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U.S. Military Drawdown in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions

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U.S. Military Drawdown in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions

SUMMARY

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In 2021, a year that will mark the twentieth anniversary of the entry of U.S. troops into Afghanistan, U.S. forces there are at the lowest level since 2001 due to the Trump Administration's reduction of U.S. forces to 2,500 and its conditional commitment to the Taliban to withdraw fully by April 2021. Members of Congress have expressed a range of views about the drawdown and are likely to continue to closely scrutinize the drawdown's impact on a range of U.S. policy interests.

The mission of U.S. forces in Afghanistan has evolved considerably since 2001, when the United States initiated military action against Al Qaeda and the Taliban government that protected the group in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks. Changes in security conditions in the country and in U.S. policy have prompted changes to international force levels, with a gradual increase over the course of the George W. Bush Administration due to growing Taliban strength (over 30,000 U.S. troops by 2008); an Obama Administration troop "surge" to blunt Taliban momentum that peaked in 2011 with nearly 100,000 U.S. troops and ended on schedule in 2014 (around 10,000 U.S. forces by 2015); and a smaller increase in U.S. troops under the Trump Administration (to around 15,000 U.S. forces in 2018) to buttress Afghan forces before withdrawals in line with a U.S. commitment to the Taliban to remove all U.S. and international forces by the end of April 2021.

U.S. commanders state that the reduction of U.S. troops to 2,500 will not result in any major changes to the two complementary U.S. missions in Afghanistan, namely counterterrorism and training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces. However, some have implied that the troop level order by President Trump might result in adjustments to U.S. operations and limits to U.S. options. It may also affect partner country forces (which now outnumber U.S. forces) and their ability to continue their training mission. The February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement also commits the United States to withdrawing from Afghanistan all "private security contractors," which have played an important role in U.S. operations. The drawdown also has implications for U.S. physical assets in the country, as military officials assess how to redeploy, transfer, or dispose of that materiel, and the considerable U.S. diplomatic presence at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul.

The drawdown came at a politically sensitive time in Afghanistan, with Taliban and Afghan government representatives engaged in direct negotiations even as the conflict continues unabated. Many Afghans appear to view the U.S. troop drawdown warily, given fears that the drawdown could lead to a Taliban military resurgence, though some Afghan officials have downplayed the effect that U.S. withdrawals have on their own forces' capabilities. The Taliban have welcomed the drawdown and implied that they may reengage in attacks on international forces (from which the group has reportedly refrained since early 2020) if forces are not withdrawn by the April 2021 date in the U.S.-Taliban agreement. U.S. officials speak often of a "conditional" withdrawal, but have given conflicting accounts of whether the U.S. withdrawal is contingent upon, or otherwise related to, the Taliban's talks with the Afghan government or the outcome of such talks. Fragile intra-Afghan talks may go on for some time as Afghans negotiate contentious issues including a ceasefire and the future of the Afghan state.

Experts have laid out a number of approaches that the Biden Administration, which is reportedly conducting a review of the U.S.-Taliban agreement and broader U.S. Afghanistan policy, might take in light of the U.S. troop drawdown. These include withdrawing all U.S. forces by April 2021 as scheduled, pausing or reversing the withdrawal pending certain Taliban actions, and indefinitely supporting Afghan forces. This report will be updated to reflect related developments or new considerations. For background on Afghanistan and the U.S. presence there, see CRS Report R45122, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief*, by Clayton Thomas.

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Background: When and why did the United States deploy military forces to Afghanistan? What are the current missions of U.S. forces?

U.S. military forces have been in Afghanistan since 2001, making it one of the longest continuous military conflicts in which the United States has fought. U.S. forces were originally focused primarily on counterterrorism, but the U.S. military mission evolved to include supporting and defending the new Afghan government and training its nascent military forces.

