



REACTIONS OF THE US CONGRESS ON THE US HASTY PULLOUT FROM AFGHANISTAN

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



President Biden has been a proponent of bringing back forces even when he was the Vice President during the Obama administration and his top goal after coming into office remained the same – to bring back American troops from Afghanistan – the longest war in US history as he called it. The decision came under criticism after haphazard evacuations and the deadly blast that ripped through Kabul airport leaving 13 US service members and 169 civilians dead.¹ The US responded by a ‘defensive airstrike’ through a drone, killing 10 members of one family including seven children² garnering increased disapproval at home.

The US Congress echoed with a collective and bipartisan outcry over Biden’s administration’s handling of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the swift takeover of Kabul by the Taliban.³ The withdrawal of American troops came under Congressional criticism in the US not only because of the decision but also because of the hasty manner with which it took place. The withdrawal and its execution also gave rise to a collective sense of failure at the level of the highest policy circles in Washington including its intelligence.

- 1 Ramon Padilla, Janet Loehrke and George Petras, “Satellite Images, Graphics, and Maps Show How Fatal Airport Explosion Ripped Through Kabul,” *USA Today*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2021/08/26/images-kabul-suicide-bombings-show-how-attack-took-place/5599824001/>
- 2 Sandi Sidhu et al., “Ten Family Members, Including Children, Dead After US Strike in Kabul,” *CNN*, August 31, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/29/asia/afghanistan-kabul-evacuation-intl/index.html>
- 3 Barbara Sprunt, “There’s A Bipartisan Backlash to How Biden Handled the Withdrawal From Afghanistan,” *NPR*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/16/1028081817/congressional-reaction-to-bidens-afghanistan-withdrawal-has-been-scathing>

The US Congress reflected a sense of shared criticism – Republicans criticized the overall White House’s actions, while the Democrats criticized the haphazard manner of the withdrawal.⁴ Scathing criticism came from congressional Democrats, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair, Bob Menendez, in particular, who demanded “a full accounting” of the administration’s “flawed execution of the US withdrawal.”⁵ Moreover, a bipartisan group of 47 US senators including Robert Menendez, Jeanne Shaheen, Patrick Leahy, Charles E. Schumer, Richard J. Durbin, Jack Reed and three Republican senators Bill Cassidy, Lisa Murkowski and Jim Inhofe in a letter to President Biden urged to address issues of immediate concerns including to ramp up efforts to evacuate at-risk Afghans and create a humanitarian parole category specifically for women in Afghanistan.⁶ In a similar attempt, two bipartisan senators, Democrat Amy Klobuchar and Republican Mitt Romney in a letter to Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and Homeland Security Secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, urged to aid and resettle the Afghan journalists who assisted US media personnel.⁷

In the aftermath of withdrawal, Congress echoed with voices of concern and criticism. Senator Tom Carper, member of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, criticized the manner of withdrawal and said that the withdrawal of US troops should have been carefully planned to prevent violence and instability; Senator Jeanne Shaheen, member of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees, called for an immediate expansion of the refugee programme for Afghan women seeking asylum and said that the images of Afghan civilians at the airport pleading to be evacuated are “seared into our minds;” Senator Mitch McConnell, minority leader, called the exit from Afghanistan a “shameful failure of American leadership;” Kevin McCarthy, called out on President Biden's poor judgment as the result of the worst possible outcome in Afghanistan; Ben Sasse, member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, called the events in Afghanistan an “unmitigated disaster;” Mark Kelly, member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, criticized US and its failure to prepare for a scenario unfolding in Afghanistan; Steve Chabot, member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee called the administration’s actions a “travesty” and that history is repeating itself; Michael McCaul, top Republican on the House Foreign

⁴ Ibid.

