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The U.S.–Taliban Deal is Not A Military Withdrawal; It Should Be

by Adam Wunische

Research Fellow, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

- President Trump will likely sell the U.S.–Taliban deal as a peace agreement and a U.S. military withdrawal. It is neither. The deal only reduces troop strength to 8,600 from 13,000, and Trump has said even minor complications will serve as justification to halt or reverse this reduction.
- The U.S. military has little left to offer toward a positive outcome in Afghanistan. Any continued U.S. use of force in the country would come with significant unintended consequences that would undermine, rather than advance, U.S. strategic objectives.
- A military withdrawal from Afghanistan is not the end of engagement but rather the beginning of a more constructive engagement. A diplomacy led effort would contain terrorism and support regional human rights and stability by bolstering development aid, supporting regional border security, improving law enforcement capabilities in partner countries, and strengthen intelligence sharing agreements.

The Trump administration will likely seek to sell the U.S.–Taliban deal as both a peace accord and a U.S. military withdrawal. However, the deal President Donald Trump has only brings troop levels back to the levels they were when he took office three years ago; that is a reduction to 8,600 troops from the current levels of 13,000. A fuller withdrawal will only take place if the Taliban fully implements all elements of the deal, effectively giving the Taliban a veto on U.S. troop withdrawals.¹ There are also indications that the U.S. intends to leave special forces troops in the country indefinitely for counterterrorism operations.² Additionally, the numerous complications and barriers that remain to be overcome will provide ample ammunition for those arguing for a continued U.S. presence at current force levels. President Trump himself has indicated that the slightest unrest will provide justification for re-engagement.³

¹ U.S. Signs Peace Deal with Taliban After Nearly 2 Decades Of War In Afghanistan, *NPR*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/29/810537586/u-s-signs-peace-deal-with-taliban-after-nearly-2-decades-of-war-in-afghanistan>.

² Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Julian E. Barnes, "Under peace plan, U.S. military would exit Afghanistan within five years," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/us/politics/afghanistan-military-withdrawal.html>.

³ *Reporterly*, "Trump says U.S. 'pretty close' to deal to end Afghanistan war," February 25, 2020, <http://reporterly.net/latest-stories/trump-says-u-s-pretty-close-to-deal-to-end-afghanistan-war/>.



The requirement that the Taliban renounce al–Qaeda and prevent them from operating in their territory is a condition few actually expect the Taliban to follow through with.⁴ If this is not, in reality, a deal for a military withdrawal, it should be. The military has little left to offer in determining the outcome of the Afghan war.⁵

Trump has ordered military withdrawals and failed to deliver before, notably in Syria late last year, and all indications point to a repeat in Afghanistan.⁶ Reports indicate that the U.S.–Taliban deal includes “secret annexes” in which the Taliban has agreed to allow the United States to keep special forces troops in the country to continue counterterrorism operations against groups like ISIS.⁷ Even if these reports are unfounded, there is significant support among leaders and foreign policy experts in Washington for such an indefinite presence—which President Trump also favors. An open letter to the U.S. secretaries of state and defense, signed by 22 members of Congress, expressed opposition to the deal. Even Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, who has called for an end to endless wars, still supports continued deployments of special forces troops as if they do not count.⁸ However, the use of special forces certainly counts as war given they are being used with increasing frequency and scope since the 1990s, often fulfilling roles that more conventional forces sometimes fill.

Aside from clear indications of the intent to maintain at least a counterterrorism presence in Afghanistan indefinitely, other factors also suggest that troops may be going nowhere fast. In recent comments, Trump has said that any level of disruption in intra–Afghan negotiations or instability in the region would justify a

halt to any withdrawal or a reversal of the withdrawal altogether. These comments should be taken seriously given the likelihood that the negotiation process will be long, difficult, and could easily be spoiled at any point by any number of actors.

