

While the extraordinary timing of the collapse of the Afghan government and Army was not predicted its causes are not difficult to understand.

Much of the responsibility must lie with the US (both Trump and Biden) and their insensitivity to the consequences of their decisions. As others have said, it was not just the decision to withdraw but how they went about it.

The rot began with Trump's insistence on US bilateral negotiations with the Taliban from which the Afghan President and Government were excluded. This continued with Biden. This was disgraceful not just in principle but because of the huge damage that this humiliation did to the authority and reputation of Ghani and his Government.

I do not exaggerate when I point out that the last example of this that I can recall was when the Czechoslovaks were excluded from the Munich Conference when Hitler, Chamberlain and the others decided on the carve up of their country.

Biden shares in responsibility for this but added to it by his refusal even to offer continuing air support after all US ground personnel were withdrawn. The Taliban have no air power of their own. The promise of ongoing US air power, even for a year would have done much to maintain Afghan military morale without the slightest risk to US personnel.

The Afghan military were not defeated in the last week. They did not fight. Both they and various warlords entered into agreement with advancing Taliban forces to surrender in exchange for their lives and safe passage. This must, to a large degree, have been because the Government they were serving had lost all its authority as much as a result of US decisions as their own incompetence. I doubt if corruption, which has always been endemic in the country, made much of a difference to popular or military morale.

The suggestion by some British MPs and military commentators, who should know better, that the UK should have offered its own continuing military support even as the Americans withdrew is absurd. Not only would it have made no difference to the eventual outcome, but it would have been unacceptable both to Parliament and the public in the UK.

The question of UK and international recognition of the new Taliban Government is important. The UK has, traditionally, had a different policy on the recognition of governments that have come into being by revolution or conflict, compared to many other Western states.

The UK recognises a government when it is clear that it is in de facto control of the country concerned regardless as to how the new government acquired its power. The UK does not see recognition as a statement of approval. Thus the UK recognised Communist China decades before the United States as we did with Cuba and elsewhere.

That is not to say that Western countries should or will recognise the Taliban Government today or tomorrow. There are good political reasons for the UK and other Western countries to co-ordinate the timing of any recognition. The Taliban are, clearly, anxious to receive international respectability as soon as possible.

I am sure the British government will say that the timing of recognition will depend on how the new Afghan government behaves over the next few days (and possibly over a week or so) on its future relations with al Qaeda, its treatment of women etc. If possible, NATO countries will try to adopt a common position. If the US refuses to consider recognition, or delays it indefinitely, I believe that the UK and EU countries will, notwithstanding, go ahead.

Dragoman

One further comment relevant to Afghanistan's future as a result of the sudden collapse of the Afghan Government and the total control of the country that the Taliban have acquired without hardly a shot having been fired.

If the Afghan Army had fought to the last man to keep control of Kabul, Kandahar, Herat and other cities it would have won the admiration of the wider world, but Kabul and other cities would have been partially destroyed and much of its infrastructure reduced to rubble. Kabul would have ended up like Aleppo in Syria.

The consequences would have been huge loss of life especially of civilians and a far greater humanitarian disaster than Afghanistan now faces. Instead, the Taliban have acquired a functioning state with its infrastructure hardly damaged.

There are very few silver linings as regards what has happened in Afghanistan. This is one of them.



Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Rifkind KCMG QC

Sir Malcolm Rifkind is a former British Foreign Minister and Minister of Defence and was one of only four ministers to serve throughout the whole 18-year tenures of both Margaret Thatcher and John Major. From 2010-2015 he was Chairman of the UK's Intelligence and Security Committee and is a Visiting Professor at the Department of War Studies at King's College, London.