



# Collapse in Afghanistan: Early Insights from RAND Researchers

Q&A



People try to get into Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, August 16, 2021  
Photo by Stringer/Reuters

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The sudden end to America's longest war came Sunday as the Taliban rolled into the capital of Afghanistan and the national government collapsed. Thousands of U.S. citizens and Afghans who worked for Americans are waiting to be evacuated. U.S. troops are at the Kabul airport to keep flights going. Even as the situation remains in flux, a handful of RAND researchers have shared some of their initial thoughts:

- **Jason Campbell** is a policy researcher who studies international security, counterinsurgency, intelligence, and measuring progress in post-conflict reconstruction. He served as country director for Afghanistan in the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy from June 2016 through September 2018.
- **Shelly Culbertson** is a senior policy researcher who focuses on forced displacement, post-conflict stabilization, and disaster recovery. She has led multiple studies about

refugees, and is associate director of RAND's Disaster Research and Analysis Program.

- **Linda Robinson** is a senior policy researcher whose expertise includes national security strategy, international affairs, special operations forces, and irregular warfare and stabilization. She directs the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy and is the author of the 2013 book about special ops in Afghanistan, *One Hundred Victories: Special Ops and the Future of American Warfare*.
- **Andrew Radin** is a political scientist who studies NATO, state-building and security-sector reform, and peace operations. He served as a country director for Afghanistan in the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy from December 2018 through December 2020.
- **Derek Grossman** is a senior defense analyst whose research focuses on national security policy and Indo-Pacific security issues.

**Q: What can the United States and the international community do at this point to protect Afghan refugees?**

**A: Shelly Culbertson:** The best way to help displaced people is to prevent them from being displaced in the first place, but it's too late for that. Afghanistan already has about a fifth of its population displaced from years of war. Many of them have been living as refugees in poor conditions for years. There is a very real risk of growing numbers of new refugees from Afghanistan—both people who have worked for the United States at some point, who are seeking Special Immigrant Visas, and other civilians who are fleeing out of fear.

The United States could speed up processes that are causing delays in the processing of Special Immigrant Visas. It could raise the cap on refugee admissions to the United States. It could also encourage other allies and partners to accept more refugees.

There appears to have been insufficient planning to protect this group of people who have helped the United States over the years. But early reports suggest that the number of SIV recipients evacuated at present is far from the total number eligible.

**Jason Campbell:** That's right. Before the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan was evacuated, it was inundated with requests for SIVs. There are tens of thousands of Afghans (if not more than 100,000) who have been trying to obtain permission to relocate, but the processes in place have not been able to meet the demand.

In one recent instance, the United States announced that it would accept increased numbers of requests—but only if they were made from outside of Afghanistan. Such statements signal that the details of the U.S. plan for departure and its implementation may not have been aligned with the realities on the ground.

**Linda Robinson:** The most promising avenue to protect Afghans who may be targeted by the Taliban is a concerted, joint effort by the United States and its allies in the coming days and weeks.

The Biden administration has been pressed by members of Congress from both parties to accelerate and expand its assistance to Afghans who have worked with the United States beyond those who qualify for SIVs and the previously defined Priority 2 refugee status. However, the requirement for applicants to apply from a third country that Jason mentioned imposes a significant logistical and financial burden on those applicants, especially now that the Taliban control all land crossings and the airport in Kabul has been besieged by thousands of panicked Afghans. An international humanitarian entity such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, which has stated that it will maintain a presence in the country, would likely be required to establish the modalities of safe passage with the Taliban regime.

President Biden has made clear on several occasions before recent events and again this week that he does not view the U.S. military as a proper tool to defend human rights. He did vow in his address on Monday to support the Afghan people—and speak out for the rights of Afghan women and girls—but “not through endless military deployments.” However, Biden did expand the pool of Afghans eligible for refugee status to include Afghan employees at the U.S. embassy, U.S. nongovernmental organizations, and U.S. news agencies. He also pledged to continue humanitarian assistance inside Afghanistan.

**Culbertson:** Many of these people may not be able to get out of Afghanistan, given the chaos at the airport in Kabul. The Taliban could cut off routes out of the country, especially if the administration is slow to either accept SIV recipients into the United States or find other host countries to take them in. We could see a scenario where many people are imprisoned or executed. If the Taliban wants to avoid further being viewed as an international pariah, then they may do less of this than expected.

**Even if all Afghans who want to flee the country can do so, are there other potential risks?**

**Culbertson:** Yes, several. For example, more flows of refugees and internally displaced people could increase the spread of COVID-19 because of crowded conditions in camps.

