**Uncertain future**

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The rapid collapse of the US-supported government in Kabul and take over by the Taliban has taken everyone by surprise.

The US was caught entirely flatfooted. Having just evacuated the last of its troops from the country, it was forced to send back thousands of soldiers to run the largest evacuation operation in recent memory. Even the Taliban themselves were not expecting to be in a position of governing the country so soon.

Tens of billions spent by the US government in training and establishing a professional military in Afghanistan seemed to have been for naught. President Ashraf Ghani himself took a convenient flight out of the country to the horror of the US leadership.

The debate about what exactly went wrong will go on for a long time. But for the moment countries in the region and powers in the West are trying to assess the threat the new developments in Afghanistan pose for them. The Taliban must be aware they cannot govern Afghanistan without the help of the West and financial support from multilateral institutions.

The world is waiting to see exactly what kind of a regime the Taliban will represent. Should they choose to implement a rigid, extremist regime as they did in the 1990s, they will not receive recognition from the world community. During their last stint in power, only three countries ever recognized them – Pakistan, UAE and Saudi Arabia.

While many in Pakistan are celebrating the return of the Taliban, the current situation in Afghanistan represents a grave threat to Pakistan itself. Policymakers in Pakistan are pleased that the chance of having an India-backed government in Kabul has been averted. However, should Afghanistan descend into chaos, Pakistan is likely to bear the brunt of it with another surge in Afghan refugees. In addition, the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan is likely to encourage extremist elements within Pakistan.

At the same time, it is not clear if the Taliban will be able to control Afghanistan anytime soon. A vicious terrorist attack that took place on August 26 outside Kabul airport in the midst of a massive evacuation operation, killed almost 200 – mostly Afghan civilians but also 13 US military personnel. This was proof, if any was needed, that not only are extremist terrorists able to operate in Afghanistan, but also that the Taliban are not yet in control of the country. The Taliban have declared they would not allow their territory to be used for attacks against any other country. However, at least for now their ability to control actions emanating from within their borders is highly suspect.

The US has already launched several drone strikes against those they believe planned the August 26 attack. Unless the Taliban are able to bring order to the country soon, such drone attacks are likely to grow. The US has learned a bitter lesson during its 20-year engagement in Afghanistan; having spent about $2 trillion in a futile effort to set up a democracy in the country, things are in some ways back to where they were in 2001.

The events of the past couple of months may also impact domestic US politics in profound ways. In 2020, former president Trump negotiated and signed a deal with the Taliban excluding President Ghani's government from the negotiations. Trump even forced the Kabul government to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners. That was a death warrant for the Afghan government. Trump and his Republican supporters have conveniently forgotten the role they played in the collapse of the Afghan government.

President Biden firmly believed nation-building in Afghanistan was a lost cause and a fool’s errand. He refused to reverse the Trump policy of exiting the country, as he had done with other Trump-era actions. However, the poorly planned withdrawal by President Biden has drawn much criticism within the US and abroad. Biden can only hope his government will deliver large parts of his domestic agenda during the coming months so his party may go into the 2022 midterm elections with some success for which the US electorate will reward him.

Once again, Afghanistan is at risk of spinning out of control. The world and particularly Central and South Asia face a very uncertain future.

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