So much effort has been required to get the Taliban and Afghan officials to begin talks that little thought has gone into what will result when they do.⁹ For negotiations to reach a genuine peace deal, both sides will be required to compromise. These necessary compromises will likely be more than either side is willing to concede. As

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just one example, the question of women’s rights will be nearly impossible to solve. The Afghan government and the Afghan people themselves are broadly supportive of women’s rights.¹⁰ The Taliban is not and will seek to curtail these rights. It comes to this: Too much compromise and the Afghan people will not support an

⁴ Tricia Bacon, “Deadly Connections: The Shifting Ties Between the Taliban and Al–Qaeda,” *War on the Rocks*, September 11, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/deadly-cooperation-the-shifting-ties-between-al-qaeda-and-the-taliban/>.

⁵ Adam Wunische, “The lost art of exiting a war,” *War on the Rocks*, October 21, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/the-lost-art-of-exiting-a-war/>.

⁶ Lara Seligman, “No ‘end date’ for U.S. troops in Syria,” *Foreign Policy*, November 25, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/25/no-end-date-for-u-s-troops-in-syria/>.

⁷ Kimberly Dozier, “Secret Annexes, Backroom Deals: Can Zalmay Khalilzad Deliver Afghan Peace for Trump?,” *Time*, February 15, 2020, <https://time.com/5784103/secret-annexes-backroom-deals-can-zalmay-khalilzad-deliver-afghan-peace-for-trump/>.

⁸ Mark Landler, “The forerunner of Trump’s plan for Afghanistan, Joe Biden’s,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/22/us/politics/trump-joe-biden-afghanistan.html>.

⁹ Vanda Felbab–Brown, “After the US–Taliban deal, what might negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan side look like?,” *Brookings Institution*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/02/19/after-the-us-taliban-deal-what-might-negotiations-between-the-taliban-and-afghan-side-look-like/>.

¹⁰ The Asia Foundation, “Survey of the Afghan People, 2019,” <http://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/afghanistan/survey/>.



agreement; too little and the Taliban leadership will not support a peace deal or rank-and-file Taliban fighters will likely splinter. Women's rights are one of many issues that must be addressed. After many such compromises, the parties will then need to consider reintegration of Taliban fighters into the Afghan security forces and a reconciliation process that deals seriously with crimes committed during the conflict. There is little indication that either side has seriously considered any of these steps.

All of this demonstrates that an expeditious withdrawal of U.S. military forces is unlikely—if, indeed, it ever occurs. This is problematic for U.S. objectives in the country. The Taliban's expectation for the deal is that all U.S. troops will withdraw within a year. When this does not happen, as is highly likely, either a unified Taliban organization will seek retribution and cancel the U.S.–Taliban deal, or a disgruntled rank and file will defect and increase the level of violence in Afghanistan.¹¹ In spite of the current deal, continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is now an active impediment to any possible advancement toward broad and sustainable peace.

Limited Utility of Military Force in Afghanistan

The continued presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan is often justified on grounds that its presence is achieving certain objectives, from preventing the collapse of the Afghan government to inhibiting the ability of transnational terrorist groups to use the territory to attack the U.S. homeland. But throughout the Afghan

state building operation, and especially at its current stage, the U.S. military has frequently produced tactical victories while undermining these broader strategic objectives. To recognize this is to conclude that the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is more counterproductive than most believe.

Afghan Security Forces

The United States has spent more than \$2 trillion on the entire war in Afghanistan, \$86.4 billion of which has gone to building the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).¹² Early in the operation, plans were made for a small residual Afghan force to provide basic security. As the Taliban began returning to towns and villages in 2006 and 2007, plans were revised to build a much larger force. At the time, these plans included long training periods for new recruits. However, as the security situation deteriorated and U.S. military and civilian planners became increasingly impatient with the war, training quality was systematically undermined by an impatient preference for training quantity.¹³

Tactically and operationally, the United States was successful in eventually fielding a large Western-style military, at least on paper. Practically, the force was more or less a non-factor in the security environment in Afghanistan. Only in 2014 did it assume primary responsibility for security operations, but even today the force remains heavily dependent on U.S. direction and support.¹⁴ Tactical success failed to translate into strategic success. The ANDSF will never stand on its own so long as it doesn't have to. In other words, the ANDSF will never become an independent force as long as it

¹¹ Barnett R. Rubin, "In long-suffering Afghanistan, this is a peace deal worth trying," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/02/16/long-suffering-afghanistan-this-is-peace-deal-worth-trying/>.

