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Beyond May 1: The Future of U.S. Engagement in Afghanistan

APRIL 2021 | QUINCY BRIEF NO. 11

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Executive Summary

October 2021 will mark the 20th anniversary of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. The United States currently finds itself at an inflection point, as it determines whether to withdraw its remaining troops by May 1, as required by a 2020 agreement with the Taliban, or to remain militarily involved in the conflict. The Biden administration should take the following steps to best support a negotiated settlement to end the war, while also bringing U.S. troops home.

- **Leave militarily, stay diplomatically.** Keeping troops in Afghanistan elevates the prominence of the United States as a driver of the conflict and a security guarantor. This frustrates compromise and imposes an exigency to negotiations that cannot be rushed, since short-term U.S. interests do not align with those of the Afghan government, the Taliban, and regional actors. Leaving Afghanistan militarily is a difficult but necessary step toward adopting a policy rooted in sustainable diplomacy and aid. The United States should remain diplomatically involved in the Afghan peace process and use its diplomatic leverage to encourage regional and domestic actors to advance a negotiated settlement. A stable Afghanistan will improve security and economic connectivity throughout the region.
- **Support a negotiated settlement, but accept the limits of U.S. influence.** A negotiated settlement among Afghans is the best option for resolving four decades of consecutive civil war, but it is important to be clear-eyed about its prospects for success. Most settlements fail in the implementation phase, and a settlement negotiated with U.S. security guarantees only to be implemented without them is also likely to fail. For this reason, the United States should withdraw its troops so that negotiations reflect the power dynamics that actually exist in Afghanistan.
- **Make counterterrorism regional and local rather than expeditionary.** The war in Afghanistan and the pursuit of counterterrorism objectives in tandem with a

counterinsurgency strategy has inflated the threat of terrorism that Afghanistan presents. A potential transnational terrorist threat from Afghan territory still exists, as it does from many politically unstable countries, but a strategy that focuses on regional security cooperation against shared threats and hardening defenses at home is more cost effective and ultimately less risky than the alternative of remaining in Afghanistan indefinitely.

Strategic outlook

The U.S. war in Afghanistan began with the limited goal of targeting al-Qaeda's operational capabilities following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Two decades of mission creep later, it has morphed into the quintessential endless war. Reasons put forward by U.S. officials and the policy community for staying in Afghanistan include counterterrorism, great-power competition, prestige and the United States' standing in the world, and the protection of human rights. The root causes of the war in Afghanistan, which include an ideologically committed insurgency, high rates of violence, weak governance, extensive corruption, ethnic cleavages, and insufficient economic development, are likely to remain realities for years and do not lend themselves to a military solution. It is difficult to imagine how a decision to remain longer in Afghanistan turns into anything but an open-ended U.S. military presence.

Progress toward a political settlement must be Afghan-driven and sustainable without the indefinite presence of foreign troops.

There are various drivers of the four-decades-long conflict in Afghanistan. These include Taliban-led violence, especially against civilians, regional spoilers, corruption in the Afghan government, terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, and the presence of foreign troops. The only variable that Washington can significantly control is whether the U.S. military is also a driver and a target of violence in Afghanistan. So long as U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan, their presence will artificially alter power dynamics within

the country and remain one of the most important factors in positions taken by the Taliban, the Afghan government, and regional actors. The leverage U.S. troops provide to the Afghan government is also unlikely to lead to a political settlement unless the Taliban calculates that Washington will remain militarily committed to Afghanistan in perpetuity.

Recognizing the reasons for a U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan does not require a revisionist account of the conflict or the events that have transpired since the signing of the U.S.–Taliban agreement in February 2020. High rates of Taliban-led violence, which includes assaults on Afghan army outposts, provincial capitals, and civilian targets, have presented the most significant barrier to progress in intra–Afghan negotiations. Extensive corruption in the Afghan government, stalling by Afghan leaders, and instances of human rights violations by Afghan and coalition forces have also slowed the peace process but pale in comparison with the levels of violence inflicted on Afghan society by the Taliban and its backers. But the U.S. military does not offer a solution to this dynamic, and is itself a driver of the conflict and its violence.

Progress toward a political settlement must be Afghan-driven and sustainable without the indefinite presence of foreign troops. It cannot be expedited or rushed. A successful peace process and a political settlement will require all sides to compromise on deeply held convictions about how a future model of government should be formulated. While counterintuitive, it is an open-ended U.S. military commitment that subjects the United States and ultimately Afghans to self-inflicted timelines, because the short-term interests of the United States and the Afghan government are not aligned and never will be so long as the presence of U.S. troops is tied to progress in a peace process. This conflict of interests encourages the United States to scapegoat individual Afghan leaders and apply counterproductive pressure to fragile dialogue rather than address the underlying dynamics of the conflict, which fall outside the scope of simple military answers.

A military withdrawal best enables the United States to prioritize its own regional objectives while also supporting sustainable diplomacy and aid in Afghanistan. Ending the longest active war in U.S. history will allow the United States to improve relations with countries that have been mired in the politics of this unwinnable conflict. Leaving this self-perpetuating war will also free Washington to pursue other priorities in South and Central Asia, including trade, development, nuclear security, and climate change mitigation.

Calls to keep a residual counterterrorism element in Afghanistan, or condition a withdrawal on the success of a negotiated settlement in a country with complex ethnic, religious, and tribal cleavages, all but guarantee the reanimation of U.S.-led combat operations. Further, the current threat emanating outward from Afghanistan does not warrant a permanent deployment of U.S. troops. Al-Qaeda remains present in Afghanistan but is significantly degraded. The ISIS offshoot known as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, ISKP, is significant but has sustained heavy losses. It is incumbent on national security leaders to develop a regionally focused counterterrorism strategy that does not require a permanent, U.S.-led counterinsurgency. A withdrawal should not mean ceasing aid to the Afghan security forces as they assume full responsibility for securing their country, or ceasing support for Afghan government institutions. But the success or failure of a future settlement must be achieved without U.S. troops. It is in the U.S. interest to complete the process of a full military withdrawal as soon as possible.

