DEFENSE & SECURITY

Withdrawal of US Military from Afghanistan: Risks and Responses

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The withdrawal of US military from Afghanistan has been on the presidents' agenda over the last decade. The decision to actually do so, however, has been delayed multiple times because of the U.S. concerns about a resilient Taliban insurgency and the inability of the Afghan government to maintain security in the country. Near the end of the Trump administration, however, action seemed imminent when the administration stated it had reached an agreement with the Taliban to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan by May 2021. That deadline was not met though on April 13, President Joe Biden announced his plans for the unconditional withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, and a pledge to end the "endless" war against the Taliban.

The context and timing of Biden's decision, however, present risks and challenges that should not be ignored or taken lightly. Here we assess the risks and challenges associated with the withdrawal decision and recommend policies that could help the United States meet its strategic goals in Afghanistan.

Risk 1: The Taliban will take the withdrawal as a victory against the United States and use it as leverage to expand its control and increase its pressure in civic life.

The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the U.S. military presence that followed have been ineffective in defeating the Taliban and preventing the insurgency. Taliban still holds remarkable military and political power, controls a large swath of territory, and actively engages in violence across more than two thirds of Afghan provinces, targeting both Afghan military forces and civilians. There is no doubt that the quick withdrawal of U.S. military forces

will boost the Taliban's morale and mobilize its militants and supporters as the Taliban has been fighting for two decades to remove international forces from Afghan soil. Taliban has already made rapid and mounting territorial gains since the withdrawal decision in May. As of late June, Taliban control one-third of districts nationwide.

Furthermore, while the choice of the 20th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks as the deadline for the withdrawal has symbolic meaning for many Americans, the Taliban will view the departure of U.S. troops as a victory over the enemy and will be emboldened to pursue the establishment of an Islamist state and the imposition of strict enforcement of Sharia law. A Taliban takeover of the government also puts at risk the successful completion of intra-Afghan governing negotiations. Should negotiations fail, the Afghan government will be severely weakened, armed militia groups loyal to strong national warlords will step up their efforts to mobilize against the Taliban, and the country will be plunged into chaos.

Policy Recommendation 1: Increase support for the Afghan government.

The United States should have a specific plan to counter the Taliban's claim of victory and ensure that Afghan warlords on the government's side. The United States should approach the withdrawal as a tactical move rather than a strategic one and allocate its resources to diplomacy and capacity building to increase the legitimacy of the Afghan government and bolster the Afghan people's trust in their country's leaders. The United States should change its role from guardian to mentor and help the Afghan government develop the state capacity it needs to stand against the Taliban. As the Afghan government sees its efforts to build a sustainable security apparatus succeed, it will find renewed self-confidence, pride, and motivation to wage their fight against the Taliban.

Risk 2: Afghanistan will turn into a haven for terrorists.

Afghanistan has been a war zone for four decades, and it has been experiencing the highest number of terrorist incidents worldwide for two years. The withdrawal of U.S. troops eliminates one of the most effective bargaining powers and leverage the United States has over the Taliban. The Taliban will fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of U.S. troops and take advantage of a golden opportunity to control of more territory in Afghanistan and create

sanctuaries for their members and allies, including al-Qaeda.

Policy Recommendation 2: Use a multifaceted approach to reducing the risk of Afghanistan becoming a haven for terrorist.

The United States should address the risk of creating a terrorist haven in multiple ways. First, the United States should support efforts by the Afghan military to recruit skilled and dedicated officers, provide appropriate training and resources for the recruits, and help the Afghan government provide a stable income for security officials. The attainment of these goals will help the Afghan military to effectively fight against the Taliban. Second, the United States should help Afghanistan's security and law enforcement forces to adopt a more community-oriented approach to their work and to develop narratives and the means of ensuring the well-being of the Afghan people. The adoption of a service-oriented approach that takes into account public expectations and trust should enable the Afghan government to be more effective in dealing with the factors that entice ordinary citizens to embrace extremism.

The concern that al-Qaeda will gain power and launch an attack in the United States is not baseless—even though the U.S. government has been effective in targeting and weakening al-Qaeda factions in Afghanistan. The consistent pressure from the U.S. military and Special Forces has resulted in the killing of many al-Qaeda leaders. The surveillance and extrajudicial killings of al-Qaeda leaders have disrupted al-Qaeda's organizational capacity. Another critical nuance is that although the Taliban has provided sanctuary for al-Qaeda, it has not been a strong supporter of the 9/11 and similar attacks on the United States. Overall, al-Qaeda's capacity to target the U.S. homeland has diminished significantly over time. As U.S. troops leave the region, the United States should coordinate with global intelligence organizations and act with locals to pursue al-Qaeda.

Diplomacy is the key. The United States should incentivize the Afghan government and the Taliban to remain engaged in the peace process and reach a negotiated settlement. While working with the Afghan government, the United States should seek reliable and strategic stabilization partners from the United Nations, the European Union, and nongovernmental organizations to provide services—including health care, education, and

food—to help stabilize the country. In a broader sense, the United States should translate its military power into political power and thereby mitigate the chance that Russia and China will fill the void.

Risk 3: Human and economic catastrophe and the lack of government legitimacy will motivate more Afghan people to join or support the Taliban and other extremist groups.

By any measure, Afghanistan is in the throes of an economic and social catastrophe. The Afghan people struggle daily with extremely high unemployment, a dismal economy, a deficient health-care system, and a variety of social challenges. The Afghan government itself is in dire financial straits, relying as it does on aid and grants from other countries and organizations for 75% of the money it spends each year, according to the World Bank 2019 report. In light of widespread government corruption, the Afghan people have lost confidence in their leaders. The abuse of power by local police and pro-government non-state militia groups also has dramatically undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan government.

Policy Recommendation 3: Enhance sustainable monetary resources and diplomatic incentives that can be used to improve living conditions in Afghanistan.

The United States should enhance sustainable monetary resources and diplomatic incentives that will enable the Afghan government to improve the living conditions of the Afghan people. Over the last decade, however, the U.S. government has gradually decreased the amount of civilian aid it sends to Afghanistan. The Biden administration, however, has promised to increase aid to Afghan government by $300 million. The increase in financial assistance is welcome, but the amount is too little to compensate the loss of U.S. leverage over the Afghan government after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country.

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Figure 1 – The US Foreign Aid to Afghanistan in Constant Dollars (The years 2020 and 2021 are partially reported) by USAID.gov June, 2021

The U.S. government should take whatever measures are necessary to ensure that monetary aid from the United States and other sponsors is not used to fuel corruption and party

patronage and that such funding is used instead to support democratic institutions and further the education of Afghan children. The monetary aid should come with strict conditions related to the competency, accountability, and integrity of the persons and institutions responsible for administering the financial assistance. A reliable and consistent monitoring system may be to ensure that the aid money and the services provided with those funds reach the intended recipients.

Beyond monetary aid to the Afghan government, the United States should consider reaching out to the Afghan people directly by providing financial assistance to the country's entrepreneurs and businesspeople. A thriving business community would play a key role in establishing government legitimacy in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has a considerable amount of natural resources—not only copper and iron but also lithium, one of the rarest minerals in the world and one that is used extensively in the high-technology industry. When the Afghan government can manage its resources, provide services, and offer loans to investors, support for the Afghan government—from the Afghan people and countries around the world—will grow exponentially.

The Afghan people do not need a guardian to help them find the right path forward or tell them how to and deal with the issues they face. What they do need is genuine a support from the United States and other countries for building a legitimate and sustainable government. It is time for the Biden administration to show that the United States cares about the future of Afghanistan and the Afghan people.

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