New flows of refugees would also strain neighboring host countries. Most refugees from Afghanistan are in Pakistan and Iran, which have struggled to provide adequate conditions and on occasion have pushed for refugees to leave. The United States could increase funding for United Nations agencies that help refugees in the neighboring countries. It could also use whatever leverage it has—through Qatar, for example—to encourage the Taliban to refrain from engaging in violence that causes more people to flee.

It may be that hundreds of thousands of people will flee and then live in squalid camps for decades, while options for resettlement to another country or returning to Afghanistan remain low.

- Shelly Culbertson

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I would also anticipate possible effects in Turkey, the European Union, and elsewhere. The 2015 surge of refugees and irregular migrants into the European Union via Turkey or other routes led to a populist backlash and increased support for far-right political parties. The EU responded by strengthening its borders and taking other steps to cut off refugee flows. It's possible that there could be another surge of refugees fleeing into other countries, with destabilizing effects.

### **What's the most likely scenario for Afghans who are trying to flee?**

**Culbertson:** Regardless of what the United States does at this point, it may be that hundreds of thousands of people will flee and then live in squalid camps for decades, while options for resettlement to another country, return to Afghanistan, or securing citizenship in Pakistan or Iran remain low. This will only add to the world's 82 million refugees and internally displaced people who live in similar conditions and have dim prospects for durable solutions.

### **Will Afghanistan become a safe haven for terrorist groups like the last time the Taliban was in charge, before the 9/11 attacks? Should we expect a threat to the U.S. homeland?**

**Robinson:** The Biden administration has pledged to maintain an “over the horizon” counterterrorism capability to disrupt any threats that arise from Afghanistan. But without an intelligence presence on the ground, the ability to detect emerging threats will be limited.

Russia and China have some incentive to deter and disrupt terrorist activity that could spill over into Central Asian states and China's Xinjiang province. Similarly, neighboring Iran has some incentive to deflect a spillover of radical Sunni elements into its Shia-majority country —although Iran has acted as a safe haven for al Qaeda elements at times, for tactical reasons.

**Andrew Radin:** I agree that the ability of the United States to unilaterally observe and act against a terrorist threat in Afghanistan or coming from groups in Afghanistan will likely be far more limited under a Taliban-control government. The Taliban are almost certain to reject any U.S. military action in the country, and if the United States does take military action against their will, then they could retaliate against any U.S. diplomatic presence in the country. The U.S. State Department sought assurances from the Taliban that they would not attack the U.S. embassy and its personnel and conditioned future assistance on the Taliban's treatment of Americans.

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- Andrew Radin

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**Campbell:** I think events will have to play out before we can determine with more certainty the immediate threat to the U.S. homeland.

It's safe to say that an Afghanistan where the Taliban is the dominant political player is going to be much more accommodating to al Qaeda and like-minded groups. But there are a couple of factors that will determine the extent to which those groups pose a threat internationally.

For one thing, the Taliban has long craved international recognition that it is a viable political entity and worthy of being accepted as the rightful leader of the Afghan state. As such, I don't believe that they want to go back to being a pariah state if they can avoid it. Given their current momentum, I think the Taliban can achieve a preferable outcome of becoming the dominant actor in a revamped political order that at least has the guise of being inclusive. Under such a scenario, they can justifiably surmise that a portion of the international community will at least begrudgingly accept their role. Evidence suggests that regional leaders are maneuvering to engage with and likely come to terms with Taliban leadership.

**Radin:** Yes, the Taliban's policy toward terrorist groups will have an important effect on the future threat of terrorism from Afghanistan. The Taliban does have a history of a close relationship with al Qaeda, including hosting the group prior to 2001. At the same time, the Taliban committed in the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement to preventing groups such as al Qaeda from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States or its allies. However, there may be reason to doubt the Taliban's assurances. U.S. officials have previously said that they are not fully satisfied with the Taliban's compliance with the peace agreement.

Another consideration is that al Qaeda is far weaker now than it was in 2001. A United Nations report suggests that al Qaeda has about 400 to 600 personnel in Afghanistan.

The threat from ISIS-K, the only other significant group that may pose an external threat in the near to medium term, is less worrisome. The Taliban is a clear enemy of ISIS-K and fought them fiercely in 2019.

### **Speaking of the agreement with the Taliban that the Trump administration signed in February 2020, what effects did this have on recent events?**

**Robinson:** U.S. leverage to affect events in Afghanistan diminished significantly with the signing of the February 2020 accord. In particular, the agreement disconnected the issue of U.S. troop withdrawal from the achievement of a political settlement; it only required that the Taliban initiate intra-Afghan peace talks. The agreement further stipulated that the United States would withdraw its forces by May 1, 2021. Pursuant to the agreement, the Trump administration reduced the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan from 15,500 to 2,500.