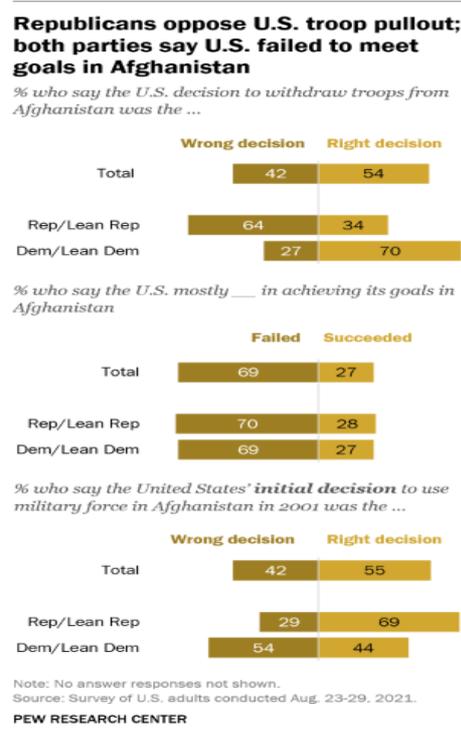
⁵ Grace Segers, “Biden Finally Unifies Congress Against His Afghanistan Withdrawal Debacle,” *New Republic*, August 19, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/163310/democrats-midterm-elections-afghanistan-withdrawal>

⁶ Sprunt, “There’s A Bipartisan Backlash,” text to letter can be accessed at: <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/08-16-21%20letter%20to%20DOS%20DHS%20re%20humanitarian%20parole%20for%20Afghan%20women%20leaders.pdf>

⁷ Claudia Grisales, “2 Bipartisan Senators Demand that Biden Protect Afghan Journalists,” *NPR*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/01/1033384865/senators-biden-protect-afghan-journalists>, complete text to letter can be accessed at: https://www.klobuchar.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/b/a/ba557321-0db3-44d2-9a19-02563e0f98c0/06BF6D3AD55799929FD00AF0A7FDFB3D.083021-afghanistan-letter-journalist-resettlement.pdf

Affairs Committee, called the situation in Afghanistan as a nightmare and an unmitigated disaster of epic proportions.⁸

The US role in Afghanistan is widely seen as a failure along the political spectrum in Washington. According to a Pew Research Center poll,⁹ there is a bipartisan backlash to how Biden handled the withdrawal from Afghanistan.



Source: Pew Research Center

Along with many Democrats and Republicans, the majority of the Independents question and disapprove of Biden's Afghanistan withdrawal strategy and his overall performance. Around 71 per cent of Independents disapproved of Biden's handling of the withdrawal along with his handling of foreign policy in general.¹⁰

Backlash to the hasty and unplanned withdrawal by the Biden administration was also met at the public level that remained highly critical of the administration's handling of the situation according

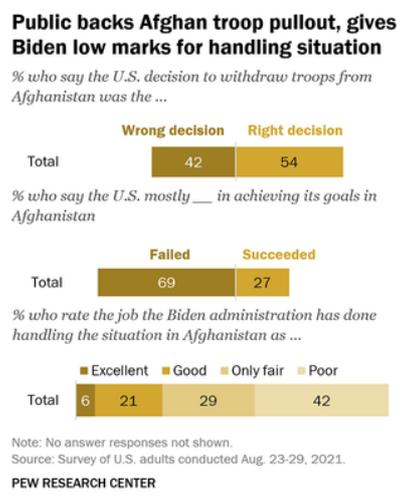
⁸ Sprunt, "There's A Bipartisan Backlash."

⁹ Ted Van Green and Carroll Doherty, "Majority of US Public Favors Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal; Biden Criticized for His Handling of Situation," Pew Research Center, August 31, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/08/31/majority-of-u-s-public-favors-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-criticized-for-his-handling-of-situation/?utm_source=AdaptiveMailer&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=21-08-31%20Afghanistan%20SR%20Heads-Up&org=982&lvl=100&ite=8950&lea=1912456&ctr=0&par=1&trk=

¹⁰ Domenico Montanaro, "Biden's Approval Rating Hits a New Low After the Afghanistan Withdrawal," *NPR*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/02/1033433959/biden-approval-rating-afghanistan-withdrawal>

to a poll carried out by the Pew Research Centre.¹¹ About a quarter of the American population was of the view that the administration did a good job; while a vast majority believed that it did a poor job.