What comes after May 1?

The fate of the U.S.-Taliban agreement

The U.S.-Taliban agreement signed in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020, requires the remainder of U.S. troops to withdraw from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, in exchange for certain steps by the Taliban to advance intra-Afghan dialogue and counterterrorism efforts. Other terms include prisoner releases by the Taliban and Afghan government

and the eventual removal of U.S. and U.N. sanctions on the Taliban. Implementation of the agreement has been complicated by several factors.

First, Washington's obligations are clear and their status is relatively easy to assess, whereas the Taliban's obligations are far more subjective. (Appendix A, at the end of this brief, provides a comprehensive list of each side's obligations, the status of their completion, and the ease of assessment in each case.) Second, the agreement is exclusive to the Taliban and United States but requires actions from the Afghan government, which is not a party to the accord. The delay in prisoner releases is an example of how unclear terms and third-party obligations initially delayed implementation of the agreement. It specifically called for the release of "up to five thousand" Taliban prisoners, which the Taliban interpreted to mean no fewer than 5,000. This clause, which was inserted by the United States and the Taliban, required the cooperation of the Afghan government, which hesitated to release prisoners that it believed would return to the battlefield. Afghanistan's 2019 presidential elections, contested by Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, were also an intervening factor, and a compromise over division of power between the two political rivals was achieved only after the Trump administration threatened to withhold aid.¹ This combination of factors caused a costly delay in intra-Afghan negotiations, which began in September 2020 rather than six months earlier, in March. This same dynamic may threaten the implementation of any future negotiated settlement, especially if it is made using U.S. troops as leverage or if its terms are vague.

Lastly, the United States also signed a joint declaration² with the Afghan government that features terms that may conflict with the U.S.–Taliban agreement.³ These include a U.S. commitment to continue fighting terrorist groups inside Afghanistan and a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops that is conditioned not only on the Taliban's fulfillment of its

¹ Constable, Pamela, and John Hudson. "U.S. vows to cut \$1 billion in aid to Afghanistan as political crisis threatens peace deal." *Washington Post*, March 23, 2020.

² "Joint Declaration Between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan." U.S. Department of State, February 29, 2020.

<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>.

³ Threlkeld, Elizabeth. "Reading Between the Lines of Afghan Agreements." *Lawfare*, March 8, 2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/reading-between-lines-afghan-agreements>.

commitments under the U.S.–Taliban agreement, but also on “any agreement resulting from intra–Afghan negotiations.”⁴ It is easy to see how these two agreements could create incongruent expectations among the United States, the Afghan government, and the Taliban.

The intra–Afghan negotiations that commenced last September progressed slowly amid high levels of Taliban-led violence, but both sides agreed to procedures for negotiating substantive matters on December 2, 2020,⁵ followed by a 20–day recess.⁶ The negotiations recommenced in January 2021 and the U.S.–Taliban agreement remained intact at the end of Donald Trump’s presidency. He also reduced official troop levels to 2,500 before leaving office in January 2021. However, already beleaguered intra–Afghan negotiations stagnated in February 2021 as Taliban negotiators shifted their focus to travel to gain support from regional actors. Intra-Afghan negotiations have largely been supplanted by efforts at regional dialogue and a meeting between the Afghan government and the Taliban that will be hosted in Turkey in April 2021.

A military withdrawal best enables the United States to prioritize its own regional objectives while also supporting sustainable diplomacy and aid in Afghanistan.

Commentary on the U.S.–Taliban agreement in the U.S. media and policy community has largely concentrated on its flaws. But the agreement has produced at least two successes that were unimaginable earlier in the conflict. More than one year passed without a single U.S. combat fatality, and the Afghan government and Taliban met at the negotiating table. However, negotiating and making the kinds of compromises necessary to achieve a settlement are two very different things. While the presence of U.S. troops, combined with diplomatic concessions to the Taliban, helped jump-start

⁴ “Joint Declaration Between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan.”

⁵ Hadid, Diaa. “Afghan Government and Taliban Reach Breakthrough to Proceed with Peace Talks.” *NPR*, December 2, 2020.

⁶ “UNAMA welcomes negotiators return to resume peace talks.” UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, January 5, 2021.

intra–Afghan dialogue, their continued presence is unlikely to provide the kind of leverage necessary to encourage compromise. This is because their continued presence deters compromise from the Afghan government in the short-term; conversely, the calculation that U.S. troops will eventually depart produces the same effect on the Taliban.

The Biden administration has kept to the U.S.–Taliban agreement while facilitating alternative mechanisms for dialogue, including a proposed transitional government and Afghan negotiations in Turkey. But the Biden administration has, to date, declined to commit to withdrawing the remainder of U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the May 1, 2021, deadline in accordance with the agreement.

Most likely post–May scenarios

There are three broad trajectories that the Biden administration may choose to pursue in Afghanistan. The first two are fully within the control of the United States: leave by the May withdrawal deadline in accordance with the U.S.–Taliban agreement or decide unilaterally to remain beyond the deadline without a follow-on agreement. The third option is to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond May by way of a negotiated extension with the Taliban, a political settlement between the Afghan sides, or a tacit agreement with the Taliban. Appendix B provides a summary of these scenarios and potential outcomes.