¹² SIGAR, "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," January 30, 2020, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-01-30qr.pdf>.

¹³ SIGAR, "Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan," September 2017, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf>.

¹⁴ Susannah George, "U.S. has begun reducing troops in Afghanistan, commander says," *The Washington Post*, October 21, 2019.

can rely on the United States supporting them when things go bad.¹⁵ Research on every insurgency in the 20th and 21st centuries have shown that those countries that receive no external support are the most likely to win against insurgents.¹⁶ The U.S. military’s external support of the ANDSF is now undermining the objective of creating a local force capable of standing on its own. There will never be a clear moment when the ANDSF demonstrates a clear ability to fight on its own, but as long as the U.S. military remains in the country, they will never take the steps necessary to do so.

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Counterterrorism

Terrorism has been, and will remain, a major concern for U.S. leaders considering a military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The 9/11 attacks have left a psychological scar on the collective American conscience. Consequently, the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan will always be irrationally amplified relative to terrorism elsewhere or other threats more generally. Unfortunately,

this is exactly the intent of terrorism generally and the 9/11 attacks specifically: Inflict fear upon a society through acts of violence to force an irrational and counterproductive foreign policy.¹⁷

Our current counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan is to seek and destroy terrorist organizations active there. After 18 years, al-Qaeda is bigger than ever and there are more terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan than before the U.S. invaded in 2001.¹⁸ Tactically, it looks to many as if killing terrorists is necessary, but strategically it does not advance U.S. objectives. First, it misunderstands the broader terrorism threat. Fixation on Afghanistan ignores the many other regions where terrorists operate. Al-Qaeda specifically has a very small contingent in Afghanistan and Pakistan; there are much larger contingents in Yemen, Syria, and throughout northern Sub-Saharan Africa e.g., Mali and Burkina Faso. Focusing so much effort on Afghanistan is a misallocation of resources.

Second, militaries are a uniquely poor tool for counterterrorism. Militaries generally assume that complete destruction of the enemy constitutes victory. For terrorist groups, this is almost always impossible. Terrorist groups can be highly adaptable and motivated by strong ideologies. Targeted killings of members are therefore exceedingly difficult—and counterproductive if it motivates others to join the cause. In fact, when looking at every terrorist group that has failed since the 1960s, only 7 percent have done so because of military campaigns directed against them.¹⁹ Additionally, having a larger military footprint abroad has been shown to increase a country’s exposure to international terrorism, not decrease it.²⁰ Given this evidence, it is unreasonable to think that military action in Afghanistan against terrorist groups forwards U.S. strategic objectives.

¹⁵ Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker, “Small footprint, small payoff: The military effectiveness of security force assistance,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1-2 (2018): 89-142.

¹⁶ Ben Connable, and Martin C. Libicki, *How insurgencies end*, Vol. 965. Rand Corporation, 2010.

¹⁷ Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, “The strategies of terrorism,” *International security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49-80.

¹⁸ Bruce Hoffman, “Al-Qaeda’s Resurrection,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>.

¹⁹ Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How terrorist groups end: Lessons for countering al Qaeda*, Vol. 741. Rand Corporation, 2008.

²⁰ Alex Braithwaite, “Transnational terrorism as an unintended consequence of a military footprint,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 2 (2015): 349-375.



