

Rapid Afghan collapse pierces Biden's pledge of competence, threatening ambitious domestic agenda

Blog post by Global Counsel USA President Erin Caddell, 24 August 2021

The scenes last week of hundreds of Afghan people converging on Kabul airport attempting to escape a nation rapidly falling into the hands of the Taliban has sparked comparisons to the fall of Saigon in 1975 at the end of America's involvement in Vietnam - an ignominious end to a protracted US military action in a faraway land. But while the implications of the bungled US pullout are likely to reverberate in the foreign-policy sphere for years, the near-term impact will also be felt here at home.

The negative news from Afghanistan comes as Biden and his Democratic allies in Congress prepare for a critical effort this fall to pass an ambitious domestic spending and tax package. The disorderly exit undermines a key tenet of Biden's bid for the presidency: that he and his experienced team of advisors would restore competence and transparency to the White House after the turbulent presidency of Donald Trump.

Right or wrong, this narrative of technocratic expertise largely held through Biden's first six months in office. The president and his team handled a broadly successful rollout of the covid-19 vaccines and won quick bipartisan support for a \$1.9 trillion pandemic-response stimulus bill. Until recently, most polls suggested American voters supported Biden on his handling of the covid-19 response, an area in which execution is key. In July, a survey by the Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 66% of those polled approved of Biden's handling of the pandemic.

Afghanistan has changed this calculus, though the wide emergence of the Delta covid-19 variant throughout the US has surely also played a role. Republicans, still searching for an identity that does not revolve around Donald Trump, now have a time-honoured archetype to rally against: a meek Democratic president unwilling to fully embrace American military might, too quick to overrule his military advisors.

The Afghanistan situation appears to be having an impact on voter sentiment. An aggregation of presidential approval polls tracked by RealClearPolitics (see below) shows marked weakness in the most recent surveys, and on average indicates those disapproving of Biden's overall performance just crossed those approving for the first time in Biden's presidency - 48.2% disapproving vs. 48.0% approving. Biden's approval had held fairly steady in the low-to-mid 50s in most polls since his inauguration.

Recent US presidential approval polls

Polling Source	Date	Approve	Disapprove	Spread
RCP Average	8/12 - 8/19	48.2	48.0	0.2
Reuters/Ipsos	8/18 - 8/19	46	49	-3
Rasmussen Reports	8/17 - 8/19	46	53	-7
NBC News/Wall St. Journal	8/14 - 8/17	50	48	+2
Economist/YouGov	8/14 - 8/17	47	47	Tie
Federalist/Susquehanna	8/12 - 8/18	49	45	+4
Politico/Morning Consult	8/13 - 8/16	51	46	+5
Reuters/Ipsos	8/11 - 8/12	51	43	+8
Gallup	8/2 - 8/17	49	48	+1
Economist/YouGov	8/7 - 8/10	47	45	+2
FOX News	8/7 - 8/10	53	46	+7
Politico/Morning Consult	8/7 - 8/9	51	46	+5
Reuters/Ipsos	8/4 - 8/5	50	43	+7
The Hill/HarrisX	8/4 - 8/5	55	45	+10
Economist/YouGov	7/31 - 8/3	49	44	+5
Politico/Morning Consult	7/31 - 8/2	52	46	+6
Quinnipiac	7/27 - 8/2	47	44	+3

Source: RealClearPolitics

Biden and Democrats in Congress already faced a big challenge in passing the ambitious “human” infrastructure package outlined by Biden earlier this year, particularly in finding revenue-generating offsets to counter the billions in new spending. Democrats face a 50-50 split in the Senate and a two-vote margin in the House above the 218 required to pass legislation. This week, the House will take up a Senate-passed resolution that would provide a framework to pass through the reconciliation process (i.e., without Republican support). Biden’s ambitious plan, totalling \$3.5 trillion over 10 years, would direct billions in new spending to address childcare and education, health, climate and other areas.

Domestic and foreign policy in DC can often seem to operate almost on separate tracks, with successes or failures in one arena often not carrying over to the other, as American voters tend to focus on issues within their own shores. But it is the case that passage of large-scale legislation requires sustained involvement and focus by the president and his top White House advisors to work through the inevitable obstacles that emerge and to rally support with Congress and the public. Biden and his team will now have to devote substantial time into the fall to try to right matters in Afghanistan. And Biden’s halting and contradictory explanations last week for the Afghan pullout could sap the confidence of Democrats in Congress, already looking at tough votes this fall to support his agenda in advance of midterm elections next year. I closely followed the passage of the

Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA), the signature piece of legislation passed by the Republican-controlled legislature of Trump's first year in office. It is my view that Democratic policymakers have not progressed as far with their infrastructure/tax plan as Republicans had at this phase of the debate over the TCJA in late summer 2017. It still seems a sensible bet that Democrats would not let control of the White House and both houses of Congress go by without passing meaningful legislation consistent with the party's values. But the effect of falling presidential support, revitalized Republican opposition and a distracted White House could be a bill that shrinks substantially in size and ambition, legislation that is stimulative, not transformative.

Momentum can shift quickly in politics. Biden himself knows this all too well - just 18 months ago, his presidential campaign was close to dead after losses in early Democratic primaries, only to roar back with wins in key states. But foreign policy has unexpectedly intervened in domestic priorities for many a US president. For example, the Iran hostage crisis of 1979 was a key factor in Jimmy Carter's failed presidential re-election bid a year later. Afghanistan's rapid fall - the first real test of Biden's claim that he represents a steady hand on the tiller of US leadership - makes the tough job of passing breakthrough legislation with a tight congressional majority that much tougher.