Unilateral extension

Keeping U.S. troops in the country beyond May without a negotiated extension is very likely to lead to the Taliban once again targeting U.S. troops. Regional dialogue inclusive of the Taliban may continue, but bilateral negotiations with the Taliban are unlikely to continue. Restarting these talks will prove difficult, as the Taliban loses trust in the U.S. commitment to leave militarily, and the Afghan government becomes more certain of a continued U.S. presence. Moreover, even if the Taliban and Afghan government do continue to negotiate after a unilateral extension of U.S. troops, the Biden

administration should avoid conditioning a future withdrawal on the outcome of a fragile diplomatic process and a prospective agreement that may never be achieved, much less implemented.

Proponents of keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond May 1 have yet to define a clear end-state that is achievable. The congressionally mandated Afghanistan Study Group report, released in early February, concludes that the end-state in Afghanistan should be a democratic country capable of preventing groups such as al-Qaeda and ISKP from attacking the United States, countering illicit narcotics, and protecting the rights of women and minorities, with a free press that could also include Taliban viewpoints.⁷ Other countries in the region with far greater political and economic stability have yet to achieve this end-state.

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In this circumstance, the Taliban is likely to attempt to capture provincial capitals, but the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, ANDSF, will likely succeed in regaining control over these urban areas with substantial U.S. support. This approach is very likely to prompt calls from within the Afghan and U.S. governments for an increase in U.S. troop numbers and air support. This path will drag the United States back into the same failed counterinsurgency strategy of the last two decades but with fewer resources than before.

Withdrawal by May 1

Withdrawing the remainder of U.S. troops by May 1 will leave the U.S.–Taliban agreement intact, preserve diplomatic channels of communication with the Taliban, and prevent additional U.S. casualties. It will also remove the U.S. military as a driver of the

⁷ Afghanistan Study Group. "Afghanistan Study Group Final Report: A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan." United States Institute of Peace, February 3, 2021.
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/02/afghanistan-study-group-final-report-pathway-peace-afghanistan>.

conflict. While counterintuitive, the presence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan subjects the United States and ultimately the Afghan peace process to self-imposed timelines, since an open-ended, conditions-based commitment of U.S. troops is neither politically tenable nor sustainable.

Violence will likely surge in Afghanistan after a U.S. and NATO withdrawal, as the Taliban will almost certainly declare some form of victory and begin to expand its territorial gains, including assaults on provincial capitals.⁸ The ANDSF is likely to thwart Taliban attempts to hold urban centers but will gradually lose territorial control over vulnerable provinces, and potentially Kabul, unless a political settlement is achieved or ANDSF capabilities improve. The Biden administration may be tempted to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan to prevent this from unfolding, but doing so will not alter the underlying dynamics of this conflict nor change the reality that there is no achievable, U.S.–led military solution. The United States and international partners are likely to use aid, sanctions relief, and recognition as leverage to induce the Taliban back to negotiations with the Afghan government. Results will depend on how much value the Taliban places on its international standing and whether the Afghan government remains intact. A short-term collapse of the Afghan government is unlikely, but this risk will increase over time if a settlement is not reached or if international aid and assistance is significantly reduced.⁹

A negotiated extension or settlement

Negotiating with the Taliban for a three to six-month extension for a U.S. withdrawal — to further facilitate a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban — appears to be the option that the Biden administration is pursuing.¹⁰ A one-time negotiated extension is preferable to remaining in Afghanistan unilaterally, but

⁸ Gibbons–Neff, Thomas, and Taimoor Shah. “The Taliban Close in on Afghan Cities, Pushing the Country to the Brink.” *The New York Times*, March 14, 2021.

⁹ Schroden, Jonathan. “Afghanistan’s Security Forces versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment.” *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 14, no. 1, January 2021. 20–29.

¹⁰ Amiri, Sharif. “US Wants Taliban Approval to Extend May 1 Deadline: Sources.” *TOLONews*, March 30, 2021. <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-171103>.

the Taliban are only likely to grant this extension in return for significant concessions, which the Afghan government will likely oppose.

The Biden administration may fear that a U.S. withdrawal on May 1 will leave Afghans with no deal to negotiate and no central government to do the negotiating. A negotiated extension may temporarily give the Taliban a reason to remain at the table and reduce the risk of the Afghan government fragmenting. However, there is no guarantee that substantive negotiations will occur or violence will not escalate during this period. U.S. troops will be unable to resolve the fundamental barriers that prevent a reduction in violence, compromise, and ultimately a negotiated settlement between Afghans. It is also important to recognize that most peace processes break down during implementation after a written peace deal is achieved and that U.S. troops are not a neutral third party that can assist in this phase.

The United States should support a negotiated settlement to end the war in Afghanistan, but it should not use U.S. troops as leverage in such an uncertain process. The presence of U.S. troops helped bring the Taliban and various factions of the Afghan government to the negotiating table, but ultimately the U.S. military cannot facilitate the kind of compromise necessary for a peace deal. A negotiated settlement predicated on the presence of U.S. troops is unlikely to be implemented and sustained in their absence. If a one-time extension is negotiated, then it must have a clear end date, and the United States should withdraw its troops before they become mired in a lengthy and violent political process outside of Washington's control.

Barriers to a peace settlement

The United States should support a negotiated settlement to end the war in Afghanistan, but it should not use U.S. troops as leverage in such an uncertain process.

A negotiated settlement among Afghans is the best option for resolving four decades of consecutive civil war, but it is important to be clear-eyed about its prospects for success. A successful negotiated settlement requires three distinct steps, according to Barbara Walter, a political scientist who focuses on civil wars: “(1) initiate negotiations, (2) compromise on goals and principles, and (3) implement the terms of a treaty.”¹¹ So far, negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan government remain stuck in the first step.

