

# Reality in Afghanistan: Securing America's Interests

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

While the U.S. government is right to pursue a negotiated settlement to the Afghan conflict, it must abide by a set of realistic principles and firm red lines.

The top U.S. goals in Afghanistan are to empower the Afghan government to maintain its own security and prevent the country from becoming a terrorist safe haven.

Any politically driven timeline for U.S. troop withdrawal would be a grave strategic error, with long-term negative consequences for both Afghanistan and the U.S.

As part of an effort to bring 40 years of wars—in which the U.S. has been involved for 18 years—to an end in Afghanistan, there have now been eight rounds of direct talks between the U.S. and the Taliban. While the U.S. government is right to pursue a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan, progress has been painfully slow. To date, the Taliban have refused to engage in direct talks with the Afghan government, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently suggested that he had been ordered by the President to draw down U.S. forces by the November 2020 elections—comments he has since walked back.<sup>1</sup>

Any timeline for a U.S. troop withdrawal divorced from the realities on the ground and driven by politics would be a grave strategic error. So, too, would be a bad deal with the Taliban, or one that does not directly involve the Afghan government. Any of these

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scenarios would have long-term negative consequences for the people of Afghanistan and for U.S. interests in the region.

As the U.S. continues negotiations with the Taliban, it must abide by a set of realistic principles and firm red lines, which include: better communication and coordination with the Afghan government, drawing a clear red line around the issue of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups operating on Afghan soil, refraining from announcing a timeline for a complete troop withdrawal unless a final deal is reached that includes the Afghan government, and making direct Taliban–Afghan government negotiations the U.S. government’s top priority.

## Strategic Interests

The number one goal of the U.S. in Afghanistan is to create the conditions in which the Afghan government is capable of maintaining its own internal security and preventing the country from once again becoming a safe haven for terrorists without the need for a large foreign troop presence.

Most of the criticism of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan today derives from a misunderstanding about the current mission there. It is no longer a major U.S.-led combat operation, but a mission designed to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).

The situation today in Afghanistan bears little resemblance to 2001, when the U.S. invaded and ousted the Taliban, or to 2009, when President Barack Obama announced a surge in force levels, which peaked at more than 100,000 troops.

Today, there is a relatively small contingent of about 14,000 U.S. troops—the vast majority of whom are training and mentoring the ANDSF. A small number of these troops conduct high-end special operations to target senior Taliban leadership, remnants of al-Qaeda, and the nascent Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K), but these missions are the exception rather than the rule.

There is also a major difference in America’s financial commitment. At the peak of U.S. involvement in 2011, the U.S. government was spending \$120 billion a year.<sup>2</sup> In its fiscal year 2020 budget request, the Department of Defense “identified \$18.6 billion in direct war costs”<sup>3</sup> in Afghanistan. That is less than two months of spending at 2011 levels.

In many ways, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan is the type of “train and advise” mission that America conducts in numerous countries around the world.

## Not Losing

The Taliban has also changed. Today, the group is nothing like the Taliban that won the Afghan civil war in 1996, seizing major cities like Kandahar and Kabul with tanks and military aircraft. By the time of the U.S. invasion in 2001, the Taliban was firmly in control of all major road networks and all major population centers, including the capital city. The situation is very different today.

In the past 18 years of war, the Taliban has never threatened Kabul. Only twice has it seized a provincial capital (Kunduz in 2015, and Ghazni in 2018), and in each case it was incapable of holding the city for more than a few days. What the Taliban *has* proven adept at is killing civilians and security forces with suicide attacks and roadside bombs. Sadly, U.S. commentators have come to treat every tactical victory of the Taliban as symbolic of America's strategic defeat.

The reality is far more nuanced and complex: a state of conflict in which the Taliban is incapable of toppling the Afghan government, but the Afghan government is incapable of completely eliminating the Taliban, which continues to enjoy safe haven in neighboring Pakistan. Unless there is a legitimate breakthrough in peace talks or a change in the mindset of the Pakistani government, this is likely where Afghanistan will remain for the foreseeable future. This is not defeat. It is the cold reality.

## Protecting America's Interests

As the U.S. proceeds with direct negotiations with the Taliban, it must abide by a set of realistic guidelines. The U.S. must:

- **Understand that no deal is better than a bad deal.** A bad deal with the Taliban, or a deal that does not involve the Afghan government, might be politically expedient for the next U.S. presidential election cycle, but it will have bad long-term consequences.
- **Communicate better with Afghan partners.** The Afghan government has understandable fears about being sidelined in U.S. negotiations with the Taliban. The frustration in Kabul has been palpable over the lack of coordination with stakeholders in Kabul. This not only risks undermining trust in Afghan–U.S. relations, it signals to the Taliban that there is discord in bilateral ties that can be exploited for political benefit.

