



Preparing for the Consequences of Withdrawal from Afghanistan



American Security Project



Perspective

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In this Report:

America's longest war will come to a symbolic close by September 11th, 2021. Yet the departure of foreign troops does not signify an end to Afghanistan's conflict. Intra-Afghan negotiations are still underway, fighting continues between Afghan security forces and the Taliban, and Afghan civilians nervously await the fate of their country. The Biden administration, with the realization that U.S. military presence is not the answer to achieving lasting peace in Afghanistan, has decided to make a clean break with previous strategy by implementing a non-conditions-based withdrawal deadline. The withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan will have profound implications on the fate of Intra-Afghan Negotiations, governance and security, terrorism, regional dynamics, great power competition, human rights, humanitarian issues, and development, which the United States, along with its partners and allies, must be prepared to deal with.

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IN BRIEF

- The American and NATO military mission in Afghanistan has been unable to achieve favorable conditions for withdrawal.
- The Biden administration's non-conditions-based withdrawal deadline reduces leverage with the Taliban and weakens the Afghan government's negotiating power.
- The Taliban will likely have the upper hand in all possible outcomes of the Intra-Afghan negotiations and exploit any situation to seize power.
- America's exit from Afghanistan will have profound implications on governance, Afghan security forces, terrorism, regional dynamics, great power competition, human rights, humanitarian issues, and development.
- The United States must be prepared with contingency plans to deal with the outcome of the decision to withdraw.

About the Authors

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Introduction

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, former U.S. President George W. Bush declared a War on Terror. “The United States of America will use all our resources to conquer this enemy. We will rally the world. We will be patient. We’ll be focused, and we will be steadfast in our determination. This battle will take time and resolve, but make no mistake about it, we will win.”¹ Twenty years later—in the very same room where Bush informed the nation that the U.S. military had begun strikes on terrorist training camps—President Biden formally announced the end of the war in Afghanistan with the withdrawal of U.S. troops before September 11th, the twentieth anniversary of the terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.²

America’s longest war has drawn on throughout the administrations of presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Each President carried out a distinct strategy, yet ultimately failed to secure peace and successfully implement a full withdrawal. The Afghan war has cost the U.S. \$822 billion from 2001 to 2019, resulting in over 2,300 U.S. military personnel killed and 20,660 wounded.³



An Army loadmaster peers over the ramp of a CH-47F Chinook while flying over Kabul in 2017. DoD photo.

Two decades on, the United States has little to show for it. The Taliban is now at its strongest point since 2001. They boast over 85,000 fighters and fully control approximately one fifth of Afghanistan,⁴ while contesting more than half of the country’s districts.⁵ The U.S has provided 75% of funding for the Afghanistan Security Forces and invested in training and equipment, yet Afghan army and police forces are still desperately dependent on foreign funding and lack the capacity to support themselves.⁶

the Taliban, Afghanistan continues to produce nearly 85% of the world’s illicit opium supply.⁷ Billions of dollars have been spent on development aid and assistance to Afghanistan since 2001, yet 90% of Afghans still live below the poverty line.⁸ Access to health services, education, and clean water remain limited, and 5.5 million people face emergency food insecurity.⁹ \$15.5 billion in reconstruction efforts were lost to fraud and corruption from 2008 to 2017 alone.¹⁰ Social conditions in the country remain dire as well. Gender-based violence against women and girls continues, especially in Taliban-controlled areas. Freedom of expression is severely restricted, and journalists and media workers are increasingly under threat.¹¹

Despite spending billions countering poppy cultivation and drug trafficking activities, a key source of revenue for

An end to American involvement in Afghanistan is finally in reach with an absolute deadline to withdraw all U.S. and NATO coalition forces by September 11th. However, the departure of foreign troops does not signify an end to Afghanistan’s decades-long conflict. Intra-Afghan negotiations are still underway, fighting continues between Afghan security forces and the Taliban, and Afghan civilians nervously await the fate of their country. This report provides a background of America’s full military withdrawal from Afghanistan, which began in 2020 with the Trump administration’s U.S.-Taliban Agreement. It then discusses the possible outcomes of Intra-Afghan Peace Negotiations and their implications for Afghan governance and security. Finally, this report analyzes the consequences of withdrawal which involve: Afghan governance and security, terrorism, regional dynamics, great power competition, human rights, humanitarian issues, and development.

