

# The Biden Administration Must Provide Clarity on Its Approach to Afghanistan

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

One year after the U.S. and Taliban signed an agreement to start a political process to end the war in Afghanistan, progress is limited and security is fragile.

About 2,500 U.S. troops are still deployed in Afghanistan to train and advise the ANDSF and conduct high-end special operations against top terrorist targets.

The Biden Administration needs to move swiftly to craft a clear approach to the Afghanistan conflict and ensure a responsible plan for any future troop withdrawals.

One year after the U.S. and the Taliban signed an agreement in the Qatari capital of Doha to pave the way for a reduction in Taliban violence and a potential reduction in U.S. troop presence,<sup>1</sup> progress on intra-Afghan talks remains limited, and the security situation remains fragile. The agreement called for a phased reduction of U.S. forces from Afghanistan with a deadline for a complete U.S. withdrawal by May 2021. In return, the Taliban committed to reducing its levels of violence in the country and engaging in meaningful intra-Afghan talks with the Afghan government.

However, the Taliban have continued violent attacks on Afghan targets, and talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban have stalled. International observers remain concerned that the talks could collapse altogether. Against this backdrop, troop reductions initiated by the outgoing Trump Administration removed all but 2,500 U.S. soldiers from Afghanistan.

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The Biden Administration needs to move swiftly to establish a clear strategy and principles to govern its approach to the war in Afghanistan. As negotiations enter a critical period and the U.S. May withdrawal deadline looms large, the Administration should conduct a detailed and speedy review assessing to which degree the Taliban are meeting their commitments and, until that assessment is complete, freeze all further U.S. troop withdrawals.

The Administration should consult closely with the Afghan government at every step of the process. If a determination is made to reduce troops further, the Administration must ensure that the reduction is conducted in a responsible way that provides for long-term U.S. support to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and continues the progress made on connecting Afghanistan to the broader region through economic and trade integration initiatives.

## Increased Violence

General Scott Miller, the commander of U.S. forces and the NATO-led non-combat Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan recently told the media that “Taliban violence is much higher than historical norms,” and that “[i]t just doesn’t create the conditions to move forward in what is hopefully a historic turning point for Afghanistan.”<sup>2</sup>

So far, the Biden Administration has not given many clues to how it will approach the unfolding stalemate. Antony Blinken, the new U.S. Secretary of State, announced that the Administration is reviewing the agreement made last year to determine whether the Taliban are meeting their commitments. Moreover, U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad will remain in his position. Beyond that, details are scarce.

## U.S. Strategic Interests

Most of the domestic criticism of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan today derives from a misunderstanding about the current mission. It is no longer a major U.S.-led combat operation, but a mission primarily designed to train, advise, and assist the ANDSF. The secondary mission is to conduct limited counterterrorism strikes and operations in partnership with the 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, a contingent of about 2,500 U.S. troops is deployed to Afghanistan—the vast majority of whom are training and mentoring the ANDSF. A small subset 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). These missions are the exception rather than the rule. In many ways, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan now more closely resembles the type of “train and advise” missions that America conducts in numerous countries around the world.

## Four Long-Term U.S. Goals in Afghanistan

U.S. long-term goals in Afghanistan can be summed up with “four S’s”:

**1. A Stable Afghanistan.** The main goal of the U.S. and international community in Afghanistan, if nothing else is achieved there, should be to create a security environment that is stable enough to allow the Afghan government to maintain internal security without the assistance of thousands of foreign troops. At a minimum, that includes preventing the country from once again becoming a safe haven for terrorism as it was under Taliban rule in the 1990s.

**2. A Self-Reliant Afghanistan.** Afghanistan has been the recipient of hundreds of billions of dollars in international aid. To date, this aid has been a necessity, and it is likely that Afghanistan will require varying forms of international assistance for the foreseeable future. However, the current financial commitments, including from the U.S., are unsustainable over the long term. Whether it is security or economics, the international community must find ways to help Afghanistan become more self-reliant.

**3. A Settled Afghanistan.** Successful intra-Afghan talks are likely vital to the country’s long-term success. The goal of any counterinsurgency is to allow those who have legitimate political grievances to address these grievances through a political process and not through violence. If the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan ever ends, it will be through a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

**4. A Sovereign Afghanistan.** A stable Afghanistan will require a sovereign Afghanistan. One whose borders and internal affairs are respected by its neighbors. The U.S. presence in Afghanistan comes at the request of the Afghan government. Other state and non-state actors in the region, including from neighboring Pakistan, have been actively seeking to destabilize Afghanistan. Stability will evade Afghanistan so long as its neighbors continue meddling in its internal affairs through the use of violent proxies.