Regardless of the backlash, President Biden defended his decision of withdrawal. He rejected the criticism and hailed the withdrawal as an “extraordinary success” declaring an end to an era in which the US used military power “to remake other countries.”¹² He broke his silence amid the chaos in Afghanistan as the Taliban took over Kabul and after the collective backlash by the US Congress. Taking to the TV he expressed no regrets regarding his decision and stressed that he stood behind the decision sighting that there was never a good time of withdrawal of troops,¹³ and blamed the Taliban takeover on political leaders in Afghanistan and its military.¹⁴



Source: Pew Research Center

On the question of the overall success of the US mission in Afghanistan, there remained an overwhelming agreement among both Democrats and the Republicans that the US did not meet any success in Afghanistan and the Afghan mission was a failure and not a success. According to the Pew poll, 70 per cent of Republicans and leaning Republicans believe America’s involvement in the country was a failure; the same view was shared by 69 per cent of Democrats and leaning Democratic.

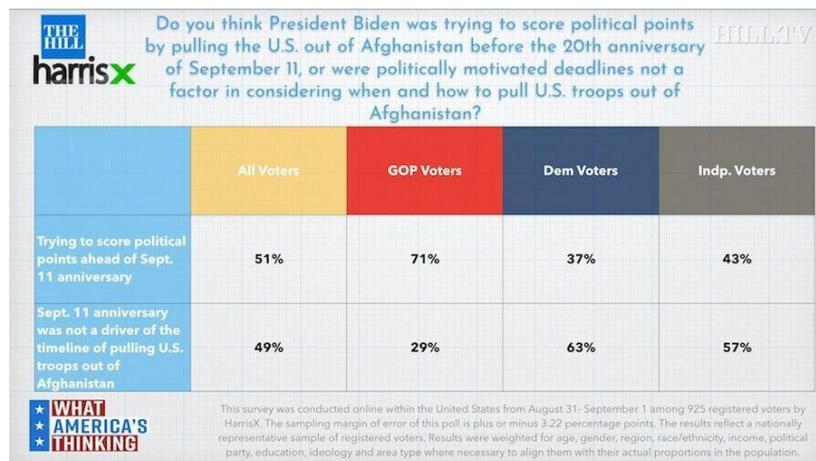
¹¹ Green and Doherty, “Majority of US Public Favors Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal.”

¹² Michael D. Shear and Jim Tankersley, “Biden Defends Afghan Pullout And Declares An End To Nation-Building,” *New York Times*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/us/politics/biden-defends-afghanistan-withdrawal.html>

¹³ “Biden Defends Decision to Pull Troops From Afghanistan Amid Widespread Backlash,” *Today*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.today.com/video/biden-defends-decision-to-pull-troops-from-afghanistan-amid-widespread-backlash-118849605903>

¹⁴ Jonathan Allen, “Even Biden Allies Question Execution of Afghanistan Withdrawal,” *NBC*, August 17, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/even-biden-allies-question-execution-afghanistan-withdrawal-n1276932>

Furthermore, criticism was also raised on the motivation behind the haphazard manner of withdrawal. Many believed that President Biden – through the troop’s withdrawal – tried to score political points before the 20th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre. Polls carried out by Hill HarrisX suggested that about 51 per cent of registered voters across the country believed that the move was politically motivated, while 49 per cent believed otherwise.¹⁵



Source: The Hill

The speed with which Kabul fell to the Taliban was unprecedented, an event for which Washington was ill-prepared making the criticism and outrage on both sides of the aisle bipartisan. The Congress echoed with demands to know why the US was not better prepared for the aftermath and the reasons for its policy failures. Moreover, with the Taliban now in control, most Americans including Senator Lindsey Graham believe that Afghanistan now potentially poses a greater security threat to the US.¹⁶ Many Democrats including Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman, Jack Reed, have pointed finger at the Biden administration’s failures of intelligence, diplomacy, and ill-planned military transition from Afghanistan.¹⁷

The Congress called for briefings by the Biden administration “Gang of Eight”¹⁸ - top four congressional leaders and top members of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees - the

¹⁵ “Poll: Voters Split on Whether they Believe Biden was Trying to Score Political Points With Afghanistan Withdrawal,” *Hill*, September 11, 2021, <https://thehill.com/hilltv/what-americas-thinking/571756-poll-voters-believe-biden-was-trying-to-score-political-points>