Regime Change and Democratization

History gives us a poor performance record for military statebuilding operations. Germany and Japan are frequently, and inappropriately, used as examples of how the United States can achieve positive outcomes from such undertakings. However, Germany and Japan had favorable preconditions, and the Soviet Union served as a common enemy and thus a source of unity. Such favorable conditions have existed nowhere else since. Outside of the unique circumstances of post–World War II reconstruction efforts, occupations almost always fail to achieve their objectives.²¹

The United States is attempting to build a stable and inclusive government in Kabul. However, this is far beyond what a foreign military occupation can be expected to accomplish. The U.S. Special Inspector General of Afghan Reconstruction reported in 2018 that the vast sums of reconstruction and development aid that were dumped on the Afghan government and economy led directly to waste, fraud, and abuse.²² In other words, our attempts to build a functioning government had unintended consequences that undermine precisely that objective. This corruption, evident early on during the U.S. reconstruction effort, enabled the Taliban to reassert its control over rural areas from 2006 to 2007.²³

Foreign-imposed regime changes substantially increase the likelihood of civil war.²⁴ These operations have also been shown to provide no benefit toward local

democratization efforts.²⁵ When President Obama contemplated possible responses to the civil war in Syria, a report he commissioned from the Central Intelligence Agency indicated that the United States

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almost always fails to achieve its objectives when it arms and supports rebel groups.²⁶ Obama decided to fund and train the Syrian opposition anyway. It was one of the U.S.'s most expensive covert train-and-assist operations ever, and it failed to deliver on any of the desired objectives.

U.S. Strategy Post-Withdrawal

The United States can easily find itself either unable to leave Afghanistan or drawn back in for trivial reasons. We also know the U.S. military is limited in its ability to affect the outcome in Afghanistan, or in statebuilding

²¹ David M. Edelstein, "Occupational hazards: Why military occupations succeed or fail," *International Security* 29, no. 1 (2004): 49–91.

²² SIGAR, "Stabilization: Lessons learned from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan," May 2018, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-18-48-LL.pdf>.

²³ Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

²⁴ Goran Peic and Dan Reiter, "Foreign-imposed regime change, state power and civil war onset, 1920–2004," *British Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 3 (2011): 453–475.

²⁵ Alexander B. Downes, and Jonathan Monten, "Forced to be free?: Why foreign-imposed regime change rarely leads to democratization," *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 90–131.

²⁶ Mark Mazzetti, "C.I.A. study of covert aid fueled skepticism about helping Syrian rebels," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/15/us/politics/cia-study-says-arming-rebels-seldom-works.html>.

operations more generally. However, the United States still has interests at stake in the conflict, even if these are less than vital. Many leaders and experts in Washington want to secure these interests through continued military force. However, because this would have unintended consequences that undermine those very objectives, non-military strategies must be pursued instead. These strategies are far more cost-effective and far more likely to achieve strategic objectives because they have fewer unintended consequences.

Afghan Security Forces and Bilateral Relations

Several steps can be taken during a U.S. military withdrawal to ensure better local capabilities post-withdrawal. These should focus on logistics, personnel salary support, and special forces commandos. A withdrawal period of up to 14 months should not be viewed as a “precipitous withdrawal.” U.S. forces have been drawing down from around 100,000 troops in 2013 to the current 13,000. Comparatively, the Soviets withdrew more than 100,000 troops in approximately nine.²⁷

The United States currently pays the salaries of the ANDSF personnel. Making clear that the U.S. will continue to do so would substantially limit the possibility of rapid desertions and defections from the government forces. It would also maintain the leverage necessary to incentivize intra-Afghan negotiations. This determination should come from both the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government. Over the past few years the United States and the Afghan government were able to remove more than 30,000 “ghost soldiers” from the payroll—soldiers claimed to exist but are likely

fake so someone else can collect their salary. This was done through the use of biometric devices that match identities with Afghan identity cards.²⁸ This method can prevent large-scale corruption after the exit of U.S. ground forces. Currently, the Afghan government uses similar devices to verify votes without any external assistance.

