

How Taliban took Kabul without a fight

The road to their final victory started from the agreement they signed with the U.S. in February 2020

STANLY JOHNY

The U.S. seemed to have concluded long ago that they lost the war in Afghanistan. What they did not expect was the speed with which Kabul fell. The latest U.S. intelligence estimates said the Taliban could capture Kabul in 90 days, *The Washington Post* reported on August 10. But the city fell in a single day, without even a fight, on August 15. How did that happen?

Trump-Taliban deal

Though the Taliban overran most of the country within days, the road to their final victory started from the agreement they signed with the U.S. in February 2020. The Trump administration appointed a special envoy for Afghanistan, held direct talks with the Taliban bypassing the Afghan government and signed an exit agreement. In the agreement, the U.S. could not extract any concession from the Taliban towards a political settlement in Afghanistan. The Taliban did not even agree to a ceasefire. And the American focus was on getting their troops and diplomats out of Afghanistan safely. In the deal, the U.S. agreed to withdraw its troops by May 1, 2021 in return for assurances from the Taliban that they would not let terrorist groups operate from Afghan soil.

This provided the Taliban a sense of victory, while demoralising the Afghan troops. **Pro-Taliban channels immediately celebrated the Doha deal as their victory over America.** They said if they could defeat the U.S., the world's pre-eminent superpower, the Afghan forces would not be much of a challenge. During the war, the Taliban's main challenge was the U.S. air power, which had caused devastating blows to the insurgency. Since the Doha agreement, the U.S. airstrikes went down drastically, in return for the Taliban stopping attacks on Ameri-



Panic and chaos: People running along a U.S. plane taxiing on the tarmac at Kabul airport. ■ AP

can forces completely. This allowed the Taliban to regroup across the country, plan for the next offensive and refurbish the supply lines. Legitimised by the U.S. deal, the Taliban also reached out to regional players such as China, Russia and Iran to neutralise their role in the coming big fight. And then they were waiting for the Americans to start going.

The Ghani factor

The Ghani administration was internally divided. The last two presidential elections – 2014 and 2019 – were disputed. After both elections, the U.S. had to interfere, striking a deal between Mr. Ghani and his main rival, Abdullah Abdullah, to stitch together the unity government. Mr. Ghani, according to both his friends and rivals, was mercurial, impulsive and isolated. He projected himself as the rightful Pashtun leader of Afghanistan, alienating other ethnic leaders, who made up the erstwhile Northern Alliance that resisted the Taliban in the 1990s. Mr. Abdullah, half Pashtun and half Tajik, was a rival who was accommodated in the government. Abdul Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek warlord and Mr. Ghani's former Vice-President who's facing serious allegations, was living abroad. Atta Muhammad Nur, the Tajik "strongman" in the north,

had publicly challenged the government. He was sacked as the Governor of Balkh province by Mr. Ghani in January 2018.

Mr. Ghani, a former World Bank economist who has specialised on failed states, could not build an administration that commands over at least all the anti-Taliban forces. He tried to weaken the former warlords in the name of strengthening the national forces, as well as shore up his political base, but in the course, he weakened the anti-Taliban coalition further. So, well before the American withdrawal started on May 1, the Ghani administration looked like a loose confederation of different fiefdoms. What glued them all together was the American troops. And once it was clear that the Americans were leaving, the cracks in the administration started widening. All the Taliban had to do was to push it from outside.

American withdrawal

The Taliban launched their offensive on May 1, the day the remaining U.S. troops started withdrawing. The Afghan government had the provincial centres under its control and set up outposts across the rural areas, which were provided supplies by air. Mr. Biden withdrew not just American air support but also the intelligence agents and contractors who

were serving Afghanistan's war planes and helicopters. This has, besides the psychological and political impacts

NEWS ANALYSIS

of the withdrawal, debilitated the Afghan air force, the only superiority the Afghan troops had in the war. Knowing this, the Taliban had also launched an assassination campaign, targeting Afghan pilots. According to a Reuters special report dated July 9, seven Afghan pilots were assassinated in recent months.

As an overstretched and resource-limited air force came under pressure, the supply lines dried up. The Taliban could easily overrun remote government outposts and sweep through the country's north, which was, in the 1990s, the epicentre of the anti-Taliban resistance. The Taliban strategy was to take the rural districts first and then lay siege to the cities, allowing them to fall. With cities under their control, they encircled Kabul.

No fight

The turning point came on August 6, **when the first city, Zaranj, fell to the Taliban.** The Taliban allowed the government troops to walk away if they surrendered with their equipment. In some cases, according to a report in *The Wall Street Journal*, surrendered sol-

diers, unpaid for months, were even given pocket money by the Taliban. Those who resisted were killed. So Afghan troops, lacking reinforcements, faced two choices – either surrender and save their lives or fight to death for a government that cannot get its act together and was abandoned by even the U.S. In most cases, they chose the first. So did several government officials. In Ghazni, the provincial Governor handed the keys to his office to a Taliban commander along with flowers. The Governor was escorted out of his office by the Taliban.

In several cities, they overran prisons and recruited prisoners to their ranks. As soldiers surrendered without a fight, cities after cities fell to the Taliban. Within eight days after Zaranj fell, more than half of the provincial capitals were under their control. Kabul became an island in the Taliban sea.

On August 14, even when the city was surrounded, Mr. Ghani tried to show a brave face, saying his focus was on remobilising Afghan troops. But it was practically impossible. The soldiers across the country knew that the war had been lost. And they were unlikely to fight for Kabul alone. Five of the seven Army corps of the Afghan National Army were already taken over by the Taliban.

By the evening, **Mazar-e-Sharif in the north, one of the most anti-Taliban cities, fell. Mr. Ghani knew the time was up.** On Sunday morning, he left the Presidential palace for the U.S. Embassy where he spent a few hours. In the afternoon, with a group of close aides, he flew out of the capital. By nightfall, the Taliban were in Arg-e-Shahi (Citadel of the King), the Presidential palace built by the 19th century Emir Abdur Rahman Khan. Almost 20 years after the U.S. started its war on terror driving the Taliban out of power, life is back to square one for millions of Afghans.