¹⁶ Adela Suliman, “Lindsey Graham Says United States Will be Going Back into Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/09/07/lindsey-graham-us-going-back-afghanistan/>

¹⁷ Aaron Blake, “Democrats Offer Some Harsh Reviews of Biden on Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, August 17, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/17/democrats-offer-some-harsh-reviews-biden-afghanistan/?itid=ik_inline_manual_4

¹⁸ Jordain Carney, “Congress Poised to Grill Biden Officials on Messy Afghanistan Exit,” August 18, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/568478-congress-poised-to-grill-biden-officials-on-messy-afghanistan-exit>

highest-level officials in the Biden administration. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken was the first official to testify and defend President Joe Biden's decision to pull out and pushed back on accusations that the State Department should have done more to help Americans and at-risk Afghans to be evacuated, blaming the previous administration for lacking a plan.¹⁹ Testifying before the Congress, Blinken in some measure blamed Pakistan for having a multiplicity of interests in Kabul, some that are in conflict with the US and accused Islamabad of hedging its bets, and harboring members of the Taliban.²⁰

The US remains in a difficult balancing act after the fall-out of the events in Afghanistan. In order to shake the blame, the US in a desperate attempt blamed Pakistan and used it as a scapegoat. Pakistan showed its strong dismay to the US and reiterated its support to the US for negotiations in Kabul as well as on counterterrorism efforts and underlined its position that Islamabad would remain closely engaged with the US and other international partners in promoting efforts in support of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.²¹

Moreover, Pakistan has been at the forefront of engagement on Afghanistan post-withdrawal on multiple levels including bilateral, regional, and global levels. Pakistan has maintained proactive humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan by sending relief goods and medical supplies; it welcomed the high-level meeting convened by the UN in Geneva to mobilize urgent humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan where Pakistan was represented by the Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi as well as continue to emphasize that sustained, constructive engagement of the international community as imperative to avoid a humanitarian crisis and help ensure durable peace and stability in Afghanistan.²²

The decision of withdrawal remains as haphazard as the decision to begin the war 20 years ago as both decisions stand more on emotional grounds aimed at satisfying the collective political and psychological need for revenge in the first case and a political legacy in the latter. Furthermore, the flawed US exit from Afghanistan is not a failure of one presidency but a collective failure of four presidencies' beginning with George W. Bush's invasion of Afghanistan. The Afghan war from the beginning has remained a victim to ill-planned strategic considerations and continuous policy

¹⁹ Patricia Zengerle and Humeyra Pamuk, "Blinken Defends Afghan Withdrawal at Testy U.S. Congressional Hearing," Reuters, September 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghanistan-blame-game-shifts-us-congress-blinken-testifies-2021-09-13/>

²⁰ "Blinken says US will Assess Pakistan Ties over Afghanistan's Future," September 14, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2320121/blinken-says-us-will-assess-pakistan-ties-over-afghanistans-future>

²¹ Foreign Minister Qureshi Telephone Call with US Secretary of State Blinken," Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 16, 2021, <https://mofa.gov.pk/foreign-minister-qureshi-telephone-call-with-u-s-secretary-of-state-blinken/>

²² Transcript of the Press Briefing by Spokesperson on Thursday, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Media Briefing, 16 September 2021, <https://mofa.gov.pk/transcript-of-the-press-briefing-by-spokesperson-on-thursday-16-september-2021/>

disjuncture between the ground realities in Afghanistan and what the successive US governments have been saying about it. The withdrawal of US troops while is a historic step that the previous US administrations failed to take regardless of their promises; it has indeed left a big question mark on the ill-preparedness of the US at every level including wrong assessment of a rapid withdrawal. It has also raised flags on the misjudgment and miscalculation of the US intelligence community of the evaluation of the resurgence of the power of the Taliban in a post-exit scenario and the swift manner they took over the Afghan capital. With the withdrawal, the basic premise of the beginning of the war has become its biggest criticism. The Taliban remain in power even after 20 years without any loss in sympathy and political power.