Advisors should immediately shift to encouraging the ANDSF to structure itself for the needs and available resources of its circumstances. Heavy focus should be on supporting the commandos who are the primary actors and who can conduct offensive operations against the Taliban if they renege on any peace deal. A larger proportion of resources should thus be dedicated to the commandos, and their authorized strength should be increased so they can add more personnel to the units; conventional forces should focus on supporting the commandos’ efforts.

Advisors need to transition the ANDSF to a system of supply-push logistics, which send a standard package of supplies to bases and units based on regular schedules. This is different from demand-pull logistics in which supplies are inventoried by field commanders and requests for specific packages are made.²⁹ U.S. forces consider pull logistics ideal because they can be adapted to changing battlefield conditions. U.S. trainers and advisers have thus attempted to get the ANDSF to use such a system. However, pull logistics depend upon proper inventory and on entering information into the CoreIMS computerized logistics system. This requires that soldiers entering information into the computerized system can operate the equipment and enter information correctly—tasks that requires operators to be literate. As SIGAR found as early as 2014, the ANDSF meets neither of these conditions.³⁰ The ANDSF nonetheless needs to immediately transition to push logistics.

²⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies. “Military Balance Journal.” (2019). <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/tmib20/current>.

²⁸ Jessica Donati and Ehsannullah Amiri, “U.S. military moves to clear ‘ghost soldiers’ from Afghan payroll,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-moves-to-clear-ghost-soldiers-from-afghan-payroll-1484822415>.

²⁹ U.S. Marine Corps, “Logistics” Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 4, October 2012, <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=MCDP+4>.

³⁰ SIGAR, “Afghan National Security Forces: Actions needed to improve weapons accountability,” July 2014, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/sigar-14-84-ar.pdf>.



The bilateral relationship between the United States and the Afghan government has value. Diplomatic engagement and economic development assistance should continue after the military withdrawal. Afghanistan will require reconstruction after decades of war to reduce the probability of renewed violence.³¹ A diplomatic and intelligence capacity should remain on the ground. The State Department should take a leading role following the military withdrawal. The department's entire budget in 2019 was \$54.22 billion.³² Spending on security for diplomats and department officials in Afghanistan will increase with the departure of military forces, but this will still represent a small fraction of the \$45 billion the Defense Department spent on operations in Afghanistan in 2018.

Counterterrorism Strategy

Direct efforts to destroy al-Qaeda and ISIS in Afghanistan have not been successful after 18 years of war, more than \$2 trillion in expenditures, and significant American and Afghan civilian casualties. To address the terrorism risk after the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the U.S. should shift to a strategy that seeks to contain terrorist groups and reduce their capabilities globally rather than waste resources by fixating on one particular location.³³ This strategy would take a global perspective of containing threats from al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and affiliate groups, recognizing from 18 years of experience that these groups cannot be destroyed at acceptable costs, but they can be contained. This global perspective would seek a diplomatic effort to contain

these terrorist groups by working with partners around the world to improve border security, law enforcement capabilities, and to improve intelligence sharing agreements.

Globally, terrorism activity is primarily isolated in several hotspots. Transnational terrorism, where members of these groups cross borders to carry out attacks, is exceedingly rare.³⁴ The fact that Afghanistan is a hotspot for terrorism primarily reflects the ongoing war. The primary perpetrator of the war, the Taliban, has local rather than global ambitions. Therefore, it is unreasonable to assume that the Taliban would seek to engage in transnational attacks if the United States withdrew. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, does have global ambitions. However, only a small portion of al-Qaeda membership is located in Afghanistan³⁴ (**See Figure 1**). Efforts to contain al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups with global ambitions, cannot focus primarily on Afghanistan. Fears of an expansion of the Islamic State in Afghanistan similar to its presence in Iraq and Syria in 2014 are unreasonable given their limited capabilities and pressure from both Afghan government and Taliban forces.