The U.S.-Taliban Agreement

The United States and the Taliban signed a historic agreement in early 2020 establishing the foundation for ending America's 'forever war' in Afghanistan. The agreement, negotiated by the Trump administration, focused on reducing violence, withdrawing U.S. combat forces, kickstarting Intra-Afghan talks, and counterterrorism efforts by the Taliban.¹² However, a year later, the agreement has failed to materialize concrete results and Afghanistan remains embroiled in violence and instability.

America's disinterest in the war and haste to depart has resulted in lost leverage with the Taliban, particularly as the Taliban have exercised strategic patience. The U.S. eagerly followed through with its troop withdrawal calendar even though the Taliban have failed to meet several key conditions. According to the agreement, the Taliban will "not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qaeda to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies,"¹³ but they have failed to break ties with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Although the Taliban have technically participated in the Intra-Afghan Negotiations, their sincerity in reaching a political compromise with the Afghan government remains unclear. Furthermore, in the first three months of 2021, the Taliban increased attacks against Afghan civilians and organized large-scale offensives.¹⁴



U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad participates in a signing ceremony in Doha. State Department photo.

In April, President Biden shifted the original May 1st deadline established in the U.S.-Taliban Agreement by announcing the United States would withdraw all remaining troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. Soon after, NATO forces announced that all troops from the Resolute Support Mission would be withdrawn within a few months of May 1st.¹⁵ Biden asserted that the United States "would not conduct a hasty rush to the exit" from Afghanistan and would instead depart "responsibly, deliberately, and safely.... in full coordination with our allies and partners."¹⁶ In part, Biden's decision is a conditions-based response to the Taliban's failed compliance with the agreement's conditions. However, America's new deadline is absolute, and withdrawal appears to be no longer contingent on the Taliban's adherence to conditions outlined in the U.S-Taliban Agreement.

Intra-Afghan Negotiations

Intra-Afghan negotiations began in September 2020 with the goals of establishing a comprehensive peace settlement among Afghans. It took nearly three months for both parties to agree on the rules of procedures for the talks, with incompatible motives and priorities impeding substantive progress.¹⁷ Major negotiating issues include reducing violence and establishing a future governance structure for the Afghan state.¹⁸ The Afghan government insists that ending violence and preserving human life through a ceasefire must be prioritized. However, the Taliban remain determined to secure an agreement on the structure of the Afghan state before any ceasefire discussions begin.¹⁹ The Biden administration has insisted that it will put "full weight" into diplomatic effort to reach a peace agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Yet these diplomatic efforts have made little progress and risk fracturing Kabul's already fragile government. Furthermore, the Taliban are currently refusing to participate in any negotiations until the withdrawal of foreign forces is complete.²⁰

Simmering below the surface of the Intra-Afghan negotiations is the widening realization that the Taliban have the upper hand, and therefore have demonstrated little interest in the compromise or power-sharing, for which American negotiators have pressed. America's imminent withdrawal has weakened the Afghan government's leverage in negotiations and the Taliban have carried out successful military operations in rural areas, systematically encroached on large cities, and overtaken military bases.²¹ Following the missed U.S. deadline to withdraw troops on May 1st, the Taliban launched a major offensive in the southern Helmand province.²² In a recent speech, the Taliban's deputy leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani stated that "No mujahid ever thought that one day we would face such an improved state, or that we will crush the arrogance of the rebellious emperors and force them to admit their defeat at our hands. Fortunately, today, we and you are experiencing better circumstances."²³ Given the Taliban's upper hand, an analysis of possible outcomes in the Intra-Afghan negotiations is required.



The Intra-Afghan Negotiations in September 2020. State Department photo.

Possible Outcomes

1) A power-sharing agreement is reached, and an interim government is installed. Peace takes hold and the Afghan government remains stable.

Both the Afghan government and the Taliban agree to make concessions regarding a ceasefire and governance structure, and ultimately reach a political settlement. An interim government is established, and the Taliban enter some key positions in the administration. Human rights are protected under the Afghan constitution and international assistance continues. The Taliban and other political stakeholders formally end hostilities and work to establish a permanent system of government. This is by far the least likely scenario.

2) A power-sharing agreement is reached, but an interim government ultimately collapses and war with the Taliban ensues.