In addition, a significant body of academic literature finds that negotiated settlements result in less long-term stability and more violence than civil wars ending in a military defeat of one side. A statistical analysis of civil war outcomes conducted by Monica Duffy Toft that tested whether there is a relationship between how a civil war ends (e.g., negotiated settlement, ceasefire, or victory) and long-term peace concluded that “wars ended through negotiated settlement were twice as likely to reignite as those ending in victory.”¹² Toft observes that “negotiated settlements may have an increased likelihood of saving lives in the short term, but an equally increased likelihood of costing even more lives in the long run.”¹³

Historically, civil wars that reignite after a settlement are up to 50 percent more deadly than the underlying conflict that occurred pre-settlement.¹⁴ The gains of a negotiated

¹¹ Walter, Barbara. *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

¹² Toft, Monica Duffy. “Ending Civil Wars: A Case for Rebel Victory?” *International Security* 2010, 34, 4: 7–36. p. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 20.

settlement typically do not last beyond two election cycles even if there is a short-term reduction in violence that results in a temporarily more democratic system.¹⁵ This is why it is important to achieve a negotiated settlement that is sustainable rather than aspirational.

Societal trust deficit and power-sharing

Reaching the compromise and implementation phases is unlikely to occur unless the Taliban and Afghan government agree to a power-sharing arrangement. One study found that past settlements with a political power-sharing component are 29 percent less likely to dissolve.¹⁶ This finding is partly explained by the protection that political participation affords former rebels against reprisals and abuses by elements of the former state and vice versa.¹⁷ But power-sharing is difficult to achieve because “each side fears that the other will attempt to capture the state, exclude them from power and resources, and use the instruments of state power to repress them.”¹⁸ Consecutive civil wars, a revolving door of powerful elites, and abuse of power have created a trust deficit in Afghanistan that impedes a power-sharing arrangement and at the same time makes it the only viable path forward.

Many elites in the Afghan government were themselves victims of the Taliban, and the Taliban also considers itself victimized by the current government. Interpersonal feuds, unpunished abuses, and societal trauma extend back to the political instability of the 1970s and the anti-Soviet war of the 1980s. This deep distrust could potentially be overcome by provisions that increase the cost of breaking a future agreement.¹⁹ But negotiated settlements too often include positive inducements without any enforceable penalty if one side reneges.²⁰ Third-party security guarantees by U.N. peacekeeping missions have bolstered the durability of some negotiated settlements.²¹ A credible

¹⁵ Toft. *Ending Civil Wars*. 35.

¹⁶ Mattes, Michaela, and Burcu Savun. “Fostering Peace after Civil War: Commitment Problems and Agreement Design.” *International Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 3, 2009. 737–759. p. 754.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Downes, Alexander. “The Problem with Negotiated Settlements to Ethnic Civil Wars.” *Security Studies*, 13:4, 2004. 230–279. p. 233.

¹⁹ Mattes and Savun. “Fostering Peace.” 755.

²⁰ Toft. *Ending Civil Wars*. 34.

²¹ Walter, B.F. “Does Conflict Beget Conflict? Explaining Recurring Civil War.” *Journal of Peace Research*, 41, no. 3, 2004. 371–388. p. 386.

third-party monitor for Afghanistan would likely have to draw from Muslim-majority countries or the U.N. more broadly. The Taliban will not accept the United States as a third-party monitor, so it is beneficial to make negotiations a multilateral effort as early as possible.

Ideological and ethnic tensions

Ideological and ethnic components of the conflict also make a negotiated settlement to end the war in Afghanistan particularly difficult. The Taliban is a rebel group with strongly held ideological views, and both it and the Afghan government are fighting for total control of the state. But there is also an ethnic component, as the Afghan government comprises stakeholders from all ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, while the Taliban is predominantly Pashtun. Afghanistan has more than fourteen ethnic groups, and peripheral insurgencies tend to last longer in countries with greater ethnic diversity.²² The ethnic nature of the conflict should not be exaggerated, but an analysis of civil wars with an ethnic component found that “warfare heightens ethnicity as the relevant line of cleavage in society” and perceived suffering at the hands of other ethnic groups leads to a “hardening” of ethnicity as the primary source of identity.²³ This dynamic is already evident in Afghan politics and public rhetoric.²⁴

Taliban funding

The Taliban insurgency also benefits from diverse sources of funding, which include neighboring countries, including Pakistan and Iran, and opium. This revenue increases the Taliban’s ability to keep fighting should it find the terms of a negotiated settlement undesirable.²⁵ In the past, the Taliban compensated for ebbs and flows in its relationship with Pakistan by soliciting funds and training from other regional countries and private

²² Fearon, James D. “Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?” *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3, 2004. 275–301. p. 287.

²³ Downes. “The Problem with Negotiated Settlements.” 234, 241.

²⁴ See “جدال اشرف غنی و طالبان، جدال بر سر رهبری پشتون‌ها است” available at <https://8am.af/the-dispute-between-ashraf-ghani-and-taliban-is-over-the-leadership-of-the-pashtuns/?fbclid=IwAR1lr3L6Lc4wDf0xcj1FC3u0d011SLAJJWnD7tqTibxVKX9YetC3PDmQs8>; Adam Weinstein. “Q&A: What do Afghans see as the main impediments to peace?” *Responsible Statecraft*, January 26, 2021. [https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/01/26/qa-what-do-afghans-see-as-the-main-impediments-to-peace/..](https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/01/26/qa-what-do-afghans-see-as-the-main-impediments-to-peace/)

²⁵ Fearon. “Why Do Some Civil Wars Last?” 297.

donors from the Gulf.²⁶ An interim peace agreement proposed by the Biden administration calls on the Taliban to give up the security of safe havens and access to funding and “remove their military structures and offices from neighbouring countries.”²⁷ This would require the Taliban to surrender its channels of support before a final agreement is reached. Any final settlement amenable to the Afghan government will likely go a step further and require the Taliban to disarm or integrate into the national army. Doing this would require significant trust on both sides, but the alternative of permitting a constellation of separate militias to remain in place would significantly shorten the fuse for a reignited conflict.