³¹ Mujib Mashal, "Afghanistan needs billions in aid even after peace deal, World Bank says," *The New York Times*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/05/world/asia/afghanistan-aid-world-bank.html>.

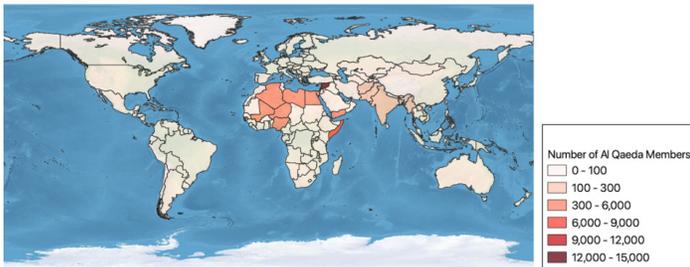
³² U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee, "Summary: Department of State, foreign operations, and related programs fiscal year 2019 appropriations bill," <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SFOPS%20FY19%20Conf%20Agreement%20Press%20Summary.pdf>.

³³ Jonathan Schroden and Julia McQuaid, "Future policy options for U.S. efforts against Al-Qaeda," *Center for Naval Analysis*, October 2017, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2017-U-016307-1Rev.pdf.

³⁴ Justin George, "State failure and transnational terrorism: An empirical analysis," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 3 (2018): 471-495.

³⁵ Bruce Hoffman, "Al-Qaeda's Resurrection," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>.

Figure 1: Concentration of al-Qaeda Membership³⁶



This strategy would focus on working with allies and partners of countries that border regions and countries where these groups are known to operate. Working directly with countries where these groups operate would be either impossible or ineffective, as these countries are either failed states and thus no possible partner exists, or they suffer from deep corruption and efforts would be ineffective. Bordering nations will not be without their own issues, but will likely be more useful partners. Improving border security in the Central Asian states that border Afghanistan to the north will be important. European countries have taken an interest in improving border security in this region, and the United States can increase its support for such initiatives.³⁷

Normal diplomatic relations with Iran would contribute significantly to such a strategy. Even allowing Iranian and U.S. diplomats to discuss basic issues such as what each country’s respective interests are in Afghanistan and what they are willing to commit to achieve a common objective would improve regional strategy and engagement. Pakistan would be particularly important for this strategy but historically has been a notoriously poor partner in counterterrorism efforts. However, much

of Pakistan’s failure to cooperate has been because of what the U.S. has asked of them. Previously, the United States has asked Pakistan to completely eliminate the Taliban, even as it is a potential ally for Pakistan. Islamabad cannot afford to lose this partnership and risk having an adversary on its eastern and western borders. This could very well be the case if the current Afghan government defeats the Taliban outright and then seeks to remedy historical grievances against Pakistan, like a redrawing of their shared border known as the Durand Line which Afghanistan does not recognize.

This strategy has undergone some reconsideration under the Trump Administration, but more reconsideration would be beneficial. The United States does not need to ask Pakistan to eliminate or even suppress the Taliban. An outright military victory for the Taliban is both unlikely and does not threaten U.S. national security because they are a domestic group with domestic interests.³⁸ Al-Qaeda and ISIS, on the other hand, are categorically different and must be contained because of their global ambitions. Pakistan also wants al-Qaeda eliminated.³⁹ Asking Pakistan to continue to aid in eliminating Taliban and al-Qaeda elements from their territory and to aid in the containment of transnational terrorist groups in Afghanistan is much more likely to illicit cooperative behavior than the U.S.’s previous strategy that demands Pakistan eliminate the Taliban.

This regional containment strategy would focus on diplomatic efforts to strengthen partnerships and coalitions in the counter-al-Qaeda or counter-ISIS campaign. A strategy of regional containment would develop the policing, intelligence, and border security capacities of partner countries. Thus, the State Department would lead strategy implementation. The focus of these partnerships and coalitions would be

³⁶ Bruce Hoffman, “Al-Qaeda’s Resurrection,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>.