- **Ensure that any final settlement is negotiated between, and agreed to by, the Afghan government and the Taliban.** Getting these two parties to the negotiating table should be the top priority for the U.S. government at this stage. Only by sitting down for direct talks with the Afghan government can the Taliban demonstrate that it is truly serious about a negotiated peace settlement. The Taliban's continued refusal to do so would signal a great deal to Washington about the group's commitment to peace talks and ultimate intentions.
- **Refrain from making any final decision on a full U.S. and international troop withdrawal, or the future of the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission, at this stage in talks.** No final decision on a full withdrawal of U.S. forces should be made until after there is an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. A decision on such an important matter can only be made jointly by both parties.
- **Ensure that any small and immediate troop reduction is carried out in a responsible way.** It has been reported<sup>4</sup> that as part of the initial deal to get the Taliban to meet with the Afghan government, the U.S. is willing to agree to a partial drawdown of U.S. forces. It would be reasonable to withdraw a small portion of U.S. or international forces, as long as the following conditions are met: (1) progress is being made with direct talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government; (2) the drawdown leads to a nationwide ceasefire that includes both Afghan and foreign militaries and all civilians; (3) the number of troops withdrawn does not fall below the troop levels in August 2017, when President Trump announced his new strategy; and (4) the withdrawn forces remain in the broader region at a level of readiness that allows them to return to Afghanistan quickly in the event that the Taliban's talks with the Afghan government collapse or if the ceasefire breaks down. If talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban proceed in good faith, and the two reach a negotiated settlement, further and more permanent troop reductions can be considered.
- **Draw a firm red line around the presence of Al-Qaeda or other transnational terrorist groups in Afghanistan, while ensuring that the U.S. is able to continue to meet its counterterrorism objectives there.** In any final settlement, the U.S. must be allowed to meet its counterterrorism objectives in Afghanistan. This will

probably mean leaving a residual force somewhere in the country. Under no circumstances can the Taliban allow Al-Qaeda and other transnational terrorists groups to operate freely in Afghanistan. The Taliban has ostensibly already offered such a pledge in return for a future U.S. withdrawal of troops, but as the old—and proven—adage goes: Trust, but verify. The Taliban must demonstrate through actions, not words, that it has severed all links to transnational jihadist groups.

- **Let Afghans decide their country's future.** However tempting it might be for U.S. policymakers to weigh in on any future power-sharing arrangement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, it must leave the most contentious issues—such as prisoner exchanges and possible amnesty—to the Afghan parties, and the Afghan people, to resolve peacefully.

## A Dose of Realism Needed

Even if a settlement is negotiated between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the U.S. must temper its expectations with a dose of realism. Regardless of the outcome, it is likely that some form of insurgency will persist in the Pashtun heartland, the Taliban's base of power. Just as victory is not defined by the complete absence of violence, the continuation of some form of hostilities does not represent failure or defeat. It simply reflects the ground realities of a country stricken by conflict for more than four decades. Numerous countries in the region, including India, have struggled against enduring domestic insurgencies for decades.

If a deal is brokered, peace in Afghanistan will still not be pretty. The Taliban and its allies will likely be empowered in areas where they were battling U.S. troops years before. Deals will be struck and allegiances will be forged with unpalatable warlords and factions whose loyalties shift with the changing of the tide. This is not defeat. This is reality in a deeply tribal society ravaged by war.

## Learning the Lessons

In the 1990s, the international community turned its back on a war-torn Afghanistan, allowing the country to become a hub for international terrorism. America's precipitous withdrawal from Iraq post-2011 had similarly disastrous results. The U.S. must learn from, and avoid repeating, the mistakes of the past.

A capable ANDSF and a legitimate political settlement with the Taliban led by the Afghan government is the country's best hope for success—and America's best hope for regional stability. Unfortunately, that outcome is now dependent on the Taliban's willingness and commitment to negotiate in good faith with the Afghan government. In recent months there have been some encouraging signs, but past history leaves a great deal of room for skepticism.

Regardless of the outcome of intra-Afghan negotiations, the U.S. decision on troop withdrawals must be dictated by U.S. national interests and conditions on the ground, not an artificial political timetable.

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## Endnotes

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2. David Rogers, "Pentagon Seeks \$120B in War Funds," *Politico*, January 7, 2011, <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/01/pentagon-seeks-120b-in-war-funds-047206> (accessed August 2, 2019).
3. Congressional Research Service, "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief," updated August 1, 2019, p.11, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf> (accessed August 2, 2019).
4. Dan Lamothe, John Hudson, and Pamela Constable, "U.S. Preparing to Withdraw Thousands of Troops from Afghanistan in Initial Deal with Taliban," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-preparing-to-withdraw-thousands-of-troops-from-afghanistan-in-initial-deal-with-taliban/2019/08/01/01e97126-b3ac-11e9-8f6c-7828e68cb15f\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.778366383a49](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-preparing-to-withdraw-thousands-of-troops-from-afghanistan-in-initial-deal-with-taliban/2019/08/01/01e97126-b3ac-11e9-8f6c-7828e68cb15f_story.html?utm_term=.778366383a49) (accessed August 2, 2019).