

Afghanistan's collapse leaves allies questioning U.S. resolve on other fronts

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby listens to a question about Afghanistan at a briefing on Aug. 13, 2021. (Susan Walsh/AP)

LONDON — The Taliban's stunningly swift advances across Afghanistan have sparked global alarm, reviving doubts about the credibility of U.S. foreign policy promises and drawing harsh criticisms even from some of the United States' closest allies.

As Taliban fighters entered Kabul and the United States scrambled to evacuate its citizens, concerns grew that the unfolding chaos could create a haven for terrorists, unleash a major humanitarian disaster and trigger a new refugee exodus.

U.S. allies complain that they were not fully consulted on a policy decision that potentially puts their own national security interests at risk — in contravention of President Biden's promises to recommit to global engagement.

And many around the world are wondering whether they could rely on the United States to fulfill long-standing security commitments stretching from Europe to East Asia.

Whatever happened to 'America is back'?" said Tobias Ellwood, who chairs the Defense Committee in the British Parliament, citing Biden's foreign policy promise to rebuild alliances and restore U.S. prestige damaged during the Trump administration.

Hubris to humiliation: America's warrior class struggles to make sense of what happened

"People are bewildered that after two decades of this big, high-tech power intervening, they are withdrawing and effectively handing the country back to the

people we went in to defeat,” Ellwood said. “This is the irony. How can you say America is back when we’re being defeated by an insurgency armed with no more than [rocket-propelled grenades], land mines and AK-47s?”

Afghans wait in long lines for hours on Aug. 14 at the passport office in Kabul. (Paula Bronstein/Getty Images)

As much as its military capabilities, the United States’ decades-old role as a defender of democracies and freedoms is again in jeopardy, said Rory Stewart, who was Britain’s minister for international development in the Conservative government of Theresa May. “The Western democracy that seemed to be the inspiration for the world, the beacon for the world, is turning its back,” Stewart said.

Britain has voiced some of the bluntest criticisms of the pullout, which is unusual for a country that regards itself as the United States’ closest ally. Britain made the biggest contribution to the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan and suffered the highest number of casualties after the United States.

In comments Friday, British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace predicted civil war and the return of al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization whose attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, prompted the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan.

“I feel this was not the right time or decision to make,” he told Sky News. “Of course al-Qaeda will probably come back, and certainly it would like that kind of breeding ground.”

“Strategically, it causes a lot of problems, and as an international community, it’s very difficult . . . what we’re seeing today,” he added.

Rivals of the United States also have expressed dismay. Among them is China, which fears that the ascent of an extremist Islamist government on its western border will foster unrest in the adjoining province of Xinjiang, where Beijing has waged sweeping crackdowns on the Uyghur population that have been denounced by the West.

The Taliban is already reimposing its rules

Washington “bears an unavoidable responsibility for the current situation in

Afghanistan,” Col. Wu Qian, a spokesman for China’s Ministry of National Defense, said earlier this month. “It cannot leave and shed the burden on regional countries.”

Secretary of State Antony Blinken rejected criticisms that the withdrawal damages U.S. credibility. He said staying mired in a conflict that is not in the “national interest” would do far more damage.

“Most of our strategic competitors around the world would like nothing better than for us to remain in Afghanistan for another year, five years, 10 years, and have those resources dedicated to being in the midst of a civil war,” Blinken told CNN. “It’s simply not in our interest.”

But the manner and implementation of the withdrawal has left allies feeling betrayed, said Cathryn Clüver Ashbrook, director of the German Council on Foreign Relations. Germany’s government, which withdrew its troops in June and is evacuating its embassy, has refrained from overt criticism of the U.S. withdrawal.

Nonetheless, some German officials and lawmakers are seething at Washington’s failure to consult coalition partners such as Berlin, Clüver Ashbrook said. Germany is particularly concerned about the potential for an exodus of Afghan refugees similar to the influx of 2015, when more than 1 million migrants, spurred largely by the war in Syria, surged into Europe, with many headed for Germany.

“The Biden administration came to office promising an open exchange, a transparent exchange with its allies. They said the transatlantic relationship would be pivotal,” she said. “As it is, they’re playing lip service to the transatlantic relationship and still believe European allies should fall into line with U.S. priorities.”

Europe’s deportations of Afghans grind to a halt as Taliban overruns country

“We’re back to the transatlantic relationship of old, where the Americans dictate everything. . . . ‘Yes we want to partner with you, but in reality, we want to be able to tell you what to do and when,’ ” she added.

The United States’ Arab allies, which have long counted on the U.S. military to come to their aid in the event of an attack by Iran, also have faced questions over

whether they will be able to rely on the United States.

“What’s happening in Afghanistan is raising alarm bells everywhere,” said Riad Kahwaji, who heads the Inegma security consultancy in the United Arab Emirates, which hosts one of the biggest American military contingents in the Middle East.

“The U.S.’s credibility as an ally has been in question for a while,” he said. “We see Russia fighting all the way to protect the Assad regime [in Syria], and now the Americans are pulling out and leaving a big chaos in Afghanistan.”

Clüver Ashbrook said Biden’s plan to build an alliance of democracies to counter the influence of China and Russia is also in doubt, now that the West will no longer maintain a significant presence in Central Asia.

For China and Russia, there is opportunity as well as concern in the departure of U.S. troops. Both Moscow and Beijing have hosted Taliban delegations in recent weeks in an attempt to pave the way for a post-American future in the region.

The humiliating conclusion of the two-decade U.S. venture into Afghanistan will aid their efforts to persuade many governments to seek out relationships elsewhere, analysts say.

In a commentary directed at Hong Kong, China’s state-run Global Times cited Afghanistan in a signal to democracy activists not to heed repeated American promises to “stand by” Hong Kong.

“It has been proven repeatedly that whomever U.S. politicians claim to stand with will face bad luck, plunge into social unrest and suffer severe consequences,” the commentary said.

Russia has been struck by the speed of the unraveling of the U.S.-installed government in Kabul, said Fyodor Lukyanov, the chairman of Russia’s Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and editor in chief of the magazine *Russia in Global Affairs*.

The decade-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, which ended in 1989, is widely remembered as a failure, one that leaves Russia in no mood to reengage too closely with Afghanistan, he said.

But at least, Lukyanov noted, the government left behind by the Soviets survived

for three years after the withdrawal of Red Army forces.

“We believe our failure was big, but it seems the Americans achieved an even bigger failure,” he said.

John Hudson in Washington contributed to this report.

Source:

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