U.S. role in facilitating a settlement

The diminished likelihood of a sustainable negotiated settlement to end the conflict does not mean that the United States should favor a policy of military defeat over political compromise. The fruitless pursuit of military victory over the Taliban dominated the first 15 years of U.S. policy in Afghanistan precisely because Washington and Kabul wished to avoid the compromises required for a negotiated settlement. Nevertheless, the United States kept the door to future negotiations open by declining to label the Taliban as a foreign terrorist organization. A negotiated settlement and in all likelihood a decentralized model of government may be the most feasible path to peace, but ultimately this decision must be made by Afghans. The United States should support Afghans in reaching a political settlement by facilitating fora for dialogue, making it clear that future aid will depend on certain human rights guarantees, and using diplomatic leverage to ensure that Afghanistan’s neighbors, particularly Pakistan, play a more positive role in the country’s future. Afghanistan also presents an opportunity for the United States to work with China on shared interests regarding counterterrorism and development in Afghanistan.²⁸

²⁶ Giustozzi, Antonio. *The Taliban at war, 2001–2018*. London. Hurst, 2019.

²⁷ Afghanistan Peace Agreement. <https://tolonews.com/pdf/pdf.pdf>.

²⁸ Markey, Daniel. “The best place to test cooperation with China.” *The Hill*, March 22, 2021. <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/544302-the-best-place-to-test-cooperation-with-china-is-in-afghanistan>.

Leave militarily, not diplomatically

Why the military strategy failed

Calls to maintain U.S. troops in Afghanistan must be viewed in the context of the conflict's history. More than 2,300 U.S. military personnel²⁹ and at least 65,000³⁰ Afghan soldiers and police have been killed since 2001. As of 2020, the death toll for Afghan civilians was 43,074³¹, and 2020 added 3,035 more.³² The majority of U.S. casualties occurred during the three-year surge from 2009 to 2012, when as many as 100,000 U.S. troops were deployed to Afghanistan at one time, 1,044 U.S. military personnel were killed in action, and 13,622 were injured.³³ U.S. fatalities during this period account for approximately half of all U.S. fatalities during the war. Civilian casualties in Afghanistan have exceeded 10,000 every year since 2014, and while the Taliban is responsible for the majority, government and coalition partners were responsible for approximately 20 percent in 2019³⁴ and 24 percent in 2020.³⁵ Despite these massive sacrifices, an estimated 40 percent of Afghanistan's territory remains contested or completely under Taliban control, although precise figures are unavailable.³⁶

²⁹ U.S. Department of Defense Casualty Status. November 15, 2020. <https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>.

³⁰ "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars." Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs.

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/Direct%20War%20Deaths%20COW%20Estimate%20November%2013%202019%20FINAL.pdf>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² "Surge in Civilian Casualties Following Afghanistan Peace Negotiations Start." United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, February 23, 2021.

<https://unama.unmissions.org/surge-civilian-casualties-following-afghanistan-peace-negotiations-start-un-report>.

³³ U.S. Military Casualties — Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Casualty Summary by Month and Service. Defense Manpower Data Center. November 15, 2020. https://dcas.dmdc.osd.mil/dcas/pages/report_oef_month.xhtml.

³⁴ "Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2019." United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, February 2020. https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2019.pdf.

³⁵ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. "Surge in Civilian Casualties."

³⁶ "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress." Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, July 30, 2018. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-07-30qr.pdf>.

A myopic U.S. focus on defeating the Taliban militarily and coercing regional spoilers allowed previous brief openings for peace talks to slip through the cracks.

Policymakers in Washington cite various factors to explain Washington's failure to definitively defeat the Taliban. These include safe havens in Pakistan,³⁷ regional spoilers, and restrictive rules of engagement.³⁸ Like solving a Rubik's Cube, a decisive military victory in Afghanistan is predicated on perfectly aligned conditions that have not occurred in the last 19 years. A myopic U.S. focus on defeating the Taliban militarily and coercing regional spoilers allowed previous brief openings for peace talks to slip through the cracks. Tactical victories against the Taliban created a positive "learning trap" that encouraged the continuation of a flawed counterinsurgency despite slow overall progress.³⁹ It also ignored the fact that a localized insurgency can effectively "win" by maintaining a stalemate, whereas a counterinsurgency must achieve a resounding military victory. A web of forward operating bases and combat outposts protected provincial capitals, but these also reinforced the illusion of coalition control over large swaths of Afghanistan when, in reality, the Taliban often operated freely just several hundred meters away.

The limitations and failure of a combat-centered approach led Washington to complement these efforts with massive nation-building initiatives, which produced underwhelming results and fuelled corruption in Afghanistan. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, SIGAR, found \$19 billion in waste, fraud, and abuse in U.S. funding between May 2009 and December 31, 2019.⁴⁰

³⁷ Davis, Daniel. "Debunking The Safe Haven Myth." *Defense Priorities*, May 2020.

https://www.realclearpublicaffairs.com/public_affairs/2020/05/07/debunking_the_safe_haven_myth_491050.html.

³⁸ Bolgiano, David, and John Taylor. "Can't Kill Enough to Win? Think Again." *Proceedings*, December 2017.

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017/december/cant-kill-enough-win-think-again>.

³⁹ Jackson, Colin. "Defeat in victory : organizational learning dysfunction in counterinsurgency." Ph.D. dissertation. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008. <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/53077>.

⁴⁰ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress." October 30, 2020. <https://www.sigarmil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-10-30qr.pdf>.

