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COVID-19 in numbers:

Ukraine

Cases: 2,298,307

Deaths: 54,001

Recovered:
2,213,177

Worldwide

Cases: 221,850,378

Deaths: 4,586,714

Recovered:
198,450,086

What Afghanistan's fall means for Ukraine, another US ally at war

By Illia Ponomarenko . Published Aug. 16 at 11:19 pm




 Afghan people sit as they wait to leave the Kabul airport in Kabul on August 16, 2021, after a stunningly swift end to Afghanistan's 20-year war, as thousands of people mobbed the city's airport trying to flee the group's feared hardline brand of Islamist rule. (Photo by Wakil Kohsar / AFP)

Photo by AFP

The fallout from the American withdrawal from Afghanistan has exceeded the darkest expectations.

Just a month after the U.S. announced withdrawal, the Islamist movement Taliban seized the country's key cities. The capital city Kabul was taken without a fight on Aug. 15, effectively re-establishing the movement's rule over the embattled Central Asian country.

The radical movement was in control of Afghanistan for five years in 1996-2001, before being overthrown by the U.S. troops in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Twenty years of U.S. and NATO military presence and \$2 trillion spent resulted in the Western-backed secular government fleeing Kabul in chaos. The U.S.-trained, 300,000-strong Afghan military and security forces surrendered to the Taliban.


Now, the world prepares to mark the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks with the Islamic Emirate's white banner flying over Kabul again.

The U.S. withdrawal leaves many questioning the Joe Biden administration's readiness to support embattled allies — including Ukraine, which has been relying on U.S. defense aid and diplomatic backing to defend itself against the ongoing Russian invasion that killed 14,000 people since 2014.

Does the Afghan debacle mean the U.S. can similarly abandon Ukraine someday?

The question is especially relevant as many experts believe that the late Afghan government's endemic corruption and ineffectiveness are to blame for the country's fall to the Taliban.



 Taliban fighters stand guard along a roadside near the Zanbaq Square in Kabul on Aug. 16, 2021, as the Taliban were in control of Afghanistan after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country and conceded the insurgents had won the 20-year war. (AFP)

Downfall

The first days of the Taliban's new reign paint a tragic picture.

The Western governments are sending troops to urgently evacuate their diplomatic missions from Kabul. Thousands of Afghans, who used to cooperate with U.S. forces, rushed to the capital in hope of being evacuated as well.

However, according to the latest reports, with all principal roads and Kabul itself falling to the Taliban, these people are very likely to be left behind at the Jihadists' mercy.

The scenes of mayhem are appalling.

Hundreds of Afghans stormed the Kabul airport, trying to cling to a U.S. Air Force aircraft taking off on Aug. 16, in a desperate attempt to leave.

At least one person was seen falling from the plane to his death. Seven were reportedly killed in the mayhem at the airport.

“This is not as much the Kabul downfall as this horrific scene of panic and despair at the Kabul airport that will turn a severe reputation loss of the U.S. and specifically President Joe Biden,” said Iliya Kusa, an international relations expert with Ukrainian Institute for the Future, a Kyiv-based think tank.

“The Afghan capital’s seizure by convoys of militants with their guns at trail, driving dirty riddled pickups, with giant white flags against the backdrop of ‘Welcome to Kabul’ signs — is quite a sight to see. It brings back unpleasant memories from 20 years ago, especially when it comes to war veterans.”

The Taliban seized the power in Afghanistan in 1996, after decades of multisided civil war and Soviet military intervention. The movement imposed strict Islamic law over most of the country and is now considered a terrorist organization by the United Nations and many nations.

Following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the U.S. accused the Taliban of harboring Osama bin Laden, who was believed the chief mastermind behind the plot and invaded the Central Asian country, ousting the movement.

Nonetheless, the Taliban never gave up on its anti-Western guerrilla beyond large cities. This led to what was called “America’s longest war,” which resulted in over 200,000 fatalities on all sides.

Ukraine has had a 21-strong military contingent in Afghanistan with a non-combat minesweeping mission. But in early June, along with other national forces, the detachment was withdrawn.


The Biden administration’s declaration of full U.S. withdrawal by Aug. 31 triggered an all-out Taliban offensive. In fact, according to international media, during the most active phase, the movement took over the country and smashed the national military within 10 days.

But as recently as July 8, Biden asserted the Taliban overrunning the country was “highly unlikely.”

