

## **Afghanistan disaster puts intelligence under scrutiny**

By Morgan Chalfant and Rebecca Beitsch - 08/18/21 05:54 PM EDT

<https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/568475-afghanistan-disaster-puts-intelligence-under-scrutiny>

***(Interjection by Don Chapin - An excerpt from another article starting “Billions Spent..”: “The U.S. failure to produce a sustainable Afghan army and police force, and the reasons for their collapse, will be studied for years by military analysts. The basic dimensions, however, are clear and are not unlike what happened in Iraq. The forces turned out to be hollow, equipped with superior arms but largely missing the crucial ingredient of combat motivation.” Underlining by Don...***

***And with Afghan governmental and military “leadership” siphoning the money intended for their troops, resulting in low or no pay, inferior nutrition, inattention to troop support, etc., “motivational” topics our “intelligence” community or newspaper reporters would NEVER investigate, what else could be expected? Most likely most of the Afghan troops are now part of the Taliban army where information of Afghan governmental troop “support” by an “intelligence community” will be non-existent, making any “assessment” very problematic.)***

The unfolding disaster in Afghanistan has put a spotlight on the intelligence community’s role in the largest foreign policy crisis of Joe Biden’s presidency.

Afghanistan unraveled much more quickly than intelligence suggested, something President Biden himself acknowledged this week.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chair Gen. Mark Milley on Wednesday said officials underestimated the pace at which Taliban insurgents would overrun the Afghan government, an extraordinary admission likely to put more scrutiny on intelligence assessments.

“There was nothing that I or anyone else saw that indicated a collapse of this army and this government in 11 days,” Milley told reporters during a Pentagon briefing.

Milley said that intelligence showed “multiple scenarios were possible,” including a rapid Taliban takeover over the course of weeks or months or years.

But he made it clear the 11-day collapse was not something that had been foreseen.

Congressional panels are likely to have questions about U.S. intelligence.

At least four congressional committees are expected to hold hearings on Afghanistan, which will bring the broader administration under heavy scrutiny.

Sen. Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), the leader of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, described the developments as the “horrifying results of many years of policy and intelligence failures” in announcing a hearing.

Jake Sullivan, Biden’s national security adviser, said Tuesday that the administration will undertake a “hotwash” evaluation of the decisions made to “find holes or weaknesses and plug them as we go forward.” But he indicated that effort would come after the U.S. completes evacuating people from the country.

The collapse has been embarrassing to the White House, particularly since Biden on July 8 told the country that it would not see scenes echoing the U.S. retreat from Saigon in 1975 and that a Taliban takeover was “highly unlikely.”

That’s likely to mean tough questions internally for intelligence agencies.

“He wouldn’t have said that unless the intelligence people were telling him that was extremely unlikely,” said Dennis Ross, former special assistant to then-President Obama.

Some former officials and experts have defended the intelligence community, noting that officials warned of the potential for a Taliban takeover even if the timeline was not accurate. They say the blame should fall on policy decisions made by Biden and top officials.

“We should not be blaming it on intelligence at all,” said Michael O’Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. “I think it’s a pure policy mistake.”

Intelligence assessments do not offer definitive judgments on precise timelines, but instead outline possible scenarios on a spectrum.

“Most intelligence assessments that I’ve ever seen are sort of probabilistic descriptions of things that might happen with some view of likelihood and speed,” said Steven Cash, a Washington-based lawyer who specializes in national security matters and served as a former chief counsel to Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.).

Douglas London, the CIA’s former counterterrorism chief for the region including Afghanistan, wrote Wednesday that Biden misled the public by saying that the situation unfolded more quickly than officials thought possible. “The CIA anticipated it as a possible scenario,” he wrote in Just Security.

During an interview with ABC’s George Stephanopoulos that aired Wednesday, Biden said there was “no consensus” on when the Afghan government would fall to the Taliban and that it was “more likely to be sometime by the end of the year.”

He also defended his July comments that a Taliban takeover was highly unlikely, saying, “The idea that the Taliban would take over was premised on the notion that somehow the 300,000 troops we had trained and equipped was going to just collapse, they were going to give up. I don’t think anybody anticipated that.”

Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, who has a very close relationship with Biden, warned that the Afghan government would be challenged to hold off the Taliban in the absence of U.S. support

before the annual worldwide threats hearing in April.

“The Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support,” Haines wrote in her testimony to the House Intelligence Committee.

Some experts have also noted that it would have been difficult for intelligence officials to measure the will of the Afghan military to fight.

“I don't think anybody thought it would be a week — that's quick. I don't think anyone thought there would be practically zero resistance from Afghan national security forces,” said Emily Harding, who previously served as deputy staff director for the Senate Intelligence Committee.

But she said Haines and others had painted a grim picture in hearings this spring on the likelihood the Afghan government would remain stable without a U.S. presence, something she said was the “intelligence community showing quite a bit of integrity and not shifting their analytic line based on the policy.”

Intelligence officials have for years offered pessimistic predictions about the Afghan military's ability to hold the country.

“There is an old gallows humor line in intelligence. There are only two conditions in life: policy success or intel failure,” said James Clapper, former director of national intelligence (DNI) under the Obama administration.

“During the six-plus years I was DNI, the IC [intelligence community] consistently assessed the Afghan government and the Afghan military and security forces with a much more pessimistic outlook than did DOD generally, and [the International Security Assistance Force] specifically. Invariably, we were criticized for being too negative, uninformed or both,” he said.

“The point is here that making such judgments would not be the exclusive province of the IC. In fact, the military and the embassy would be in a far better position to make such judgments than the IC,” Clapper said.

The intelligence community consists of 18 elements, with different entities having varying levels of confidence in their assessments. Intelligence assessments do not mandate policies, but are used by policymakers like Biden and his senior officials when making choices about policy.

The four committees that have announced plans to investigate have multiple lines of inquiry they can pursue.

Lawmakers may wish to explore any differences in analysis from various intelligence outfits.

Harding said on-the-ground intelligence can conflict with what other analysts are hearing — something Congress may want to probe.

“This is a consistent problem. They know more in that they are sitting right there and they have their eyes on the situation. But if you're the guy on the ground, and the person that you're talking to is your counterpart in the Afghan National Security Forces, what do you think that guy is going to tell you? Is he going to tell you the bad news or is he going to give you the most rosy possible picture?” she said.

Katrina Mulligan, who has held national security roles at the National Security Council and the Department of Justice, said lawmakers should be asking bigger picture questions, not about intelligence, but how the U.S. uses the military.

“The real question here isn't why did intelligence get it wrong, it's really, what were the assumptions that policymakers were making when they made the decisions that they made?” she said.

“How did we get nation-building so wrong? And what does it mean

in the future for how we think about how we use our own forces?” she said.

*This story was updated at 6:54 p.m.*

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