Adopt a global, partnership-driven counterterrorism strategy

The war in Afghanistan led to an exaggerated perception of the country's terrorism risk relative to actual threat assessments.⁴¹ This misperception was exacerbated by the absence of a clear ranking of terrorism threats by the Department of Defense.⁴² This is not to argue that threats from groups such as al-Qaeda and ISKP no longer exist in Afghanistan. The Taliban maintains links and a common ideology with al-Qaeda and is neither capable nor willing to fully expel the group from Afghan soil.⁴³ In an ideal scenario, the United States would have a capable counterterrorism partner in Kabul that could manage these threats independently. However, this is far from the reality, and the former deputy and acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Laurel Miller, argued that if the United States stays militarily involved in Afghanistan to combat terrorism, it will quickly find that the nature of its partnership with the Afghan government makes it "impossible to disentangle counterterrorism from counterinsurgency in Afghanistan."⁴⁴ A more sustainable U.S. counterterrorism strategy will focus on disrupting terrorism plots inside the United States and developing counterterrorism partnerships with stable nations that share similar concerns in the region.

While Afghanistan presents terrorism challenges, the threat is manageable without keeping U.S. troops in the country permanently. The Taliban historically lacks ambitions outside of the country, and the United States is reportedly coordinating close air support for anti-ISKP offensives led by the Taliban.⁴⁵ The ISKP, in particular, lacks the local roots and reliable foreign funding that enabled groups such as al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda may have

⁴¹ 116th Congress. *Worldwide Threats to the Homeland*. (Testimony of Christopher Miller.) 2020. <https://homeland.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Testimony%20-%20Miller.pdf>.

⁴² Tankel, Stephen. "Making the U.S. Military's Counterterrorism Mission Sustainable." *War on the Rocks*, Sep. 28, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/09/making-the-u-s-militarys-counter-terrorism-mission-sustainable>.

⁴³ Bacon, Tricia. "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>; see also <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghanistans-terrorism-challenge-political-trajectories-al-qaeda-afghan-taliban>; <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/11/05/qa-the-elephant-in-the-room-what-is-the-future-of-al-qaida-in-afghanistan/>.

⁴⁴ Miller, Laurel. "The Myth of a Responsible Withdrawal From Afghanistan." *Foreign Affairs*, January 22, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-01-22/myth-responsible-withdrawal-afghanistan>.

⁴⁵ Morgan, Wesley. "Our Secret Taliban Air Force." *Washington Post*, October 22, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/10/22/taliban-isis-drones-afghanistan>.

ambitions to attack U.S. targets in the region and inside the United States, but its ability to do so is diminished.⁴⁶ Intelligence collection that is conducted as part of U.S. troop deployments has become increasingly driven by force protection, and the justification for keeping troops deployed therefore becomes circular.⁴⁷ Furthermore, a strong case can be made that strengthening defenses at home is the best dollar-for-dollar investment of counterterrorism resources.

While Afghanistan presents terrorism challenges, the threat is manageable without keeping U.S. troops in the country permanently.

An open-ended, U.S.-led war in Afghanistan encourages regional actors to pursue short-term agendas that further destabilize the country. The Biden administration should instead prioritize terrorism threats across the region, and should engage with potential partners. For example, Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan share similar concerns about al-Qaeda and the rise of ISKP.⁴⁸ This effort will require a sliding-scale approach to counterterrorism coordination that includes intelligence-sharing and joint operations with trusted partners on one end, and backdoor diplomacy combined with confidence-building exercises on the other. Relying on offshore capabilities and regional partnerships will present its own challenges and constraints. These limits may prove discomfiting for U.S. leaders who are still motivated by the potential fallout of worst-case scenarios.⁴⁹ It will require more creative forms of monitoring threats and may slow response times, but compared with the alternative of remaining in Afghanistan indefinitely, it is more cost-effective and less risky.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/al-qaeda-is-being-hollowed-to-its-core/>

⁴⁷ Simon, Stephen, and Richard Sokolsky. "19 Years Later – How to Wind Down the War on Terror." Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, June 10, 2020. <https://quincyinst.org/2020/06/10/19-years-later-how-to-wind-down-the-war-on-terror/>.

⁴⁸ Mir, Asfandyar. "What explains counterterrorism effectiveness? Evidence from the US drone war in Pakistan." *International Security* 43, no. 2, 2018. 45–83.

⁴⁹ Simon and Sokolsky. "19 Years Later – How to Wind Down the War on Terror."

⁵⁰ Lalwani, Sameer. "Strategizing to Exit Afghanistan: From Risk Avoidance to Risk Management." *War on the Rocks*, March 29, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/strategizing-to-exit-afghanistan-from-risk-avoidance-to-risk-management>.

Localize aid and support transitional justice

The United States should promote long-term development over short-term metrics. This will require a robust multilateral aid and development framework that includes Europe and Afghanistan's neighbors. It should focus on ensuring that donor/recipient accountability is measured by its positive impact on Afghan communities rather than shortsighted metrics, and that NGOs do not create a “parallel public sector” that undermines the Afghan government.⁵¹ But it should also require that achievable conditions for continued aid are met.

Aid is another aspect of the war in Afghanistan that is subjected to self-inflicted and unachievable timelines. The long-term community-centric planning required to achieve real change is subverted by a U.S. desire for quick results. As a consequence, the development of organic civil society was sidelined by U.S.-backed NGOs funded with millions of dollars.⁵² In addition, U.S. aid has been too closely tied to elite politics. As a 2007 study by Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra observed, “international donors rarely venture beyond the ‘charmed circle’ of Karzai and a coterie of technocrat ministers,” a reference to Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan’s president at the time.⁵³ Withdrawing militarily from Afghanistan will force donors to focus on sustainable aid rather than what the above study described as flawed “aid-for-security bargains.”⁵⁴

The United States should promote non-retributive transitional justice mechanisms to heal rather than divide Afghan society. These include truth commissions and victims’ compensation funds. Different factions of Afghan society have simultaneously played the role of victim and perpetrator, and the U.S.-led coalition also engaged in human rights abuses. A comprehensive transitional-justice process cannot begin in earnest

⁵¹ “The Paradox of Aid: Lessons from Afghanistan.” Overseas Development Institute, Feb, 12, 2018.