Mustafa Nayyem, a former Ukrainian lawmaker, journalist, and current government official of Pashtun origin, strongly criticized the U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

"I do not support what is now happening to my first homeland," Nayyem said on Aug. 15.

"It hurts to know that the places I grew up in, the cities my mom was born and buried in, are in flames again, and are unlikely to get back to a peaceful life soon. This time — by the U.S. fault or due to its actions. Afghanistan is a planetary tragedy that is just unfolding."

 *In this file photo taken on Oct. 13, 2012, US Army soldiers attached to 2nd platoon, C troop, 1st Squadron (Airborne), 91st U.S Cavalry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team operating under NATO-sponsored International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) protect a wounded comrade from dust and smoke flares after an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blast during a patrol near Baraki Barak base in Logar Province. (AFP)*

Ukrainian effort

Starting from Aug. 16, all commercial flights were canceled in Kabul. The U.S. military halted all operations in a bid to expel the crowds at the airport.

Germany alone has to evacuate a total of nearly 10,000 Afghans, according to the country's Chancellor Angela Merkel. However, the hope of that is dwindling as more nations curtail their air communications with Afghanistan.


By Aug. 16 morning, Ukraine in its turn managed to rescue 79 individuals from the country. According to Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, an emergency flight included eight Ukrainians. Others included citizens of Afghanistan, Belarus, The Netherlands, Croatia, and Tajikistan, including small children.

"Some will have to start a new life from scratch," the minister said on Aug. 16. "The Kabul airport is now a place one should not be at. And at the same time, it is a place of the last hope to thousands of people."

According to the government, at least 50 Ukrainians are still in Afghanistan.

"Most persons are working under commercial contracts or are Ukrainian nationals of Afghan origins," said ministry spokesman Oleh Nikolenko on Aug. 16. "Almost all of them were contacted, diplomats are confirming who among them want to be evacuated."

Also, nine Afghans arrived in Boryspil who had nowhere else to go. So, according to Andriy Demchenko, the spokesman with Ukraine's State Border Guard Service, they all requested refugee status in Ukraine.

 *In this photo taken on April 7, 2019, schoolgirls walk past a barrier wall painted with an image of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the late military and political Afghan leader also known as the "Lion of Panjshir," in Kabul. (AFP)*

No silver bullet

As Ukrainian experts say, despite massive financial inflows, what the U.S. managed to build in Afghanistan was nothing but an extremely expensive house of cards, which collapsed immediately after Americans left.

According to official estimates, the U.S. government has spent \$88 billion since 2001 on the Afghani security and military forces alone. Their resilience alone in the field turned out to be deplorable.

In many ways, this happened because the Taliban managed to win the general population's sympathy over weak and corrupt central Western-backed authority, which did little to make life better, especially when it comes to the hinterlands.

In Ukrainian media, many compared the Afghan downfall with what might await Ukraine in a similar doomsday case.

Since 2014, Kyiv has received close to \$4.6 billion as U.S. assistance alone, including nearly \$2.5 billion in defense and national security. Up to this day, Ukraine relies heavily on foreign aid.

In reality, the cases of Ukraine and Afghanistan have almost nothing in common. Yet Kyiv should learn an important lesson now: Foreign assistance is not a universal silver bullet in national defense.


“External support is a good thing, it can help run some projects, but it does not guarantee success,” says Iliya Kusa. “Afghans had 20 years of strong Western support, but they failed to make use of it and did not do many things they should have.”

Afghanistan since 2012 enjoyed the status of a major U.S. non-NATO ally, the goal that Ukraine also pursues passionately. Yet, it did not save Kabul when the time came.

“Ukraine must also understand that as we put the stake on Washington D.C., we need to remember that it has its own interests and priorities,” Kusa says. “And if they change — it is quite possible that we might face the same fate. So we should work over our own capabilities and rely on them primarily.”

So now Kyiv should be doing its best to prove that it is not going to repeat the late Afghan government’s mistakes, added Glen Grant, the retired British Army officer.

“The coming months will be vital for Ukraine to show that it is both a good ally and that it is not going to cave in if Russia attacks,” Grant says. “The current Ukrainian leadership policies of passive resistance may well be undermining the case for enhanced support. Of course, Ukraine must rely upon itself. No one helps a loser.”

