research institution. “It’s repeating the mantras of Europeans whenever things don’t go as we want,” he said. But the wars in Bosnia and Libya demonstrated “the inability of Europeans to do anything serious without the Americans.”

To alter that would require a commitment of political will and taxpayer money that European leaders show little sign of providing. It is hard enough to get NATO’s European members to spend the 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense that they agreed, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to do by 2024. Even Mr. Laschet’s Germany, which is spending more, is up to only 1.53 percent.

Shooting drills at the base of the KSK, the elite German special forces, in Calw, Germany. Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times

“It’s nice to talk of European strategic autonomy, but to do what?” Mr. Korteweg asked. “What problem do we want to solve without the Americans? On what problem do we not want them to lead? Or is European autonomy a way of protecting ourselves from the big, bad outside world, from migration flows and Chinese economic coercion?”

record as rulers.

Benjamin Haddad, a Frenchman who directs the Future Europe Initiative at the Atlantic Council, sees the debate reinforcing a call by President Emmanuel Macron of France for a more autonomous European defense capacity in cooperation with NATO.

But he is skeptical. “Europe did damage control with Trump, to wait him out,” Mr. Haddad said. “Now, there is a bit of a shock, and clearly the Trump years didn’t serve as the wake-up call we expected from Europeans.”

Mr. Haddad sees no concern that Washington will renege on its commitment to NATO’s collective defense. “But there is a message to Europe that there is no U.S. appetite to intervene in conflicts in the neighborhood that could impact Europe,” he said.

Anna Wieslander, a Swedish defense analyst and director for Northern Europe at the Atlantic Council, sees the Afghan pullout as a clear sign that NATO will shift again to focus on great-power competition with China and Russia, emphasizing issues of deterrence, resilience, disinformation and climate change.

European allies were tired of Afghanistan, too, she said, where the war against terrorism became mixed up with democracy promotion, nation building and social reform. “But NATO is not a development aid organization,” she said.

The withdrawal fiasco will revive the strategic autonomy argument, but the best result, she said, would be “a European pillar in NATO” that could — with major investment — provide some of the strategic airlift, surveillance, reconnaissance and command and control that only the Americans now provide. “If we want more capacity and burden-sharing,” Ms. Wieslander said, “that could be a useful, if expensive debate.”

Julian Lindley-French, a defense analyst at the Institute of Statecraft in London, says that the Europeans are doing a lot of “virtue signaling,” despite “the weakness of the European effort in Afghanistan over the past 20 years,” where most allies limited their operations with cautious rules of engagement.

“European weakness,” he added, “is in fact European isolationism.”

European complaints about the chaotic withdrawal are serious but could boomerang, warned Kori Schake, director of foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

“I’m sympathetic to European anxiety, given their reliance on the United States for the ultimate guarantee of their security, but also because it raises important questions about Biden’s judgment,” Ms. Schake said.

NATO allies “stood shoulder-to-shoulder with us in Afghanistan for 19 years, and the U.S. seems insufficiently appreciative of that long effort,” she said. “But I fear that there will be an American backlash to these European complaints when they could have done more.”

Even as Americans “may feel disgraced by what will happen after our abandonment,” Ms. Schake said, “our European friends complaining loudly about our failures is unlikely to instill greater commitment by Americans to European concerns and interests.”