



Taliban fighters on a pick-up truck move around a market area, flocked with local Afghan people at the Kote Sangi area of Kabul yesterday, after Taliban seized control of the capital following the collapse of the Afghan government.

PHOTO: AFP

'Nation building' was not the goal

Under pressure from allies, Biden points finger at Afghan leaders, forces for crisis

REUTERS, Washington

President Joe Biden said on Monday he stood "squarely behind" his decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan despite searing images of chaos in Kabul that exposed the limits of US power and plunged him into the worst crisis of his presidency.

Breaking his silence on the US pullout after scenes of bedlam dominated television news channels for days, Biden blamed the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan on Afghan political leaders who fled the country and the unwillingness of the US-trained Afghan army to fight the militant group.

The panicked evacuation, coming weeks after Biden predicted the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan was not inevitable, has dented America's image on the global stage just as Biden has sought to emphasize to world leaders that "America is back" after former President Donald Trump's tumultuous four years.

The pullout has also raised fears that militant groups like al-Qaeda could reconstitute under Taliban rule.

Biden, rejecting harsh criticism of his Afghan policy from Republican and Democratic



lawmakers, some former generals and human rights groups, was resolute in defending his withdrawal from a 20-year war that endured through four presidencies.

"I stand squarely behind my decision," Biden said in a televised speech at the White House. "After 20 years I've learned the hard way that there was never a good time to withdraw US forces. That's why we're still there."

Biden said he found some of the scenes of chaos in Kabul "gut-wrenching" but that he did not start moving out evacuees sooner because Afghan President Ashraf Ghani did not want a mass exodus.

He acknowledged that the Taliban's speed in retaking the country was unexpected.

"The truth is: This did unfold more quickly than we anticipated. So what's happened? Afghanistan political leaders gave up and fled the country. The Afghan military gave up, sometimes without trying to fight," Biden said.

Biden singled out for criticism the two main Afghan leaders, Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, saying they had "flatly refused" his advice to seek a political settlement with the Taliban.

"How many more generations of America's daughters and sons would you have me send to fight Afghans - Afghanistan's civil war, when Afghan troops will not?" Biden asked.

Biden reiterated however that the US national interest in Afghanistan was always principally about preventing terrorist attacks on the US homeland -- and that America would continue to "act quickly and decisively" against any terror threat emanating from the country.

"The mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to be nation-building," he said.

Whether Biden will face a long-term political risk for Afghanistan is unclear. Foreign policy does not typically play a major role in US elections. Many Americans have expressed support for Trump's and Biden's decision to leave Afghanistan, America's longest war.

WEST'S BLUNDERS AND TALIBAN'S VICTORY IN AFGHANISTAN

China, Pakistan, Russia set to increase influence

THE GUARDIAN

Regional powers will see their influence increase dramatically in Afghanistan as the US executes a hasty, haphazard withdrawal and the Taliban return to power after 20 years. Russia, Pakistan and China have all signalled a readiness to transition smoothly into engaging with Taliban authorities with varying levels of enthusiasm.

PAKISTAN: Of all its regional neighbours, Pakistan appeared the most exuberant in welcoming Taliban rule in Afghanistan. The hope for Pakistan is that it would enjoy more influence and leverage in Kabul under Taliban rule, giving it a strong regional ally aligned with its Islamic values. Pakistan - long accused of aiding the Afghan Taliban - the prime minister, Imran Khan, said the Taliban had "broken the chains of mental slavery in Afghanistan". The leader of a key religious political party said the "Taliban has freed their country from superpowers". Khan, who has personal and political reason to cheer the fall of the Afghan government, was not alone in portraying the Taliban's victory as a triumph. Influential religious clerics and senior Pakistan military generals also celebrated publicly. For years Pakistan, which has a long and porous border with Afghanistan, has been a sanctuary for Taliban leaders and their families, and is where fighters often receive training and medical care. Pakistan has denied giving

its backing of authoritarian leaders by saying they provided a bulwark against the rise of radicalism and chaos. Yet in Afghanistan, the calculus is different and a cooler realpolitik is at play. Despite naming the Taliban a terrorist group, Russia appears ready to engage if it can ensure security for its own diplomats and prevent militants from launching assaults against its central Asian allies such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Zamir Kabulov, Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan, even dangled the possibility that Russia would recognise the Taliban government based on "the behaviour of the new authorities", a major prize for the Taliban that would also indicate Moscow sees itself as a potential intermediary as the west pulls out.

CHINA: While China was uneasy about the US military engagement in Afghanistan, it has also been critical of its "irresponsible" withdrawal of late. In recent years, Beijing has begun to see the US's continued presence in Afghanistan as a lesser of two evils, according to Andrew Small of the German Marshall Fund, a US thinktank. "But judging from last month's meeting between the Taliban and the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, Beijing seems to have been well prepared for this eventuality - perhaps even better than the US itself," he said. On Monday, China's propaganda agencies took this opportunity to discredit US foreign policy,



the Afghan Taliban any military assistance, and said it pushed for peace during the Doha negotiations, but many believe the main priority for Pakistan has been to keep the Taliban onside. However, many fear the strength of the Taliban's resurgence will further embolden already powerful radical Islamist groups in Pakistan and make the country more vulnerable to jihadists. Ayesha Ijaz Khan, a Pakistani lawyer and writer, tweeted: "Pakistanis just don't know what's about to hit them yet."