 *Afghan people sit along the tarmac as they wait to leave the Kabul airport on Aug. 16, 2021, after a stunningly swift end to Afghanistan's 20-year war, as thousands of people mobbed the city's airport trying to flee the group's feared hardline brand of Islamist rule. (AFP)*

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ANALYSIS

Ukrainians Worry Biden Will Ditch Them Next

The White House meeting is a chance to repair a damaged relationship.

By Vladislav Davidzon, a writer, journalist, and artist who has reported extensively from Ukraine.

AUGUST 30, 2021, 3:49 PM

The Sept. 1 White House summit between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and U.S. President Joe Biden offers a tremendous opportunity for U.S. diplomacy. It promises to be both a symbolically and substantively important meeting the Ukrainian president has spent the last two and a half years pleading for. It also comes after the Biden administration's decision to side with Berlin over Kyiv and forego further sanctions against the building of the Russian Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. The pipeline remains a serious issue for Ukrainians and will likely face serious opposition in the U.S. Congress. But the issue foremost on the minds of many people in Kyiv is the Afghan withdrawal and what it signals for Ukraine's future security relationship with the United States.

Biden was elected with the understanding he represented a return from the erratic and transactional isolationism of former U.S. President Donald Trump to a more mature and considered foreign policy. He was widely considered to be an experienced and wise foreign-policy hand who would split the difference between political moderation and the use of U.S. power in the world.

However, the botched Afghanistan withdrawal is an early and perhaps critical foreign-policy failure. The natural question the withdrawal's unsentimental calculus creates for allies heavily dependent on U.S. security is whether Afghanistan is unique or if commitments to similarly embattled allies may also be abandoned.

This is a particularly fraught question in Kyiv, where there are fears the White House may be stripping away secondary peripheral national commitments to

allies to minimize friction with Russia while concentrating instead on its rivalry with a rising China.

And on Ukraine, Biden has been signaling a dovish position that is in direct contradiction with his statements during the 2020 presidential election and during his tenure as vice president. Skeptics of Washington's commitment to Ukraine also point to the recent one-on-one summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the about-face on Nord Stream 2, and a relatively weak NATO statement in response to Ukrainian calls to join NATO.

Support inside Ukraine for joining NATO is at record highs. Yet Washington has been unwilling to pursue the matter in response to opposition from Paris and Berlin, which see giving such commitments to Kyiv as a provocation to Moscow. It has even refrained from pressing for a membership action plan for Ukraine, which carries no assurances of eventual membership. Ukraine is, of course, still a long way off in technical capacity, and joining the alliance would require the resolution of parts of its territory currently occupied by Moscow.

The upcoming meeting between Biden and Zelensky will see the latter requesting more substantive security guarantees as well as "snapback" sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline if Moscow ceases to transit gas to Europe through Ukrainian territory (thus depriving Ukraine of critically needed transit fees). The Ukrainians also hope to receive a supplementary \$100 million in military aid that was proffered and later withdrawn, even as tens of thousands of Russian troops remain amassed along the Ukrainian border.

One prickly aspect of this new skepticism is the effect it is having on anti-corruption work in Kyiv. The United States has maintained a close focus on corporate governance and anti-corruption in Ukraine for years, and the anti-corruption process has been a core policy objective. For many Ukrainian activists, including stalwart anti-corruption fighters and reformers, this is perceived as a way for Washington to shift the agenda and conversation away from Kyiv's security concerns, the overwhelming worry for the country, and toward the issues the Washington team is comfortable with.

On Aug. 27, a group of 51 respected reformers, parliamentarians, and civil society activists issued an open letter to Biden, declaring his "administration's decision to indulge Germany on Nord Stream 2" undermined its efforts to "rally the democratic world against authoritarianism and global corruption."

Washington's response has been that Ukraine has not been doing nearly enough to fulfill its reform agenda.

Part of this background is an ongoing controversy over the corporate governance of the Naftogaz Ukrainian gas company. The previous reformist CEO, Andriy Kobolyev, was sacked by Ukraine's Cabinet of Ministers—the de jure owner of the state company—rather than its supervisory board, and the whole process was carried out utilizing legal loopholes. The United States insisted his dismissal represented a violation of international best practices. However, Naftogaz and its defenders said Kobolyev presided over an out-of-control board of directors that oversaw massive losses to the Ukrainian state in 2020 while also discreetly paying the former top manager and other executives tens of millions of dollars in bonuses over a year-and-a-half period.

