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The Collapse of Afghanistan's Republic and the Taliban's Return to Power: Causes and Consequences

Introduction: The fall of the Republic of Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban Emirate is a complex outcome shaped by a combination of internal weaknesses, regional dynamics, and foreign interventions. Key factors such as the U.S. strategic miscalculations, the corruption within the Afghan government, and the influence of neighbouring countries played critical roles in the rapid collapse of the Afghan state. Additionally, the involvement of global powers, including the U.S., Pakistan, Iran, and Russia, further shaped the trajectory of Afghanistan's political landscape. This analysis explores how these interconnected elements led to the Taliban's resurgence and the ultimate disintegration of the Afghan government.

The fall of the Republic of Afghanistan and the subsequent rise of the Taliban is deeply rooted in a complex interplay of internal and external factors, particularly the shifting policies of the United States. The origins of the Taliban in Pakistan are crucial in understanding how terrorist groups have been used as proxies or intermediaries in geopolitical rivalries. During the Cold War, the United States used the Mujahideen as a countermeasure against the Soviet Union, and in the 2020s, the situation in Afghanistan provides a clear example of terrorist groups being directly employed as proxy forces to undermine a strategic rival.

While the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is often described as a mission to combat terrorism, some analysts present the reasons for two decades of U.S. involvement as more multifaceted and complex. However, upon closer inspection, the situation is less complicated than it may seem. Strategic errors, shifting international dynamics, and the political and military concerns of neighbouring countries, particularly Afghanistan's regional rivals, played significant roles in shaping Afghanistan's fate.

U.S. Performance in Afghanistan

The United States' 20-year engagement in Afghanistan, ostensibly aimed at fighting terrorism and promoting human rights, was marked by a series of contradictions and strategic blunders. Despite its lengthy presence, the U.S. failed to resolve critical internal challenges in Afghanistan, such as pervasive corruption and government weakness. The U.S. frequently claimed its mission was to protect human rights, but its decision to rapidly withdraw and compromise with the Taliban in Doha contradicted these claims, raising questions about its true objectives.

An essential and often unaddressed question is whether the U.S. intentionally handed over power to the Taliban. While some argue that the U.S. did not directly transfer power, evidence suggests that American actions—including direct negotiations with the Taliban, the swift withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the establishment of a weak Afghan government—indirectly facilitated the Taliban's resurgence. Without U.S. cooperation and compromise, particularly the appointment of Ashraf Ghani as president, the Taliban's return to power would have been far less likely. The miscalculations of U.S. policymakers, combined with Afghanistan's internal instability and the rapid collapse of Afghan military forces, created a perfect storm for the Taliban's resurgence.

External Influences and Regional Dynamics

The decision to withdraw U.S. forces in 2021 was significantly influenced by external pressures, particularly from Afghanistan's neighbouring countries. Pakistan, Iran, and Russia, each with their own interests, sought to reduce U.S. influence in the region and strengthen the Taliban's position. Pakistan was a key player in facilitating the Taliban's return to power, viewing the group as a strategic ally to protect its interests in Afghanistan and counter India's influence. Iran and Russia, though historically opposed to the Taliban, recognized that the group could help limit U.S. influence in the region and thus supported the Taliban's negotiations with the U.S.

Pakistan's role was particularly crucial. The country's intelligence agency, the ISI, provided extensive support to the Taliban throughout the conflict, including military and logistical assistance. This support allowed the Taliban to sustain their operations and continue expanding their territorial control. Pakistan's strategic interest in having a friendly, or at least neutral, regime in Kabul was a driving force behind its involvement in the peace process and the 2020 Doha talks. Under pressure from Pakistan and other regional actors, the U.S. was forced to hastily

withdraw, leading to the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's swift return to power.

The U.S. and Domestic Pressures

The U.S. withdrawal was also shaped by domestic factors. The long-running war in Afghanistan had led to significant public fatigue, with the American people increasingly disillusioned by the high human and financial costs. This dissatisfaction created significant political pressure on U.S. policymakers to end the war. President Joe Biden, who assumed office in 2021, campaigned on the promise to end America's "endless wars" and to shift focus to other geopolitical priorities. The Biden administration adhered to the Doha Agreement, but the withdrawal process—executed hastily and without proper planning—led to a chaotic collapse of the Afghan government.