President Ghani's government is replaced with an interim administration while the Taliban and other political stakeholders attempt to establish a permanent system of government. Although a power-sharing agreement is ideal, its implementation will cause its own set of problems. There is no guarantee that a political settlement will be durable or enforceable, as the Taliban will have little incentive to comply with its terms in the absence of U.S. and NATO military pressure. It is likely that any power-sharing agreement will be exploited by the Taliban to seize power.

3) The Afghan government and Taliban are unable to reach a compromise. Negotiations are abandoned and war with the Taliban ensues.

Intra-Afghan negotiations remain stuck in a political stalemate for some time. Both the Afghan government and the Taliban refuse to make key compromises on the order of discussion regarding the topics of ceasefire and governance structure, and ultimately fail to reach a political settlement. It is also possible that political infighting could prevent Afghan leaders from rallying behind a single peace proposal. If President Ghani refuses to step down for the establishment of an interim government, and deep divisions between official and unofficial power brokers reach a breaking point, the Afghan state could collapse. Without a united front, the Afghan government would lose all bargaining power. Negotiations are abandoned and the Taliban carry out a full-blown offensive.

4) **The Taliban stall negotiations until the withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO troops.**

Because the U.S. has conceded its major leverage point without holding the Taliban accountable for agreement violations, the Taliban have little incentive to compromise on a political settlement with the Afghan government. The Taliban stall negotiations until a full withdrawal is complete by September 11th. From there, the militant group will likely carry out a full-blown military offensive against the weakened Afghan security forces and return to power through force.

Implications of Withdrawal

The conflict in Afghanistan will not end with the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO coalition forces. America's exit from Afghanistan will have profound implications on governance, Afghan security forces, terrorism, regional dynamics, great power competition, human rights, humanitarian issues, and development. The United States, as well as its partners and allies, must be prepared to deal with the consequences of withdrawal.

Afghan Governance and the ANDSF

The withdrawal of foreign troops and other sources of assistance will weaken the Afghan government and undermine capabilities of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in countering Taliban influence. The continuing risk of corruption in foreign funding to Afghanistan will damage government capacity, resulting in a loss of potential influence and legitimacy.²⁴ A weakened Afghan government will embolden the Taliban and increase the risk of state collapse.

The U.S.-led NATO advisory mission has improved the technological capabilities of the ANDSF but hasn't fully weaned its dependency on international advisors for critical support and sustainment functions. An assessment conducted by the Combating Terrorism Center, which analyzed the military force of Afghan security forces relative to the Taliban, concluded that a withdrawal of foreign troops would give the Taliban a slight military advantage over the ANDSF.²⁵ The Taliban control more territory than at any other time since 2001.²⁶ However, the presence of U.S. and NATO coalition forces has prevented the Taliban from gaining control of Afghanistan's largest cities, Kabul and Kandahar. After withdrawal, these cities are more likely to fall to the Taliban.

Terrorism

If the Taliban return to power, Afghanistan risks becoming a haven for international terrorists again. A non-conditions-based U.S. withdrawal is likely to empower terrorist and extremist groups who see U.S. withdrawal as a clear sign of victory.

Previous drawdowns in both Afghanistan and Iraq provide insight into the consequences of the United States' September 11th withdrawal. Former President Obama promised to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016, but the deadline emboldened the Taliban.²⁷ Similarly, the hasty withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq enabled ISIS to take over Mosul three years later in 2014.²⁸ In each scenario, miscalculated drawdowns undermined hard-won achievements in the fight against terrorism.

Without crucial human intelligence, surveillance and direct-action capabilities, the U.S. may lose the ability to closely monitor expansionist activity by various terror groups in Afghanistan.²⁹ An emboldened al-Qaeda or the Islamic State may be able to reconstitute, posing significant risks to Afghan civilians, neighboring countries, and the West.³⁰

Al-Qaeda

Prior to U.S. involvement in 2001, the Taliban provided refuge to al-Qaeda, which utilized the sanctuary to establish jihadist training camps in Afghanistan. Due to persistent counterterrorism efforts by international forces, al-Qaeda no longer enjoys its pre-9/11 strength. Yet the organization has proven its resilience and remains intent on directing attacks against the West, including the United States. Since 2015, much of al-Qaeda's central leadership is in Afghanistan and the organization enjoys allied support from the Pakistani Taliban, Terik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and various Central Asian armed groups. Al-Qaeda possesses significant weapons capabilities and remains politically cohesive, with the ability to organize in several significant regions across the country.³¹ Despite having pledged to break ties with terrorist groups in last year's agreement, the Taliban have maintained a close relationship with al-Qaeda³² and will likely expand ties after the withdrawal of international forces.