<https://www.odi.org/events/4531-paradox-aid-lessons-afghanistan>; Nematullah Bizhan. *Aid Paradoxes in Afghanistan: Building and Undermining the State*. Abingdon, Oxon. Routledge, 2017.

⁵² Mehrdad, Ezzatullah. “How Liberal Values Became a Business in Afghanistan.” *Foreign Policy*, April 6, 2021.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/06/afghanistan-ngo-liberal-values-became-business>.

⁵³ Goodhand, Jonathan, and Mark Sedra. “Bribes or Bargains? Peace Conditionalities and ‘Post-Conflict’ Reconstruction in Afghanistan.” *International Peacekeeping*, 14:1, 2007. 41–61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

until violence is significantly reduced, and a retributive model of justice is a nonstarter because many of the potential guilty parties are required to make a political settlement work. But the United States should work with Afghan partners to implement transitional-justice initiatives at the local level when this is possible. Future aid should be conditioned on basic human rights guarantees that are adopted nationwide rather than restricted to a Kabul bubble. Western aid should be supplemented with development projects led by Afghanistan's immediate neighbors, including China and Iran. Most importantly, it is imperative that the administration continue to direct military aid to the Afghan security forces after a U.S. withdrawal. But this aid must be conditioned on respect for the rights of Afghans, continuous improvements in capabilities, and fostering a command culture that rejects corruption.

Conclusion

Leaving Afghanistan militarily does not mean that U.S. interests do not continue to exist there or that Washington should cease looking for opportunities to support the country's future.

Three consecutive U.S. administrations have pledged to leave Afghanistan militarily but have chosen to continue the dysfunction of the status quo rather than accept the risks of a course correction. Washington should be careful not to transition from one flawed strategy that seeks to defeat the Taliban militarily with U.S. troops to another one that attempts to dictate a negotiated settlement – after failing to win the war – using those same troops as leverage.

The United States should support diplomatic efforts to end the war in Afghanistan, but tying U.S. troops to a negotiated settlement that may never be implemented is tantamount to a repeat of the mistakes of the past two decades. This truth remains even if a political settlement is achieved on paper in coming weeks or months. The

withdrawal of U.S. troops may make the Taliban less inclined to compromise, but their continued presence will have the same effect on the Afghan government, and may even make the Taliban more intransigent as it begins to target U.S. and NATO troops. These contradictions are inherent to any U.S. troop presence, and ever-shifting calculations as to when they will leave will continue to frustrate compromise and add an outside exigency to negotiations. A settlement that is negotiated with U.S. security guarantees only to be implemented without them is likely to fail. For this reason, the United States should withdraw its troops so that negotiations reflect the power dynamics that actually exist in Afghanistan. While regional countries, particularly Pakistan, have also placed their thumbs on the scale, leaving U.S. troops in Afghanistan will not resolve this.

Leaving Afghanistan militarily does not mean that U.S. interests do not continue to exist there or that Washington should cease looking for opportunities to support the country's future. Afghanistan will likely continue to present a terrorism threat and require significant aid for the foreseeable future. It is incumbent on U.S. leaders to develop a more sustainable counterterrorism strategy with a focus on hardening defenses at home, collaboration with reliable partners in the region, and a rejection of the perpetual deployment of U.S. troops. The United States should also support Afghans in reaching a political settlement by facilitating fora and logistics for dialogue, conditioning future aid on basic human rights guarantees, and using Washington's existing leverage with Afghanistan's neighbors, particularly Pakistan, to refrain from interfering in domestic politics. It also presents a limited opportunity for the United States to work with China, Russia, and Iran on shared interests regarding counterterrorism and development in Afghanistan. Ending the war in Afghanistan presents an important test for Washington's ability to prioritize threats, center diplomacy, and end endless wars.

Appendix A

Obligations under the U.S. – Taliban agreement of February 2020

(Formally known as the “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America” informally referred to as the “Doha Agreement.”)

United States	Status as of 4/1/21 - Ease of assessment	Taliban	Status as of 4/1/21 - Ease of assessment ⁵⁵
<u>Affirmative Obligation⁵⁶</u> <u>(requires cooperation of outside parties):</u> Withdraw all U.S. troops and coalition partners, including contractors, trainers, and advisors within 14 months of the announcement of the agreement (by May 1, 2021).	Partially (clear metric)	<u>Affirmative Obligation:</u> Release up to 1,000 Afghan prisoners by March 10, 2020.	Completed Late (clear metric)
<u>Affirmative Obligation</u> <u>(requires cooperation of outside parties):</u> Committed to work with the Afghan government to complete the release of up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners by March 10, 2020.	Completed Late (clear metric)	<u>Affirmative Obligation</u> <u>(may require cooperation of outside parties):</u> Taliban will not allow any of its members or other groups, including al-Qaeda, to use Afghan soil to threaten the security of the U.S. or	Incomplete (subjective)

⁵⁵ Ease of assessment is classified as “clear metric” if easily quantifiable; all others are classified as “subjective.”

⁵⁶ Obligations are categorized as affirmative if qualified by language such as “will,” and as discretionary if qualified by language such as “with the goal of.” Obligations do not include any of the secret annexes.