## Recommendations for the U.S.

The Trump Administration should not be faulted for testing the prospects for a negotiated settlement and encouraging direct talks between the Taliban and Afghan government. Most international experts believe intra-Afghan talks may be the most effective, and perhaps only, path to peace. History shows that most insurgencies are concluded with some form of political settlement. The Biden Administration needs to move swiftly to craft a clear approach to the Afghanistan conflict. As the conflict there enters a critical period, the U.S. should:

- **Recognize that no deal is better than a bad deal.** The Biden Administration should not be afraid to acknowledge failure if the intra-Afghan talks breakdown. The U.S. has legitimate national security interests in Afghanistan and the region. If a lasting peace cannot be brought about through a negotiated settlement, America and the Afghan government will have to develop a new strategy and secure their interests.
- **Conduct a detailed and speedy review assessing whether the Taliban are meeting their commitments.** There is a lack of clarity over whether the Taliban are living up to the commitments they made in the deal with the U.S. There are plenty of troubling indicators in recent months that show that violence and attacks by the Taliban against the Afghan military and civilians have not decreased. After the Afghan government made the goodwill gesture of releasing thousands of Taliban prisoners, hundreds have already been recaptured during recent fighting, despite pledging to never raise arms again. Recently there has been a spate of assassinations of journalists in the country, along with several suicide bombings of civilian targets. The results of this review should be made public.
- **Freeze all further U.S. troop withdrawals.** The Biden Administration should pause any remaining troop withdrawals planned by the previous Administration. With violence still at relatively high levels, withdrawing U.S. forces before the May deadline and before a comprehensive review is conducted would send the wrong signal. The Taliban may believe that all U.S. troops will be withdrawn from the country by May 2021 regardless of the situation on the ground. The Biden Administration should make it clear to the Taliban that this is not the case, and that future withdrawals will be conditions-based.

- **Consider any request of more U.S. troops made by the Afghan government.** If intra-Afghan talks reach a complete stalemate, the U.S. government should at least consider any request from the Afghan government to provide additional assistance and capabilities to Kabul. There should be no confusion that the Afghan government remains the elected representative of the Afghan people.
- **Plan for a long-term U.S. commitment to the ANDSF.** The Biden Administration needs to plan for a strong U.S.–Afghan bilateral relationship regardless of the outcome of the intra-Afghan negotiations. In conjunction with allies and partners, the U.S. must continue to provide at least limited forms of financial assistance to the Afghan military for the time being. The cost to the U.S. taxpayer will be far greater if the security situation requires a new infusion of U.S. forces.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the U.S. should consult with neighboring countries in Central and South Asia over hosting military training programs for the ANDSF, where possible.
- **Hold Pakistan accountable.** On New Year’s Day 2018, the Trump Administration took the dramatic step of suspending billions in U.S. aid to Pakistan. The Trump Administration was right to hold Pakistan to account for its decades-long sponsorship of terrorist groups. It was right to dismiss warnings that a cessation of aid would result in a collapse of bilateral relations. U.S. pressure on Pakistan began to ease over the past two years as the Trump Administration sought Islamabad’s help in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. That was a welcome first step but it is not nearly enough. In order for Pakistan and the U.S. to resume a productive partnership, Pakistan will need to use its influence to press for a negotiated settlement in intra-Afghan negotiations. More important, Pakistan must take additional and verifiable steps to decisively break with its history of using violent Islamist groups, such as the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and Lashkar e Taiba, as an extension of its foreign policy.
- **Ensure that any future troop reduction is carried out in a responsible way.** The May 2021 deadline for the withdrawal of all remaining U.S. forces coincides with the Taliban’s annual “spring offensive” and the end of Ramadan—typically a period of reconciliation and forgiveness. This offers both risks and opportunities. The U.S. should not withdraw troops from Afghanistan unless the following

conditions are met: (1) Progress is being made during direct talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government; (2) the drawdown leads to a nationwide cease-fire that includes both Afghan and foreign militaries and a halt to all attacks on civilians and on U.S. forces; and (3) the withdrawn forces remain 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 cease-fire 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.

- **Continue the progress made on connecting Afghanistan to the broader region through economic and trade integration.**

Landlocked Afghanistan suffers from a lack of connectivity with the broader region and even its immediate neighbors due to a lack of quality infrastructure. Thankfully, there is a growing realization of this in Washington. The Trump Administration's strategy for Central Asia published last February rightly sought to "[e]xpand and maintain support for stability in Afghanistan" and "[e]ncourage connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan."<sup>4</sup> The Biden Administration should continue to support regionally backed economic and trade initiatives.

## Clarity Needed

The Biden Administration, like the Trump and Obama Administrations before it, has inherited a complex situation in Afghanistan that defies easy solutions. While the Administration will naturally be preoccupied with domestic concerns, not least recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Afghanistan will demand its attention as negotiations enter a critical phase. The U.S. military, America's North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies, the Afghan government, and the Afghan people are now looking to the Biden Administration for—and indeed deserve—clarity on how the Administration intends to approach and resolve America's longest war.

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## Endnotes

1. David Welna and Colin Dwyer, "U.S. Signs Peace Deal with Taliban After Nearly 2 Decades of War in Afghanistan," National Public Radio, February 29, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/29/810537586/u-s-signs-peace-deal-with-taliban-after-nearly-2-decades-of-war-in-afghanistan> (accessed February 18, 2021).
2. Hamid Shalizi and Charlotte Greenfield, "Afghanistan Peace Talks Under Threat as Major Taliban Spring Offensive Takes Shape," Reuters, February 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN2AHOSV> (accessed February 17, 2021).
3. For example, at the height of the U.S. fighting in Afghanistan in 2011 and 2012, the U.S. was spending \$120 billion a year. For 2021, the U.S. plans to spend only \$4 billion on funding the Afghan Ministry of Defense—about the same amount it was spending in Afghanistan in 2011 every 12 days.
4. U.S. Department of State, "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity," February 5, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/> (accessed February 18, 2021).