Internal Factors Contributing to the Collapse of Government

Internally, the Afghan government was beset by numerous challenges. Corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of legitimacy undermined the government's ability to maintain control and secure the support of the Afghan people. Despite receiving significant financial and military assistance from the U.S. and NATO, the Afghan National Army and Police suffered from issues such as low morale, corruption, and inadequate training. These weaknesses were exploited by the Taliban, allowing them to capture key areas of the country with relative ease.

The fall of the Republic of Afghanistan and the subsequent rise of the Taliban Emirate is a result of a complex interplay of internal, regional, and external factors. Key to this collapse was the Afghan government's internal weaknesses, particularly the deliberate reshuffling of military leadership by President Ashraf Ghani. Experienced military staff were replaced with inexperienced Pashtun officers, many of whom were sympathetic to the Taliban. This action weakened the Afghan National Army and paved the way for the Taliban's resurgence. Additionally, the release of over 5,000 Taliban prisoners, many of whom were involved in violent activities such as mine planting and killings, further strengthened the group. Despite Ashraf Gani's efforts to portray these prisoners as primarily speaking one language—Pashto, the language of the Pashtun—this move led to the integration of dangerous individuals into the Taliban's ranks, accelerating their military success. Coupled with U.S. miscalculations and the influence of neighbouring countries, these factors played a central role in the Taliban's return to power and the eventual collapse of the Afghan government.

The Fleeing of Ashraf Ghani and the Collapse of the Government

One of the most dramatic moments in the collapse of the Afghan government was the sudden flight of President Ashraf Ghani in August 2021. Ghani's decision to flee Kabul, without informing key officials or military commanders, created a vacuum of power. Given the extensive intelligence capabilities of the U.S., it is surprising that the rapid advance of the Taliban was not detected sooner. This has led some to speculate that Ghani's departure may have been part of a prearranged deal between the U.S. and the Taliban. The inability of the Afghan government to respond to the Taliban's advance further exemplified the collapse of the political structure in Kabul.

The Role of Zalmay Khalilzad and Tribal Influences

Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special representative for Afghan peace, played a crucial role in the negotiations that led to the 2020 Doha Agreement. Khalilzad, who hails from a Pashtun background, had a personal connection to the group that many critics believe influenced his approach to the talks. Some argue that Khalilzad was overly optimistic in his dealings with the Taliban, presenting them as a legitimate negotiating partner despite their history of violence and repression. The concessions made to the Taliban in the Doha Agreement, including the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the failure to secure guarantees on human rights or counterterrorism, set the stage for the Taliban's return to power.

Proxy Warfare and Strategic Objectives

The concept of proxy warfare has long been central to Afghanistan's political landscape. Proxy wars enable states to achieve their strategic objectives without direct military engagement. In the 1980s, the U.S. supported the Mujahideen to counter the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Similarly, the U.S. sought to engage with the Taliban in recent years, partly to limit its military footprint while maintaining strategic influence.

Regional Powers and Their Influence

Regional powers played a pivotal role in Afghanistan's politics. Pakistan has long supported the Taliban, providing financial, logistical, and military assistance. This support was crucial in maintaining the Taliban's ability to operate effectively and in securing its position in Afghanistan. Pakistan's involvement in the Doha peace talks, aimed at securing a U.S. withdrawal, further solidified its role as a key factor in Afghan affairs.

Iran's relationship with the Taliban is more complex. While the two sides were historically hostile, Iran saw the Taliban as a potential counterbalance to U.S. influence. Over time, Iran began to engage with the Taliban covertly, providing financial and military support to protect its strategic interests in the region. Similarly, Russia, wary of U.S. presence in Central Asia, supported the Taliban to reduce American influence in the region.

The Failure of the U.S.-Backed Afghan Government

The U.S.-backed Afghan government, perceived by many as a puppet regime, lacked the legitimacy to effectively confront the Taliban. The failure to establish a strong, self-sustaining government left the Afghan state vulnerable to Taliban advances. The Taliban's use of guerrilla tactics, psychological warfare, and local support allowed them to erode the authority of the Afghan government, which lacked the unity and cohesion necessary to resist the Taliban's onslaught.

Conclusion

The fall of the Afghan government and the return of the Taliban were the result of a combination of internal political dysfunction, external pressures, and strategic miscalculations. Afghanistan's neighbours, particularly Pakistan, Iran, and Russia, played key roles in supporting the Taliban's return, each pursuing their own strategic interests. The U.S. withdrawal, influenced by both domestic fatigue and international pressures, further paved the way for the collapse of the Afghan state. The internal weaknesses of the Afghan government, exacerbated by corruption, ethnic divisions, and an ineffective military, created the conditions for the Taliban to once again dominate the country.

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