ISIS

The Islamic State in Afghanistan has suffered substantial military losses and has become politically fragmented. Though on the decline, ISIS continues to carry out brutal attacks against Afghan civilians in major cities.³³ The Taliban have directly benefitted from the Afghan Islamic State's losses by acquiring territory previously under ISIS control and recruiting defecting ISIS factions.³⁴ The withdrawal of U.S. military and intelligence personnel will hinder monitoring capabilities that are crucial to gauging the Islamic State's threat.

Regional Dynamics and Great Power Competition

The withdrawal of Western troops, and subsequent security vacuum, will have a significant impact on regional security. The relative stability western troops have been able to bring to Afghanistan has caused significant collective action problems regarding development and counterterrorism assistance. Afghanistan's neighbors will be forced to fill security gaps left by the withdrawal of US and NATO forces. Furthermore, Afghanistan's geo-strategic location serves as a division of power between China, Iran, Russia, India, and Pakistan.³⁵ In the international coalition's absence, Afghanistan could become a playing field for great power rivalries.

China

China's priority concern in Afghanistan is the spillover of insecurity and radicalization. Specifically, Beijing remains concerned that Afghanistan will become a haven for Uyghur separatists and threaten stability in the Xinjiang province.³⁶ In 2018, China assisted the Afghan military with the construction of a mountain brigade in the north. In 2019, China built a military base for its own use in Tajikistan near the Wakhan Corridor, a strategic route connecting Afghanistan to China.³⁷ It is likely that China will expand military infrastructure in Afghanistan and further assist Afghan security forces once international forces make their exit. China has long expressed support for the Taliban to be included in the Afghan government, under the assumption that the Taliban will eventually come to power.³⁸

As Afghanistan's largest foreign economic investor, Beijing's economic opportunity in the country relies heavily on peace and security.³⁹ Chinese companies have won various mine and oil field contracts, and are waiting until Afghanistan stabilizes and U.S. forces withdraw to begin conducting their economic operations.⁴⁰ China has also expressed interest in integrating Afghanistan into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive infrastructure project, to further connect Central Asia.⁴¹

Iran

Throughout the Intra-Afghan peace process Tehran has adopted the policy of “strategic hedging” to protect its interests in Afghanistan.⁴² Although Iran and the Taliban have not historically aligned, changing circumstances have improved relations and led to the development of a tactical alliance.⁴³ Simultaneously, Tehran won support from Afghanistan’s Tajik and Hazara populations. By maintaining good relations with both the Afghan government and Taliban, Iran has prepared itself for a variety of outcomes.

Iran aims to quell the spillover of insecurity and violence from Afghanistan over the two countries’ shared border. Although both countries align in their interests of establishing a stable Afghanistan, Tehran perceives America’s military presence as a threat in its “backyard”.⁴⁴ With international forces gone, Iran will likely intervene more heavily in Afghan affairs.

Russia

Russia has a tumultuous history of involvement with Afghanistan. The 1979 Soviet-Afghan war resulted in a humiliating military defeat to an Islamist guerrilla force, backed by the U.S. and Pakistan, and left post-Soviet Russia wary of future involvement with Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Yet since the withdrawal of combat forces by the U.S. and NATO in 2014, Russia has increased its engagement in the Afghan conflict.

Moscow’s primary motivation in Afghanistan is to address the security threat to its southern flank. Russia remains concerned of ISIS-Khorasan Province’s (ISKP) growing influence in Afghanistan, as well as the spread of opium and other narcotics from Afghanistan into Central Asia.⁴⁶ Secondly, Moscow aims to actively fight against U.S. interests in a type of zero-sum strategy. Russia views Afghanistan as an arena of competition with the West and will likely expand its geopolitical interests in the region once U.S. and NATO forces make a complete withdrawal.