³⁷ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Achievements, threats and challenges in border management focus of Central Asian Border Management initiative concludes in Almaty, Kazakhstan,” November 7, 2019, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/438275>.

³⁸ Carter Malkasian, “What a Withdrawal from Afghanistan Would Look Like,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2019-10-21/what-withdrawal-afghanistan-would-look>.

³⁹ Asfandyar Mir, “What explains counterterrorism effectiveness? Evidence from the US drone war in Pakistan,” *International security* 43, no. 2 (2018): 45–83.

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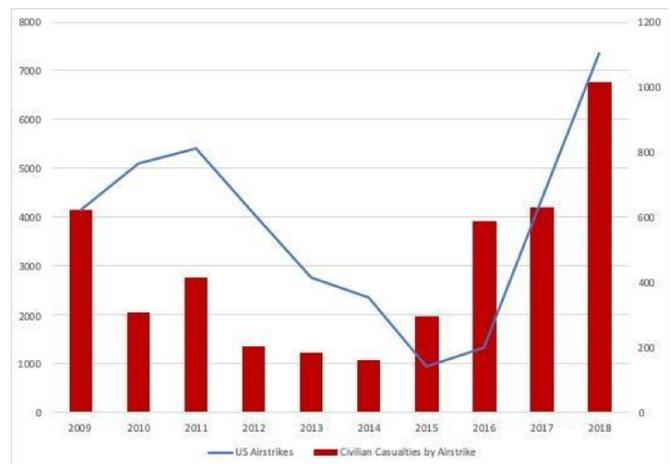
on denying the ability of terrorist organizations to operate, move, and exert influence. This means blocking known members from crossing borders while mounting a systematic campaign to counter radicalization messaging on various social media platforms and apps and targeting financial resources to prevent transnational resource flows. A focus on long-term, underlying causes of support for these organizations—political grievances, inequality, environmental factors, and the like—must also be pursued. Other departments, including Defense, Treasury, and Homeland Security, would thus play supporting roles for this State-led strategy.

Women and Human Security Strategy

A military withdrawal from Afghanistan is not the end of engagement but rather the beginning of a more constructive engagement. The best thing the United States can do to advance human security in Afghanistan is remove itself from the war-fighting that contributes so much to human suffering in Afghanistan. Increased military pressure from the United States in the past few years has resulted in substantial increase in aerial bombings. The United States dropped more bombs on Afghanistan in 2019 than at any point since tracking began in 2009 (See Figure 2). Additionally, this increase in military pressure resulted in increased costs paid by Afghan civilians. U.S. and Afghan forces killed more civilians than did Taliban forces in 2019, primarily because of reduced restrictions on rules of engagement.⁴⁰

The goal of U.S. policy makers shouldn't be to determine the status of women and human security in any particular country, which is not possible, but instead to provide countries with the best tools to secure these rights and protections for themselves. Forced imposition of American values onto Afghan society and governance was always unlikely to be achievable, and in many circumstances unwanted. U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, John Sopko, said while testifying before the U.S. Congress that, "all Afghans wanted was a little peace and a little security."⁴¹ Instead the United States attempted, and failed, to completely remake Afghanistan in its own image. To this end, there are several actions the United States can take to ensure the Afghans have the best tools available to work to protect women's rights and human security.

Figure 2: Number of Bombs Dropped by U.S. in Afghanistan⁴²



⁴⁰ Kathy Gannon, "Anger grows at civilian deaths by US, Afghan forces," *AP News*, October 6th, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/f8a3204232f140be9e4e99e661a69b27>.

⁴¹ John Sopko, Testimony before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, January 15, 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?468108-1/afghanistan-reconstruction>.

