

WSJ News Exclusive | Afghan Government Could Collapse Six Months After U.S. Withdrawal, New Intelligence Assessment Says

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11-14 minutes

KABUL—The U.S. intelligence community concluded last week that the government of Afghanistan could collapse as soon as six months after [the American military withdrawal](#) from the country is completed, according to officials with knowledge of the new assessment.

American intelligence agencies revised their previously more optimistic estimates as [the Taliban swept through northern Afghanistan](#) last week, seizing dozens of districts and surrounding major cities. Afghan security forces frequently surrendered without a fight, leaving their Humvees and other American-supplied equipment to the insurgents.

The new assessment of the overall U.S. intelligence community, which hasn't been previously reported, has now aligned more closely with the analysis that had been generated by the U.S. military. The military has already withdrawn more than half of its 3,500 troops and its equipment, with the rest due to be out by Sept. 11.

On Wednesday, Taliban fighters were battling government troops inside the northern city of Kunduz after occupying the main border crossing with Tajikistan the previous day and

reaching the outskirts of northern Afghanistan's main hub, Mazar-e-Sharif. Tajikistan's border service said 134 Afghan troops at the crossing were granted refuge while some 100 others were killed or captured by the Taliban.

Overall, the Taliban's lightning offensive in northern Afghanistan resulted in the fall of dozens of districts over the past week, putting much of the countryside under insurgent control. Local politicians and tribal elders negotiated a series of surrender agreements with government forces. Often unpaid for months, these troops left convoys of armored vehicles and stockpiles of weaponry, including artillery pieces, mortars and heavy machine guns, in exchange for Taliban guarantees of safe passage.



Militiamen appeared with Afghan security forces in Kabul on Wednesday.

Photo: Rahmat Gul/Associated Press

U.S. intelligence experts had believed the government of President Ashraf Ghani, who is slated to meet President Biden in Washington on Friday to discuss continued American support for Afghanistan, could survive as long as two years once the U.S. withdrawal is completed. That is

roughly the same interval that elapsed between the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and the fall of Saigon in April 1975.

The latest view of intelligence analysts and senior U.S. military officials, however, is that the government of Afghanistan and its capital, Kabul, could fall between six and 12 months after American forces depart, according to officials.

Some other Western officials believe that the government's collapse could come as soon as three months from the completion of the U.S. withdrawal. The military had planned to complete the withdrawal as soon as July, except for U.S. troops assigned to protect the American Embassy in Kabul.

The U.S. is pulling out from Afghanistan, ending the country's longest overseas war, as a result of the February 2020 agreement that [the Trump administration negotiated with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar](#). White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday that, while Taliban attacks on Afghan forces are increasing, there has been no such rise in attacks on American troops. "Had we not begun to draw down, violence would have increased against us as well," she said. "So the status quo, in our view, was not an option."



Vehicles were lined up at an Afghan security checkpoint in Jalalabad, in eastern Afghanistan, on Wednesday.

Photo: ghulamullah habibi/EPA/Shutterstock

As part of the Doha agreements, the Taliban were also supposed to engage in peace talks with the Afghan government. These negotiations, however, have led nowhere and officials in Kabul say they don't expect any progress until the fighting season ends in October.

The Taliban on Wednesday trumpeted their “manifest victory and triumph” this month, saying that the recent territorial advances “will be the beginning of the end of the ills birthed by occupation.” The insurgent movement promised that Afghan troops who surrender would be sent home, and those who renounce the Kabul government “should continue to live their lives in liberated areas with confidence.”

The new U.S. intelligence assessment is creating more urgency among military planners to prepare potential operations to evacuate U.S. and other personnel should security in the Afghan capital deteriorate rapidly.

Alarmed by Taliban gains, White House officials considered slowing down the pace of withdrawal, which could include keeping Bagram Air Base, north of the capital, open for now. That would have allowed the U.S. military to maintain another evacuation point for U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization personnel, other foreign citizens and the tens of thousands of [Afghans who supported the U.S.](#) over the years. Mr. Biden, however, decided this week to proceed with closing down the base, U.S. officials said.

