

Washington's Afghanistan debacle deepens after troop withdrawal

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In the wake of last week's withdrawal of the great bulk of US troops from Afghanistan after 20 years of occupation and war, the US military and intelligence apparatus is scrambling to set up means for continuing attacks inside the country.

Last Friday, the Pentagon abandoned the sprawling Bagram Air Base, long the center of US military operations in the country. Reports have since emerged from Afghanistan that the American forces departed like thieves in the night, failing to notify the new Afghan commander that they were leaving, and plunging the facility into darkness by cutting power on the way out. Their departure was followed by the invasion of the base by an army of looters who grabbed everything they could of supplies abandoned by the US military.

This ignominious end to the longest war in US history is emblematic of the unmitigated debacle of the US intervention in Afghanistan, which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Afghans, along with those of more than 4,000 US troops and military contractors, while costing trillions of dollars.

The depth of this debacle has been further demonstrated by the ever-worsening rout of the US-trained Afghan security forces ostensibly loyal to the puppet government of President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul. The Taliban insurgents have overrun fully a quarter of the country's district centers in recent weeks, on top of territory the Islamist movement already controlled.

On Monday, the Tolo news agency reported that 13 districts had fallen to the Taliban in the space of 24 hours—11 in the northeast, one in the east and one in the south—the highest number of areas taken thus far by the insurgents in a single day.

In many cases, the Afghan troops have fled or

surrendered their positions as well as their US-supplied weapons without putting up any resistance, and a number of soldiers have gone over to the Taliban. Morale within the Afghan army is low, with troops well aware that their commanders have subordinated their welfare to a host of corruption schemes that have enriched the senior officer corps. In some cases, soldiers may have concluded that they are more likely to be paid by the Taliban than by an army in which commanders routinely steal the salaries of their troops.

On Monday, the government of Tajikistan's national security committee reported that 1,037 Afghan government troops had fled across Afghanistan's northeastern border into the former Soviet republic to escape the Taliban offensive.

"Taking into account the principle of good neighborliness and adhering to the position of non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, the military personnel of the Afghan government forces were allowed to enter Tajik territory," said the statement, published by Tajikistan's state information agency.

In the north, the Taliban has taken over key border crossings as well as entire districts that it was unable to even enter when it constituted the national government between 1996 and 2001. While emerging from the predominantly Pashtun areas of eastern and southern Afghanistan, the Taliban has in recent years recruited fighters from among ethnic Tajiks, Hazaras and other minority populations.

Developments on the ground are seeming to confirm the reported worst-case scenario presented by US intelligence analysts that the government could fall to a resurgent Taliban within the space of six months.

In an attempt to prop up the Afghan puppet forces, the Pentagon has announced changes to the withdrawal

schedule, which has already seen virtually all of the allied NATO forces leave the country and all but a small residual contingent of US troops. Some 650 American soldiers are reportedly being left behind to secure the massive US embassy in Kabul as well as the Afghan capital's airport. Another force of 300 troops is being placed on standby for a possible crisis evacuation of US personnel, along the lines of the evacuation of Saigon in 1975.

Gen. Scott Miller, the senior commander of US forces in Afghanistan, is remaining in the country for a few additional weeks to coordinate the post-withdrawal liaison between the Pentagon and Afghan puppet forces. He is set to travel to different areas of the country as well as to the NATO headquarters in Brussels and to what will now be the most forward US base for Afghan operations in Qatar in what one senior official described to the *New York Times* as "a hand-holding tour."

General Miller gave a grim assessment of Afghanistan from the standpoint of US imperialism in an interview Sunday with ABC News.

"The loss of terrain and the rapidity of that loss of terrain has... has to be concerning," he said, warning that the Taliban's advance could lead Afghans to conclude that their victory is "a foregone conclusion." He added, "I would like us not to just turn our backs on this."

Perhaps of greater substantive significance for the Afghan security forces, the Pentagon is also extending the contracts for a few hundred of the 18,000 US military contractors deployed in Afghanistan in order to continue supporting Afghan warplanes and Black Hawk air assault helicopters, which have been the principal prop of the government's security forces.

The Pentagon, the CIA and the White House are still working out command-and-control protocols for continuing US operations in Afghanistan following the troop withdrawal. The US military will retain the power to support Afghan puppet forces with airstrikes against the Taliban, according to CNN.

The CIA, however, may remain in charge of operations directed at assassinating alleged "terrorists" inside Afghanistan.

US President Joe Biden has spoken of Washington retaining an "over the horizon" capability for intervening in Afghanistan, which could include

everything from US airstrikes carried out by warplanes flying from the Persian Gulf to drone missile strikes and assassination raids by CIA or special forces kill teams.



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