President Biden allowed the May deadline to pass, but he announced in April that he would withdraw U.S. forces by September 2021. NATO allies urged that a longer withdrawal timeline be considered and that some forces be left behind. But Biden judged that failure to withdraw would likely result in resumed Taliban attacks against U.S. troops, which had halted pursuant to the February accord.

It's doubtful that the small remaining U.S. and coalition footprint could have held off Taliban forces indefinitely had the Taliban launched a concerted offensive. The president made clear this week that he would not consider an increase in forces to shore up the counterinsurgency effort and would not "continue to funnel billions of dollars into stabilizing Afghanistan indefinitely."

**Campbell:** I agree wholeheartedly. The long-shot prospects for a negotiated end to the conflict in Afghanistan disappeared after former President Trump's impromptu announcement in front of the White House on December 19, 2018, when he declared that the United States would remove all forces from Syria and half of its forces from Afghanistan.

That announcement gave the more hawkish element within the Taliban the ability to claim that they were right all along and that if the Taliban continued to stall, then the United States would eventually leave entirely. And afterwards, the Taliban were happy to continue to build their international bona fides by participating in numerous international engagements. But they didn't articulate a vision for a stable, inclusive Afghanistan, nor did they demonstrate any willingness to engage in serious discussions.

At that point, the path to the February 2020 agreement was paved.

During international negotiations, the Taliban have taken full advantage of the stage they were provided in Doha, Qatar to engage with stakeholders and play off of their distrust for one another. They did this to prevent a unified stance negotiated among the United States, China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran.

### **Finally, what are some of the geopolitical implications of the rapid collapse in Afghanistan?**

**Derek Grossman:** China is likely to soon welcome and legitimize the Taliban's leadership. Although Beijing's official position is to support Afghan national reconciliation, it has simultaneously been engaging officially with the Taliban since 2019 and unofficially for the last several years to prepare for the Taliban regaining power. Notably, during July 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi welcomed Taliban representatives to China in a highly visible sign of warming China-Taliban relations.

China has two key and interrelated objectives in post-U.S. Afghanistan.

First and foremost, as Linda mentioned, Beijing seeks stability in Afghanistan to avoid any potential spillover into China's northwest province of Xinjiang. Xinjiang is home to the ethnic Uyghur minority, some of whom Beijing assesses are part of a separatist and terrorist group known as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). To date, China has mostly relied upon its "ironclad brother" Pakistan to do the heavy lifting and prevent terrorists from entering Xinjiang or otherwise supporting ETIM's cause. But this time, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen said, "We care about the oppression of Muslims, be it in Palestine, in Myanmar, or in China, and we care about the oppression of non-Muslims anywhere in the world. But what we are not going to do is interfere in China's internal affairs."

China's second priority is to secure access to Afghanistan's natural resources. According to one 2014 report, Afghanistan may possess nearly a trillion dollars' worth of extractable rare-earth metals locked within its mountains. To access these metals, China will first require stability to build highways, roads, and rail into and throughout the country. Beijing is already involved in several projects, although Kabul had resisted formal participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative to avoid getting on the wrong side of the United States. This may change soon.

China and Pakistan are likely to remain closely aligned on Afghanistan, and this is yet another positive for Beijing as the Taliban consolidates its power.

**Campbell:** The geostrategic effect could be profound, as China, Russia, and even Iran could benefit from the new political order in Kabul. Depending on what transpires, this may prove to be a huge loss for the United States.

There are credible reports that, following senior-level meetings with the Taliban a couple of weeks ago, the Chinese have voiced a willingness to accept a new Taliban government in Afghanistan. This likely comes with the expectation that the Taliban will stem extremist threats emanating from Afghanistan. Beijing will also likely attempt to leverage its relationship with the new regime to pursue economic objectives such as exploiting Afghan mineral deposits and establishing a land connection to Iran and points beyond.

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- Jason Campbell

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Additionally, despite being historical adversaries of the Taliban, Russia and Iran have in recent years provided support to the group and built closer ties with its leadership. This was largely catalyzed by their mutual desire to push the United States and NATO out of Afghanistan, but both Moscow and Tehran will likely want to maintain a productive relationship with the new regime.

Of course, the wild card in all of this is the degree to which the Taliban are willing and able to tamp down some of the extremist organizations with which they continue to maintain relationships. If they can and China, Russia, and Iran are willing to formally recognize the Taliban regime, this could further limit the options of the United States and its allies and partners when it comes to diplomatically isolating the Taliban.

Overall, while many who track and analyze great power competition have viewed Afghanistan as a distraction, what is occurring there now may be viewed as a significant U.S. loss, as China, Russia, and Iran stand to make gains, while the United States has lost its presence, visibility, and even some of its credibility.

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