Both the new CEO, Yuriy Vitrenko, as much as the previous one have solid reputations as competent reformers, and whatever the merits of each—I have personally spent time with both and respect them as serious, well-intentioned, and competent managers—the linkage of the issue to the wider claim that Ukraine has failed to fulfill its anti-corruption commitments has caused disquiet. To some activists in Kyiv, the critique seems to be a convenient way of avoiding discussing Nord Stream 2 and Ukraine's defense needs, and it represents an unfair repetition of the obsession with Kyiv's failings.

“For the people of Ukraine, security is crucially important, and several thousand have already died defending our sovereignty,” said Daria Kaleniuk, a signatory to the open letter and executive director of the Anti-Corruption Action Center. “The exhaustive list of specific reform targets would have to lead Ukraine to NATO membership, which would represent the most powerful boost for the Ukrainian reform process. If the State Department was serious about helping Ukraine in fighting corruption and supporting the rule of law, the reforms that are needed for the anti-corruption struggle would be part of a map toward NATO.”

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a highly placed U.S. State Department official denied the existence of any linkage between security considerations and the anti-corruption fight. But the moralistic tone of Washington's lecturing still rankles many Ukrainians. The country's record is surely not perfect, but it is doubtless true they have made consistent and notable efforts in the anti-corruption process over the last seven years. These include nationalizing and

restoring PrivatBank to profitability, which Ukrainian authorities allege engaged in corrupt practices; purging the economy of so-called zombie banks; creating an open and transparent bidding process on government contracts; passing stringent asset decelerations for members of the government; and creating a new specialized anti-corruption court whose judges are screened by nongovernmental organizations and Western referees.

The Ukrainians clearly have a long way to go, yet it is equally true they have made measured progress on both reform and transparency.

Biden's language around the Afghanistan withdrawal—blaming the Afghans for failing to fight for themselves—has also caused disquiet in a country that has fiercely resisted foreign aggression. To be sure, in stark contrast to Afghanistan, the Ukrainian state functions and possesses an organized and capable military of its own—one that has fought Russian-backed forces to a standstill.

However, anxieties about U.S. commitment remain. The meeting with Zelensky will thus represent a litmus test of whether the Biden administration will continue to prioritize previous U.S. commitments to Kyiv or if Ukrainians have a real reason to be concerned.

Vladislav Davidzon is a writer, journalist, and artist who has reported extensively from Ukraine. He is the chief editor of the *Odessa Review*.

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Thanks to US abandoning weapons in Afghanistan, Taliban fighters now better armed than Ukrainian Army – Russia's defense minister

30 Aug, 2021 15:21



FILE PHOTO. Taliban fighters in Kabul, Afghanistan, Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021. © AP Photo/Rahmat Gul

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By Janny Tickle

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Russia's defense minister says that the... more than 100
Javelin portable anti-tank missile systems in Afghanistan. Sergey Shoigu now

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of weapons, and vehicles, is a massive risk for Afghanistan.

“Javelins are supplied to Ukraine from the United States,” Shoigu said. “I don’t remember how many, a few dozen, or so.”

This means that the Taliban now has more of them than the Ukrainian Army.

The Javelin is a portable fire-and-forget anti-tank missile that uses automatic infrared guidance. It has been used extensively in the war in Afghanistan, as well as in Iran, Syria, and Libya.

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Taliban orders Kabul residents to hand over weapons, ammo & ‘state property’

According to Shoigu, the large number of weapons now in the possession of the Taliban is a huge threat

As well as Javelins, the Taliban has access to Black Hawk helicopters, Hercules planes, and a fleet of Humvees, amongst other vehicles. They also

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video reportedly shows #Taliban captured Kanduz airport with #Afghanistan Air Force Mi-35 Hind attack helicopter pic.twitter.com/u7jZJdR800

— Joseph Dempsey (@JosephHDempsey) [August 11, 2021](#)

Last week, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby admitted that the US administration has no idea of the inventory taken by the Taliban.

“Obviously, we don’t want to see any weapons or systems fall into the hands of people that would use them in such a way to harm our interests or those of our partners and allies,” he said.

The US has provided at least \$1.5 billion in military aid to Ukraine since 2014, providing weapons, vehicles, and other technological support. Earlier this year, President Joe Biden announced an extra boost worth \$125 million, including two patrol boats.

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