Since Intra-Afghan negotiations began Moscow has maintained relations with a variety of stakeholders to ensure a leading role in any post-conflict political settlement. Despite Russia’s historic opposition to the militant group, the Kremlin has established ties with the Taliban in recent years to counter ISKP.⁴⁷ There is evidence that Moscow has financially supported Taliban violence and developed cross border weapons supply networks with the militant group.⁴⁸ Building a cooperative relationship with the Taliban and other political parties will ensure that Moscow’s interests are secured in a post-U.S. Afghanistan.

India-Pakistan Rivalry

With NATO forces out of the way, India and Pakistan may intensify their competition for influence in Afghanistan. Both countries have significant stakes in Afghanistan, as its stabilization is integral to regional security in South Asia. India is the largest regional contributor of development assistance to Afghanistan and aims to cultivate relations with the country as a natural gas partner and ally against Pakistani Islamic militants.⁴⁹ Pakistan is largely focused on undermining India’s influence in Afghanistan and growing the influence of the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), Pakistan’s national intelligence agency which has known links to the Taliban’s Haqqani network.⁵⁰ In the absence of U.S. and NATO forces, Pakistan will likely increase its influence in Afghanistan due to established ties with the Taliban.⁵¹ India’s recent decision to revoke Kashmir’s semi-autonomous special status has escalated tensions, and Pakistan could retaliate through intensified proxy violence in Afghanistan.

Human Rights

While there is certainly more work to be done, human rights in Afghanistan have drastically improved since the Taliban's ousting in 2001. Afghanistan's 2004 constitution incorporates democratic ideals and recognizes a wide range of universal civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights under international law.⁵² Though not always enforced or implemented in practice, human rights laws have provided a crucial foundation for Afghans to recognize their rights and advocate for change. The status of human rights in Afghanistan depends heavily on the intensity of violence and the strength of an Intra-Afghan political settlement, if one can be reached. A Taliban take-over will likely erode hard-fought gains in human rights—specifically those of women and girls, minority groups, and free-speech—that have allowed Afghans to enjoy greater freedoms and quality of life.

Rights for Women and Girls

During the 1990s, the Taliban imposed severe restrictions on Afghan women's access to healthcare, education, and jobs.⁵³ Women were forbidden from working outside of the home, attending school, and leaving their homes without a male chaperone. Laws were brutally enforced by the “religious police” through public beatings, arrests, and executions.⁵⁴ Members of the Taliban regime perpetrated crimes of murder, rape, kidnapping, and forced marriage on a regular basis.⁵⁵

The Taliban's behavior towards woman has softened over the years and is enforced differently across provinces and districts under its control.⁵⁶ Although the Taliban claim they no longer oppose girls' education, most leaders

do not allow girls to attend school past puberty, and some have outright prohibited girls' schools. However, Taliban authorities in some districts have been more flexible when local demand for education is high.⁵⁷



The Taliban have expressed their commitment to “upholding and guaranteeing all rights of women afforded to them by Islamic law”.⁵⁸ Yet if the Taliban return to power in Afghanistan, women and girls will likely face increased gender-based discrimination and violence. A non-conditions-based withdrawal leaves the Afghan government with little leverage to protect the rights and privileges of women and girls in Afghanistan.

Girls studying at a middle school in Jalalabad. UNHCR photo.

Minority Rights

The Taliban have historically persecuted ethnic and religious minorities and specifically targeted the Shi'a Hazaras, Afghanistan's most persecuted religious minority group. Hazaras constitute approximately 9% of the Afghan population and have endured systematic discrimination, targeted violence, and displacement by the Taliban for decades.⁵⁹ After seizing control of Mazar-e-Sharif in 1996, the Taliban declared jihad and systematically killed thousands of Hazaras.⁶⁰

In recent years, the Taliban have attempted to diversify its support base and increase its influence among Afghanistan's minority religious and ethnic groups to transform its global reputation, establish itself as a legitimate leader, and undermine the Afghan government's authority.⁶¹ Despite fronting itself as inclusive, the Taliban maintain an exclusionary stance on religious freedoms, refusing to recognize the liberty of Shia Muslims and other minority groups. In negotiations, the Taliban have insisted on adopting the Hanafi school of Sunni jurisprudence in Afghanistan's legislative system. Establishing Hanafi jurisprudence into law would exclude Afghan Shia Muslims and members of other religious minorities such as Sikhs and Hindus.⁶² In addition, the presence of foreign Islamic extremist groups in Afghanistan have led to a rise in attacks against religious minorities. Without protection from U.S. and NATO counterterrorism activities, religious minorities will be increasingly targeted by groups like the Islamic State.⁶³

Freedom of Expression

Targeted attacks and intimidation of journalists, media workers, and activists have been used to silence critics and undermine prospects of an open society in Afghanistan.⁶⁴ The Taliban have said they support freedom of speech "within the framework of Islamic principles and national interests."⁶⁵ In the absence of international protection, Afghans will experience increased censorship of information and critics of the Taliban will be violently suppressed.