“It is a dynamic situation,” Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Tuesday. “If there need to be changes made to the pace or to the scope and scale of the retrograde on any given

day or in any given week, we want to maintain the flexibility to do that.”

Mr. Kirby added, however, that there is no plan to go back on Mr. Biden’s pledge for American forces to leave Afghanistan by Sept. 11.

Pentagon officials declined to comment about the new intelligence assessment.

The setbacks suffered by the Afghan military in recent days prompted the prominent mujahedeen commanders who fought the Taliban before 2001, such as Atta Mohammad Noor, to call on supporters to rejoin armed militias in a national mobilization. While this mobilization is ostensibly in support of Afghan government forces, it shifts the power away from Mr. Ghani’s embattled administration and toward the warlords whose authority he long tried to curb.

Biden Announces U.S. Troop Withdrawal From Afghanistan

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Biden Announces U.S. Troop Withdrawal From Afghanistan

President Biden said he will withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, marking the second time in less than two years that an American president has set a date to

end involvement in the Afghan conflict -- the longest war in U.S. history. Photo: Andrew Harnik/Getty Images (Video from 4/14/21)

In Mazar-e-Sharif, convoys of these anti-Taliban militias roamed the streets Wednesday as civilians mostly stayed at home. “I don’t see many ordinary vehicles. It looks like a city at war now,” said shopkeeper Sami Faizy.

Mohammed Amin Darasoofi, a member of the provincial council, said that the return to Mazar-e-Sharif of commanders such as Gen. Atta, a Tajik, and Mohammed Mohaqiq, a Hazara warlord, has rekindled the morale of government soldiers.

“In the past week, the morale of security forces was low,” he said. “But now the mujahedeen and the people revolted. The Taliban cannot defeat the mujahedeen.”

In Kunduz, which fell to the Taliban twice in recent years, just to be recaptured by the Afghan government with U.S. support, the insurgents were closing in on the city center as of Wednesday night.

As Ghulam Rabbani Rabbani, head of the provincial council, spoke by phone from the city, gunfire interrupted the conversation. “There are many government forces, but there are many Taliban too,” he said. “The Taliban have the plan to take the city. Those who have the resources are fleeing it.”





Militiamen joined a gathering in Kabul on Wednesday to declare their support for Afghan security forces in fighting the Taliban.

Photo: Reuters

In a briefing to the United Nations Security Council on Tuesday, the U.N.'s special representative for Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, pointed out that “most districts that have been taken surround provincial capitals, suggesting that the Taliban are positioning themselves to try and take these capitals once foreign forces are fully withdrawn.”

“It should be emphatically clear that any efforts to install a militarily imposed government in Kabul would go against the will of the Afghan people and against the stated positions of the regional countries and the broader international community,” she added.

Thousands of Americans, including military personnel, contractors and diplomatic personnel, still remain in Afghanistan. There are also tens of thousands of Afghans who over the years have assisted American military and diplomatic efforts.

Top military officials and Republican and Democratic lawmakers support an evacuation of those individuals, all of whom could be targeted by the Taliban. Although planning has been done, the Biden administration has yet to issue the green light to conduct such an operation. That has frustrated some supporters of Mr. Biden, who say that the White House is hoping for the best and failing to plan for the worst.

U.S. Rep. Seth Moulton (D., Mass.), a former Marine infantryman, plans to unveil on Thursday a detailed plan for evacuating as many as 20,000 Afghan interpreters and

others who he said deserve special immigrant visas.

“Hope is not a plan, and the administration is putting a lot of weight into hope right now,” he said. “One of the things about Afghanistan is it’s clear by now that we’re not going to win the war, but there are still devastating ways we could lose.”

—Ehsanullah Amiri in Kabul and Sabrina Siddiqui in Washington contributed to this article.

The U.S. in Afghanistan

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