

Biden told Afghan President they needed to 'change perception' of the Taliban's rapid advance

By Rob Crilly, Senior U.S. Political Reporter For Dailymail.Com and Ariel Zilber For Dailymail.com EDT 31 Aug 2021

As Biden repeats claim that 'nobody could have known' Afghan Army would collapse, bombshell transcript from July reveals he pressured Afghan President Ghani to create 'perception' Taliban wasn't winning 'WHETHER IT'S TRUE OR NOT'

President Joe Biden wanted the now-departed Afghan president to create the 'perception' that his government was capable of holding off the Taliban - an indication he knew it was only a matter of time before the US ally fell to the Islamic group even while reassuring Americans at home that it would not happen.

In the last phone call between and his Afghan then-counterpart Ashraf Ghani, the American president said they needed to change perceptions of the 's rapid advance 'whether it is true or not,' according to excerpts published on Tuesday.

Biden on Tuesday repeated his assertion that his team was caught flat-footed by the rapid Taliban takeover of the country.

'The assumption was that more than 300,000 Afghan national security forces that we had trained over the past two decades, and equipped, would be a strong adversary in their civil wars with the Taliban,' Biden told the nation in a televised speech from the White House on Tuesday.



President Joe Biden



President Ashraf Ghani fled Kabul as the Taliban closed in

'That assumption that the Afghan government would be able to hold on for a period of time beyond military drawdown turned out not to be accurate.

'But I still instructed our national security team to prepare for every eventuality, even that one. And that's what we did.

'So, we were ready when the Afghan security forces, after two decades of fighting for their country and losing thousands of their own, did not hold on as long as anyone expected.'

Four weeks before Kabul collapsed, Ghani pleaded for more air support and money for soldiers who had not had a pay rise in a decade.

A transcript obtained by Reuters reveals two leaders oblivious to the impending disaster and an American president focused on spinning the message.

'I need not tell you the perception around the world and in parts of, I believe, is that things are not going well in terms of the fight against the Taliban,' Biden said.

'And there is a need, whether it is true or not, there is a need to project a different picture.'

The Taliban were already capturing district after district across the country, while the US and Afghanistan were at loggerheads over tactics.

In the months leading up to the chaotic US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was completed on Monday, Biden was telling the public a different story - that the withdrawal would be done smoothly and that Washington's Afghan allies were in control.

'I don't think anybody anticipated that,' Biden told ABC News when asked about the swift disintegration of the Afghan security forces.

In April, Biden said that the US couldn't stay in Afghanistan forever and that it was time to bring the troops home.

'We'll do it responsibly, deliberately, and safely. And we will do it in full coordination with our allies and partners, who now have more forces in Afghanistan than we do,' Biden said.

'And the Taliban should know that if they attack us as we draw down, we will defend ourselves and our partners with all the tools at our disposal.'

In July, Biden said that the withdrawal, which was to be complete by August 31, was 'proceeding in a secure and orderly way.' He gave no indication that it would be chaotic.

When asked if a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was inevitable, the president responded: 'No, it is not.'

Biden said that the Afghan government has '300,000 well-equipped (forces) as well-equipped as any army in the world - and an air force against something like 75,000 Taliban.

'It is not inevitable.'

When Biden was asked if he trusted the Taliban, the president replied: 'No. But I trust the capacity of the Afghan military, who is better trained, better equipped, and more competent in terms of conducting war.'

The president was then asked about his own intelligence community's assessment that the Afghan government would likely collapse.

'That is not true,' Biden responded. 'They did not reach that conclusion.'

'The intelligence community did not say, back in June or July, that in fact this was going to collapse like it did,' Biden told ABC News earlier this month.

Biden said that he was not told that the Taliban would take over as quickly as they did. Instead, he said there was a possibility it would take more time.

'Not even close,' Biden said.

Behind the scenes, however, Biden apparently knew that the situation was more precarious.



Refugees are led through the departure terminal to a bus at Dulles International Airport after being evacuated from Kabul following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan



Taliban members gather and make speeches in front of Herat governorate after the completion of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan



Taliban forces patrol at a runway a day after U.S troops withdrawal from Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul

Two weeks after his remarks to reporters denying that a Taliban takeover was inevitable, Biden and Ghani spoke for about 14 minutes on July 23. It was their last conversation before the Taliban captured the capital.

Ghani fled the presidential palace, Kabul and the country on August 15.

By then a chaotic evacuation was already under way, helping tens of thousands of people to safety as the cost of 13 American troops and dozens of Afghans killed in a suicide attack on Kabul airport.

But in mid July, Biden was intent on Ghani delivering a public message and public plan that would shore up confidence in the Afghan government.

'You clearly have the best military, you have 300,000 well-armed forces versus 70-80,000 and they're clearly capable of fighting well, we will continue to provide close air support, if we know what the plan is and what we are doing,' he said.

He pushed Ghani to allow his Defense Minister General Bismillah Khan Mohammadi to pursue a strategy that would focus on defending major population centers.

And he urged the Afghan president to bring together some of the most powerful anti-Taliban warlords in a show of support to reverse perceptions of a crumbling government.

Taliban fighters spotted in US military Humvee on streets of Kabul



Taliban special forces fighters arrive inside the Hamid Karzai International Airport after the U.S. military's withdrawal

'But I really think, I don't know whether you're aware, just how much the perception around the world is that this is looking like a losing proposition, which it is not, not that it necessarily is that, but so the conclusion I'm asking you to consider is to bring together everyone from [Former Vice President Abdul Rashid] Dostum, to [Former President Hamid] Karzai and in between,' he said.

'If they stand there and say they back the strategy you put together, and put a warrior in charge, you know a military man, Khan in charge of executing that strategy, and that will change perception, and that will change an awful lot I think.'

Ghani responded by saying Afghanistan was facing not just the Taliban, but their foreign backers.

'We are facing a full-scale invasion, composed of Taliban, full Pakistani planning and logistical support, and at least 10-15,000 international terrorists, predominantly Pakistanis thrown into this,' he said.

But he also asked that American close air support be 'frontloaded' to help with the challenges faced by the Afghan army immediately.

Details of their conversation emerged a day after the last U.S. troops were flown out of Kabul ending America's longest war.

In a follow-up call later that day that did not include the US president, Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, General Mark Milley and U.S. Central Command commander General Frank McKenzie spoke to Ghani.

Reuters also obtained a transcript of that call.

In this call, too, an area of focus was the global perception of events on the ground in Afghanistan.

Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Ghani 'the perception in the United States, in Europe and the media sort of thing is a narrative of Taliban momentum, and a narrative of Taliban victory. **And we need to collectively demonstrate and try to turn that perception, that narrative around.'**

'I do not believe time is our friend here. We need to move quickly,' McKenzie added.

A spokesperson for McKenzie declined to comment. A spokesman for Milley did not respond by publication time.