Humanitarian Issues and Development

The U.S. will most likely discontinue robust development assistance if the Taliban take hold of power in Afghanistan. Total international withdrawal from Afghanistan will likely be followed by a reduction in foreign assistance and subsequent civil war, further deteriorating an already dire humanitarian situation and undermining development progress.

Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis is due to decades of conflict and insecurity. Afghanistan has the second largest refugee population in the world,⁶⁶ and four million people are internally displaced.⁶⁷ Foreign withdrawal will likely lead to state collapse and a renewed civil war. Subsequent violence and civilian casualties could result in a mass exodus of Afghan refugees and migrants to neighboring countries.⁶⁸



An Afghan refugee child rests on packed tents at a camp in Greece. UNHCR photo.

Economic growth has been constrained by protracted insecurity, and since the drawdown of U.S. and coalition forces in 2014 annual GDP growth has failed to rise above 3%. Over half the population live below the poverty line.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Afghanistan remains heavily dependent on foreign development assistance and humanitarian aid. Nearly 80% of the government's public expenditures are financed by donor grants, and U.S. reconstruction efforts have totaled \$143 billion.⁷⁰

Mounting violence has escalated Afghanistan's brain drain as the country's young and educated seek safer futures abroad. 2021 has seen a campaign of assassinations in Kabul targeting journalists, civil servants, judges, and activists⁷¹—the backbone of Afghanistan's democratic reforms and development progress over the past two decades. The mass exodus of qualified citizens and future leaders will further weaken the Afghan government's chance of survival.

The withdrawal of coalition troops will cause a reduction in foreign assistance, which experts have warned could be highly destabilizing.⁷² Cuts in donor support to Afghanistan have already begun. The 2021 aggregate donor pledge to Afghanistan decreased by 13% compared to 2016-2020, with America's pledge being slashed by a quarter.⁷³ As the U.S. further decreases its security and economic assistance to Afghanistan, other countries are unlikely to fill funding gaps.

Donors are wary of their funding being swallowed up by corruption—a pressing issue in Afghanistan. Nearly \$19 billion in U.S. assistance to Afghanistan was lost to corruption from 2008 to 2019.⁷⁴ The withdrawal of military and civilian personnel from DoD, State, and USAID will weaken the oversight capabilities for U.S. funded programs, grants, and contracts.⁷⁵ A greater percentage of funds will be processed by the Afghan government, which could involve the Taliban if a power-sharing agreement is reached.

Recommendations

1) **Protect remaining assets and establish clear guidelines for evacuation.**

As Afghanistan's security situation unravels, the U.S. must protect its embassy and diplomatic personnel from attacks. Weakened Afghan security forces may fail to protect the U.S. Embassy in Kabul following the withdrawal of foreign troops. Boosting security and increasing the Embassy's Marine detachment may be necessary to ensure the safety of American diplomats in Afghanistan. Stand-by forces and equipment would help ensure a safe emergency evacuation.

2) **Safeguard America's allies in-country.**

The U.S. must protect America's allies in-country who will be increasingly targeted by the Taliban. The Biden administration should raise the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) cap further and dedicate more resources to processing SIV applicants before the September 11th withdrawal deadline.⁷⁶ Over the past two decades members of the current Afghan government, interpreters, and civil society groups have risked their lives assisting the U.S. in a variety of functions. In the absence of U.S. and NATO troops the Taliban will likely increase its systematic targeting and killing of these local allies. Honoring our commitments by protecting local allies maintains America's credibility and ensures the trust of future partnerships.