⁴² United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, "Quarterly Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 1 January to 30 September 2019," *United Nations*, October 17, 2019, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_-_3rd_quarter_update_2019.pdf; United States Air Forces Central Command Combined Air Operations Center, "Combined Forces Air Component Commander 2013–2019 Airpower Statistics," December 31, 2019, [https://www.afcent.af.mil/Portals/82/Documents/Airpower%20summary/\(U\)%20APPROVED%20Dec%202019%20APS%20Data.pdf?ver=2020-01-27-023439-697](https://www.afcent.af.mil/Portals/82/Documents/Airpower%20summary/(U)%20APPROVED%20Dec%202019%20APS%20Data.pdf?ver=2020-01-27-023439-697).



The first action is to maintain engagement economically and diplomatically. These are genuine forms of engagement that advance both U.S. and Afghan goals. Maintaining funding and non-direct support for the ANDSF will prevent its collapse. This will maintain pressure on the Taliban to recognize their power is limited and compromises must be made. Economic and development aid must continue to be conditioned on basic rights for women. Public attitudes towards women's rights in Afghanistan have shifted significantly toward more rights. Over 90 percent of Afghans believe women should have a right to attend Islamic schools and over 80 percent believe women should be able to attend primary and high school. Although the official policy of the Taliban prevents women and girls from attending school, reports have indicated that some Taliban fighters still send their daughters to school, including some Taliban leaders.⁴³ Additionally, the Taliban have at least voiced support for increased basic rights relative to the 1990's. These are all limited advancements, but they provide leverage for the Afghan government to ensure these basic rights are protected through any power sharing agreement.

The Taliban in the past few years have made significant efforts to improve governance and the delivery of services to regions they control or influence.⁴⁴ They have standing relationships with numerous NGOs that deliver aid throughout Afghanistan. There are even instances of the Taliban asking these NGOs to increase the delivery of their services to rural areas. The Taliban are dependent on having better governance than the central government for much of their legitimacy, as the majority of the population does not sympathize with their movement. This can be used as leverage as the delivery of economic and development aid continues after a withdrawal; it also can be made dependent on the protection of women and girls.

This is not to say the Taliban have changed: They have not. However, there is a certain measure of leverage that can be exerted over how they calculate their

decisions through non-military means. It will not be possible to convince the Taliban to grant rights and privileges to women and girls equivalent to their Western counterparts, but it would be possible to get them to agree to certain basic protections and education for girls. This would not deliver a desired degree of protection for women and girls, but it would be better than they currently experience under civil war conditions.

⁴³ Deccan Herald, "Taliban leaders send their girl children to school: UN," December 10, 2019, <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/297650/taliban-leaders-send-their-girl.html>.

⁴⁴ Ashley Jackson, "Life under the Taliban shadow government," *ODI*, June 2018, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12269.pdf>.



Conclusion

Although President Trump and his supporters will attempt to sell the U.S.–Taliban deal as a military withdrawal and an end to America’s longest war, the accord is unlikely to do either given Trump’s record and rhetoric. Trump has truly committed only to a withdrawal of forces to the troop strength when he took office. And he has placed so many conditions on a full withdrawal that Afghanistan is quickly looking like a repeat of the late–2019 failure to withdraw from Syria. This is unfortunate. Not only does the continued U.S. military presence in Afghanistan create unintended consequences that undermine strategic objectives, but it is also now a direct impediment to a broader peace. No one should be able to claim they have ended the war while any U.S. troops remain on the ground. These include special forces commandos and the like.

Grasping this imperative in Afghanistan should lead to a broader recognition of the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the U.S.’s use of military force abroad. Throughout the world, the U.S. military is too frequently deployed to address issues of too little importance. The armed services are asked to chase tactical victories, and sacrifice their lives if necessary, for actions that are unlikely to ever achieve strategic objectives. A reorientation of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan should serve as a blueprint for the reorientation of U.S. strategy globally—away from the counterproductive overuse of military force toward genuine diplomatic engagement.