RUSSIA: Russia has long criticised the US intervention in Afghanistan and its spectacular failure has evoked obvious schadenfreude in the Kremlin. More than three decades ago, the Soviet Union evacuated its last tanks in Afghanistan over the Friendship Bridge into Uzbekistan. This week, US-allied warlords and their fighters were forced to flee over the same bridge. Vladimir Putin has made anti-terrorism a cornerstone of his foreign policy, comparing it to the fight against nazism. In Syria and Libya, Russia justified

but Beijing is treading a careful line in its policy towards the new Taliban regime. This is because China sees the issue of Afghanistan as a quagmire where great powers have found themselves entrapped - from Britain to the Soviet Union, and now the US. China is particularly concerned that Afghanistan would become a base for terrorists and extremists fighting for the independence for the largely Muslim region of Xinjiang — a priority issue Wang raised with Taliban leaders during their meeting last month. In response, the Taliban pledged that it would "never allow any force to use the Afghan territory to engage in acts detrimental to China." But the security risks are not bound to China's borders. In recent years, China has invested heavily in Central Asia through its Belt and Road trade and infrastructure program. A spillover effect of the Taliban's rise to power on Islamist militants could potentially threaten Chinese economic and strategic interests in the wider region.

Militants must never attack West from Afghanistan: UK Nato to remain vigilant against terrorists

REUTERS, London

Britain yesterday cautioned the Taliban that Afghanistan must never be used to launch terror attacks but added that the West must try to positively influence the insurgents who have grabbed power after the United States withdrew its forces.

Britain fears the Taliban's return and the vacuum left by the West's chaotic withdrawal will allow militants from al Qaeda and Islamic State to gain a foothold in Afghanistan, just 20 years after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said the West would have to be pragmatic in its relations with the Taliban, try to see if it could moderate the new rulers of Afghanistan and even try to convince them to be "inclusive".

"Our message is going to be this: Afghanistan must never be used to launch terror attacks against the West, we've had 20 years of success in that regard," Raab told Sky.

Told by a Sky reporter that the Taliban were a "red tag bunch of thugs", Raab said: "I'm not going to dissent from that view but they are now in power, and we now need to deal with that reality."

Raab said the position at Kabul airport was stabilising.

Nato's secretary general also yesterday said that international terrorism is a threat with the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and the Western defence alliance "needs to stay vigilant to stay at the forefront of the fight" against it.

Jens Stoltenberg also told a news conference that the speed of the collapse of the Afghan National Army in the face of the Taliban's advance was a surprise, and there are lessons for Nato to draw from this, but the main focus today is to get vulnerable people out of the country.



French and Afghan nationals line up to board a French military transport plane at the Kabul airport yesterday, for evacuation from Afghanistan after the Taliban's stunning military takeover of the country.

PHOTO: AFP

The picture that defines chaos

AFP, Kabul



A photo shows more than 600 Afghans -- women, men, children and the elderly -- sitting packed on the floor of a cavernous US military plane, part of a dramatic airlift hours after Kabul fell to the Taliban.

The now-viral image, obtained and posted by the respected military news site Defense One, was taken inside a US Air Force C-17 transport.

The US military said about 640 Afghans were on board on the Sunday night flight. In its usual configuration, a C-17 carries just over 100 troops with equipment.

"The crew made the decision to go" rather than force them out, the official said.

It came as Taliban fighters flooded the streets of Kabul, with panicked citizens rushing to the airport to try and find a flight out of Afghanistan.

The flight landed in Qatar in the early hours of Monday, according to the tracking website FlightAware.

This C-17 was not the only one to take so many Afghans out of the country -- Defense One cited the US official as saying several planes took off from Kabul with similar numbers.

In harrowing videos shared on social media, hundreds of people are seen running next to a C-17 as it appears to gather speed, some clinging to the sides of the plane. Afghan media reported that several people died after falling from planes as they took off.

US invasion of Afghanistan was a 'bad idea': Gorbachev

AFP, Moscow

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who ended the USSR's decade-long war in Afghanistan in 1989, on Tuesday warned against repeating the mistakes of the US invasion of the country.

"From the very start (the US invasion) was a bad idea, although Russia initially supported it," Gorbachev told the RIA Novosti news agency.

"Failure should have been admitted earlier," 90-year-old Gorbachev said.

"Now it is important to learn from the situation and at least not repeat such mistakes," he added.

Taliban militants on Sunday completed a military takeover of Afghanistan with little resistance, capitalising on the withdrawal of US-led troops from the country.

"Like many other similar projects at its heart lay the exaggeration of a threat and poorly defined geopolitical ideas. To

that were added unrealistic attempts to democratise a society made up of many tribes," he said.

The US military had been present in Afghanistan since 2001 when it invaded following the Taliban's refusal to hand over al-Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

The Soviet Union had also invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to support an Afghan communist government that was in conflict with Muslim guerrilla fighters.

Shortly after coming to power in 1985, Gorbachev decided to end the Soviet presence in Afghanistan.

Moscow's decade-long war in Afghanistan killed up to two million Afghans, forced seven million more from their homes and led to the deaths of more than 14,000 Soviet troops.

Fighters from the anti-Soviet Mujahideen helped found the Taliban in the early 1990s.