		<p>its allies. This includes the obligation to “send a clear message” that those who pose such a threat have no place in Afghanistan; to “instruct members” of the Taliban not to cooperate with those groups; to “prevent them from recruiting, training, and fundraising” and not host them; to follow international law so far as granting asylum; and to “not provide visas, passports, travel permits, or other legal documents to those who pose a threat [to the U.S. and its allies].”</p>	
<p><u>Affirmative Obligation (requires cooperation of outside parties):</u> “The United States will request the recognition and endorsement of the United Nations Security Council for this agreement.”</p>	<p>Completed (clear metric)</p>	<p><u>Affirmative Obligation (requires cooperation of outside parties):</u> “The Taliban commits that its released prisoners will be committed to the responsibilities mentioned in this agreement so that they will not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.”</p>	<p>Completed (subjective)</p>

<p><u>Discretionary Obligation</u>: Initiate an administrative review of current U.S. sanctions against Taliban members “with the goal of removing these sanctions by August 27, 2020.”</p>	<p>Incomplete (clear metric)</p>	<p><u>Affirmative Obligation (requires cooperation of outside parties)</u>: Taliban will start intra–Afghan negotiations with Afghan sides on March 10, 2020.</p>	<p>Initiated late (subjective)</p>
<p><u>Discretionary Obligation (requires cooperation of outside parties)</u>: With the start of intra–Afghan negotiations, the U.S. will start diplomatic engagement with other members of the U.N. Security Council and Afghanistan to remove Taliban members from the U.N. sanctions list “with the aim of achieving this objective by May 29, 2020.”</p>	<p>Incomplete (clear metric)</p>	<p><u>Conditional Obligation</u>: A “permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra–Afghan dialogue” the details of which will be determined by the parties to the talks. A ceasefire “will be announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.”</p>	<p>Incomplete (clear metric)</p>
<p><u>Discretionary Obligation</u>: The U.S. and Taliban seek positive relations with each other.</p>	<p>Incomplete (subjective)</p>	<p><u>Discretionary Obligation</u>: The U.S. and Taliban seek positive relations with each other.</p>	<p>Incomplete (subjective)</p>
<p><u>Affirmative Obligation (requires cooperation of outside parties)</u>: “The United States and</p>	<p>Incomplete (subjective)</p>		

<p>its allies will refrain from the threat or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Afghanistan or intervening in its domestic affairs.”</p>			
<p><u>Affirmative Obligation:</u> The U.S. will seek economic cooperation for reconstruction with the new post-settlement Afghan government and will not intervene in its internal affairs.</p>	<p>Incomplete (subjective)</p>		

Appendix B

Scenarios for U.S. policy toward Afghanistan

Scenarios	Potential outcomes
<p>Scenario 1: The U.S. unilaterally abrogates the Doha Agreement and remains in Afghanistan beyond May 1.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Taliban is almost certain to escalate violence unless a follow-on agreement is negotiated. It will likely wait until after the May 1 agreed deadline to stage attacks on U.S. targets. If the U.S. and Taliban are in the final stages of a negotiated extension or another comparable agreement, the status quo of the U.S.–Taliban agreement is likely to remain in place over the short-term.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is very unlikely that the Taliban will continue any bilateral negotiations with the Afghan government unless there is a negotiated extension or comparable agreement with the U.S. • The Taliban is likely to attempt to capture provincial capitals and may temporarily hold them, but the ANDSF will likely succeed in regaining control over urban areas with substantial U.S. support. This is very likely to prompt calls from voices within the Afghan and U.S. governments for an increase in U.S. troop numbers and air support. • The U.S. is likely to find itself unable to sustain force protection or assist the ANDSF without significantly increasing troop levels and close air support to ANDSF units. • The U.S. may find itself sidelined from regional negotiations as regional countries such as Russia take the lead and intra-Afghan talks breakdown.
<p>Scenario 2: The U.S. stays in Afghanistan beyond May 1 with a negotiated extension or a tacit agreement with the Taliban.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The status quo of the U.S.–Taliban agreement is likely to remain in place in the near term without renewed Taliban attacks on U.S. troops. However, overall violence in Afghanistan is very likely to remain high unless significant progress is made toward a political settlement. • Absent a publicly announced negotiated extension, it is possible that a tacit agreement could emerge if the U.S. and Taliban have made progress in closed-door negotiations but fall short of a

	<p>completed agreement or wish to avoid a formal announcement. A continuation of the status quo that requires the Taliban to refrain from attacks that target U.S. troops would indicate such a scenario may be under way.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without a political settlement, this scenario is likely to transition into outcomes outlined in Scenarios 1 and 3 within one year.
<p>Scenario 3: The U.S. withdraws troops by the May 1 deadline or soon thereafter.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Taliban will almost certainly declare some form of victory and begin to expand its territorial gains, including assaults on provincial capitals⁵⁷ where they have a military advantage such as Uruzgan, Helmand, Kandahar, Baghlan, Ghazni, and Wardak. The Taliban is likely to fail to hold urban centers at first but will eventually succeed unless a political settlement is achieved or ANDSF capabilities rapidly improve. • The Taliban is likely to continue to participate in international fora if they are invited but may reject bilateral negotiations with the Afghan government. • There will be a heightened risk of fragmentation within the Afghan military and pro-government militias. • Highly professional and cohesive units such as those within the Afghan special forces will likely remain intact but desertions will increase in the ANDSF. • International actors are very likely to use airstrikes, aid, sanctions relief, and recognition as leverage to induce the

⁵⁷ Neff and Shah. "The Taliban Close in on Afghan Cities." *The New York Times*, March 14, 2021.

Taliban back to negotiate with the Afghan government.

- A short-term collapse of the Afghan government is unlikely but will increase over time if a settlement is not reached or international aid and assistance is significantly reduced.⁵⁸

About the Author

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⁵⁸ Schroden. “Afghanistan’s Security Forces versus the Taliban.”

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