3) **Maintain a rapid reaction force for emergency situations.**

Key concerns of U.S. and NATO troop withdrawal stem from the loss of on-the-ground intelligence, surveillance, and direct-action capabilities that would leave the U.S. blindsided in Afghanistan. A rapid reaction force (RRF), based in a neighboring country, would help respond to developing threats before they become serious crises. The U.S. could continue its counterterrorism commitment and prevent terrorist groups from regrouping through a limited armed military force. An RRF would allow the U.S. to conduct counterterror or other military operations in Afghanistan on a case-by-case basis, rather than resuming a full-fledged war with indefinite military commitments. The U.S. should work with countries in the region to assure the ability to bring such a force to bear on critical threats. Securing basing rights to host an RRF may be difficult, as evidenced by Pakistan's recent refusal to host American counter-terror forces.⁷⁷

4) Continue targeted assistance to the Afghan Government and strengthen oversight capabilities to prevent corruption.

Any post-settlement peace process will require sustained donor support. The U.S. should continue to provide development assistance to the Afghan government in order to prevent state failure and the backsliding of progress. Conditions-based development serves as a crucial point of leverage in Afghanistan, and U.S. diplomatic engagement must stress that if the Taliban want international recognition and aid, they must live up to their commitments regarding anti-terrorism and human rights. In addition, the U.S. must be assertive and targeted in its oversight of assistance to prevent fraud and corruption. A report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction highlighted the need for future funding agreements to include “complete transparency and access, measurable and verifiable benchmarks with tangible outcomes, periodic reassessment of funding goals and Afghanistan’s needs, and high-level political buy-in from all sides.”⁷⁸ Holding future funding agreements to these standards will be critical to ensure U.S. taxpayer dollars are not wasted.



A U.S. military advisor on mission in Afghanistan. U.S. Army photo.

The Afghanistan Partnership Framework (APF) of the 2020 donor conference stressed the need for a comprehensive and long-term anti-corruption strategy.⁷⁹ Although the Framework articulated specific conditions necessary for continued international assistance, it did not outline financial consequences for the Afghan government if these anti-corruption measures fail to materialize. The APF serves as a foundation for anti-corruption efforts, but more must be done to hold the Afghan government accountable for systemic corruption. Developing increasingly targeted programs, grants, and contracts can help overcome collective action problems and provide clearer lines of accountability.

Additionally, NATO has indicated it wishes to continue training members of the Afghan military at a location outside of the country.⁸⁰ This effort is laudable, but is likely to face challenges in terms of security, transportation logistics, capacity, and an increasing probability of desertion. NATO should prepare for these eventualities.

5) Develop contingency plans with current partners and neighboring countries.

Afghanistan’s instability—whether it be a mass outflow of refugees, terrorist threats, increased drug trafficking, great power competition, or proxy conflicts—will be destabilizing for neighboring countries. Working with Afghanistan’s neighbors and NATO allies will be crucial to ensuring security threats do not spread across borders. A U.S. or NATO military base should be established in one of Afghanistan’s neighboring countries, possibly Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan, to sustain rapid reaction and air force capabilities. Central Asia has a complicated history hosting Western troops. U.S. and NATO forces occupied bases in Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan from 2001-2014 during the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan. However, Russian and Chinese influence soured relations and ultimately forced U.S. and NATO troops from Uzbek and Kazakh bases. Central Asian governments are concerned that the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops will embolden domestic terrorist groups and threaten border security and may be more open to hosting U.S. and NATO troops in the future. Despite currently poor relations, the U.S. and NATO should hold discussions with Russia to deconflict counter-terror policy and address mutual threats emanating from within Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan will have profound implications which the United States, along with its partners and allies, must be prepared to deal with. A non-conditions-based withdrawal deadline has weakened the Afghan government's negotiating power, and the Taliban will likely have an upper hand in all possible outcomes of the Intra-Afghan negotiations. An already fragile Afghan government will lose legitimacy, and the capacity of Afghan security forces will be severely weakened. In the absence of Western troops, Afghanistan risks again becoming a haven for international terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Furthermore, the country could become a playing field for great power competition among China, Russia, Iran and escalate tensions between India and Pakistan. Hard-fought gains in human rights—specifically those of women and girls, minority groups, and free-speech—will likely be lost if the Taliban return to power. Foreign assistance to Afghanistan may decrease, and mounting insecurity will further threaten an already dire humanitarian situation and undermine development progress. It is therefore crucial that the United States protect remaining assets and establish clear guidelines for evacuation, safeguard America's allies in-country, maintain a rapid reaction force, continue targeted assistance to the Afghan Government while strengthening oversight capabilities, and develop contingency plans with partners and neighboring countries.

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