



Systemic Failure

Dr Rob Johnson, August 2021

“Let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.” President Richard Nixon in his address to the nation on the war in Vietnam, 3 November 1969.

The rapid collapse of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan provoked a welter of think tank analyses, political recriminations, and breathless media coverage, with responsibility pinned either onto the hasty manner of the United States’ withdrawal, faulty intelligence, or the alleged inadequacy of the Afghan security forces. Regardless of these assessments, the events in Afghanistan constitute a systemic failure. But it was avoidable.

Historically, there are comparable cases of systemic collapse. These can be seen, not in the shallow sense of the optical similarities of the fall of Saigon, but in the stresses, thresholds, and tolerances of regimes. Under similar conditions, not all systems fail so comprehensively, suggesting that the haste of the US withdrawal, conducted without consultation of Allies, was indeed the critical factor.

The responsibility for the collapse of Afghanistan lies clearly with President Biden. His determination to leave, regardless of conditions, existed before his presidency, but he took the opportunity to implement it as soon as he took office in January 2021. The Afghan Army, which had taken significant losses since 2015, but which had held, was fundamentally undermined when President Biden decided to withdraw American air support, logistics, maintenance, and munitions. Without serviceable air support and logistics, Afghan army units were first forced to abandon peripheries of the country and concentrate on urban areas. This gave the insurgents the opportunity to take over rural districts before launching attacks on small urban areas. By May 2021, it was evident that the Afghan security forces were losing control.

Despite evident warnings, the US abandonment continued, without contingency plans. Biden gave an interview in July denying that the Taliban would ever overrun the country and that there would ‘no circumstances’ in which Kabul would resemble Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War, with embassy staff shuttled away by helicopter. In early August 2021, northern districts were being overrun, and the Taliban used negotiation to persuade some areas not to fight. Feeling isolated and without the means to sustain resistance, Afghan provincial and district leaders gave way. In the final days, the Taliban moved rapidly to secure the major cities, including in the north, leaving Kabul isolated. Before his flight, President Ashraf Ghani had called for the reconstituting of the Afghan armed forces, but it was too late.

Only at this moment, did the US administration appear to realize the enormity of the collapse. Biden quickly blamed the Afghan army and government for not showing resolve or resistance. The American President tried to argue that all contingencies had been considered, but the scramble of fearful Afghans to the Kabul international airport had clearly not been foreseen. NATO member states even faced difficulties in getting American co-operation on the ground initially, given the pressures to get security established around the airport and American civilians out. Inevitably attention soon turned to the thousands of Afghans who had assisted the American coalition and the Afghan military personnel who had been trained by the United States. Despite assurances they would be extracted, it was evident many would be left behind.

Surveying previous insurgencies, it is clear that, when governments fail, they do so rapidly. When insurgent movements are defeated, they tend to do so more gradually, indicated by steady splintering and factionalism. The Taliban had actually started to fragment in 2015-16. Leadership disputes had broken out and there was disagreement about the next steps after the end of the ISAF mission. They had inflicted heavy losses on the Afghan government forces, but the emergence of 'IS-Khorassan', a faction emulating Daesh, indicated that there were divisions. However, repeated US announcements of withdrawal kept the insurgent factions together. Pakistan continued to supply the Taliban and its other confederates, and to provide the mountainous border region to base the fighters and their commanders, while keeping up the pretence of alignment with the United States. The younger cohorts of insurgents had been steadily radicalised by Deobandi, Salafi, and Wahabi ideologues. There is every prospect that the radicalised movement that now holds power in Kabul will steadily impose its brutal variant of governance: it is the nature of revolutionaries to brook no criticism and to exact revenge.

Is Taliban rule now established? They may yet suffer the fate of Daesh. On Afghanistan's national day (19 August) protestors were tearing down Taliban banners and putting the national flag back up. The divisions and fissures that had riven Afghan society are still there, and now the unifying element of a corrupted government has gone, so it seems that a new pulse of civil violence is highly likely. A resistance force appeared in the Panjshir area under the leadership of Ahmad Masoud, son of the famous anti-Taliban leader, at the same time as the fall of Kabul.

The Taliban may have taken Afghanistan, but it is not yet clear how securely they can hold it. They have proven they can fight, but can they govern? Historically, revolutionary movements will seek out their adversaries, denouncing them as collaborators and traitors. Summary executions, torture, and seizure of property are common outcomes. But government is often chaotic. In a comparable example, when Arab insurgents overran Damascus in 1918, their attempts to restore basic services or gain consensus on governance failed completely and they relied on outside assistance. When the Taliban governed Afghanistan in the 1990s, the capital remained in ruins, most services had failed, and government was practically non-existent. The Taliban only have experience of imposing summary justice, except where they have coerced more competent personnel to work for them. With the cessation of foreign aid, the prospects of a viable state of Afghanistan are very low indeed, unless, of course, regional states decide to prop up the Emirate, or the Taliban continue to foster the drugs trade.

There is the question of the longer term significance. Is this the watershed, as 9/11 was purported to be, or just a low phase in a continuum of US foreign policy, as the fall of South Vietnam proved to be? Does it mark a more seismic defeat of the Western world, its democratising project, and its 'rules-based international system' established in 1944-45, or will it galvanise the West? What is clear is that faith in the United States has been much diminished. As one former British official put it, who will trust the United States in any subsequent intervention if they feel America will abandon them suddenly? Another, the former MP Rory Stewart, believed the fall of Kabul marked the end of the era of Western interventionism. The West's rivals have been quick to establish an advantage. Beijing reminded Taiwan that they were now alone in their defiance of China. They received a delegation of the Taliban as they set their sights on Afghanistan's mineral resources. Europeans began to discuss the absence of the United States in the defence of Europe, which, while premature, reflected the loss of credibility of Washington in the eyes of their closest allies.

Biden will be personally damaged by this event, but the consequences are far more grave and far reaching for the United States and the West. The pivot to Asia, announced by Barak Obama, while largely focussed on the Pacific and the challenge posed by China, appears to be unhinged.

There is no disguising this as a shameful defeat. People who were prepared to subscribe to the ideals of the United States have been abandoned in a bungled scuttle. Biden asserted that he is placing American interests before any one else's, but to a more blatant degree than at any time since 1945. America's standing in the world is weakened, but its philosophical basis is too: was the ideal of democracy, adherence to the rule of law, faithfulness, and generosity all simply a façade? If so, it suggests that the

betrayal was not just of the Afghan people, but to those who were sent to uphold the security of Afghans, Americans and allies, over the twenty years of the campaign.

The situation was entirely avoidable. The commitment to Afghanistan, to sustain its state and security, was small. Advisors and specialists had warned what would happen if Afghanistan was abandoned. America and its allies possessed the means to support Afghanistan indefinitely with a very small cost in resources. The bases in Afghanistan gave the United States the ability to conduct surveillance, to prevent or disrupt the establishment of Jihadist terrorist bases in the region. These capabilities have been removed.

One final reflection. Those who advocated for so long that the West should withdraw, 'stop the war', and bring the troops home, got their wish. The chaotic and lethal consequences of that perspective are evident.

Dr Rob Johnson is the author of *The Afghan Way of War* (2011) and co-editor of *At the End of Military Intervention*, with Dr Tim Clack (2014)