On September 11, 2001, operatives of the international terrorist organization Al Qaeda (AQ) conducted a series of terrorist attacks in the United States that killed nearly 3,000 people. Al Qaeda, which had previously struck U.S. targets both in the United States and abroad, and its leader Osama bin Laden, were based in Afghanistan, a legacy of the group's roots in the anti-Soviet insurgency of the 1980s. Afghanistan in 2001 was ruled by the Taliban, a fundamentalist Sunni Islamist group that originated in the country's majority ethnic Pashtun south and east and emerged out of Afghanistan's post-Soviet civil war to take over most of the country by 1996. The Taliban offered sanctuary to Bin Laden and his followers after they were expelled from Sudan in 1996. The Taliban and Al Qaeda established what was later described as a mutually beneficial "alliance" whereby Al Qaeda provided financial and armed support to the Taliban in exchange for freedom of movement in Afghanistan. Over 10,000 AQ fighters may have trained at AQ camps in Afghanistan.[1]

In a nationwide address before a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush demanded that the Taliban hand over AQ leaders, permanently close terrorist training camps, and give the U.S. access to such camps, adding that the Taliban "must hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate."[2] Taliban leaders refused, citing Bin Laden's status as their guest.[3]

Pursuant to an authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) enacted on September 18, 2001 (P.L. 107-40), U.S. military action began on October 7, 2001, with airstrikes on Taliban targets throughout the country and close air support to anti-Taliban forces in northern Afghanistan. Limited numbers of U.S. Army Special Forces and some conventional ground forces began deploying in Afghanistan less than two weeks later.[4] By November 13, the Taliban evacuated Kabul, which was soon retaken by those Afghan forces (known as the Northern Alliance). As U.S.-backed Afghan forces drew closer to the southern city of Kandahar, birthplace of the Taliban movement and home of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, Taliban leaders reportedly offered terms of surrender, including an amnesty for Taliban fighters who would lay down their arms. U.S. officials rejected such an amnesty and while many Taliban fighters and leaders were killed or captured by U.S. or Afghan forces, others (including Mullah Omar) sought shelter in remote or rural parts of Afghanistan or escaped to Pakistan.

In December 2001, Afghan delegates convened in Germany by the United Nations selected Hamid Karzai to serve as head of an interim national government, marking the beginning of post-Taliban governance. The creation of the new Afghan government also represented the beginning

[1] "The 9/11 Commission Report," July 2004, pp. 66-67.

[2] "Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2001.

[3] Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Penguin Press, 2018), pp. 69.

[4] For more on the first year of U.S. operations in Afghanistan, see Walter L. Perry and David Kassing, "Toppling the Taliban: Air-Ground Operations in Afghanistan, October 2001-June 2002," RAND Corporation, 2015.

of a major new mission set for U.S. forces and their international partners: helping defend and develop that government and its nascent military. Karzai attended the January 2002 State of the Union address where President Bush previewed this expanded mission, saying that the United States and Afghanistan were "allies against terror" and that "we will be partners in rebuilding that country."[5] Congress supported the Bush Administration in this approach, authorizing and appropriating funds for more expansive U.S. military and civilian assistance missions (e.g. via the Afghanistan Freedom Support Act, 2002 P.L. 107-327). U.S. officials declared an end to major combat operations in Afghanistan on May 1, 2003, though then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said that "pockets of resistance in certain parts of the country remain."[6]

By 2005, scattered Taliban forces had already begun to regroup in the Pashtun heartland of eastern and southern Afghanistan, as well as across the border in Pakistan, where many observers suspected that Pakistan's security and intelligence services were tolerating, if not actively support them.[7] The Taliban described continuing U.S. and coalition military operations in Afghanistan as a military occupation and characterized their Afghan government adversaries as puppets of foreign powers.[8] In response to growing Taliban activity, the United States gradually increased forces to around 30,000 by the end of the George W. Bush Administration. Under the Obama Administration, the United States and its partners further increased international force levels, which peaked at over 130,000 (of which around 100,000 were U.S. troops) in 2010-11, but set a goal to end combat operations by the end of 2014.

Though that "surge" was arguably successful in weakening Taliban advances, by 2010 the Obama Administration came to assess that the conflict had no military solution.[9] Preliminary U.S.-Taliban negotiations were constrained by U.S. policy to require the inclusion of the Afghan government, with which the Taliban refused to meet, in any settlement.[10] As international force levels were reduced in advance of the scheduled 2014 transition, NATO began gradually transferring security duties to Afghan forces starting in 2011. Afghan forces assumed full responsibility for security nationwide at the end of 2014 with the end of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the start of the noncombat Resolute Support Mission (RSM) that began on January 1, 2015.

In addition to training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces as part of RSM, U.S. troops in Afghanistan also conduct counterterrorism operations; these two "complementary missions" comprise Operation Freedom's Sentinel. The legal framework for U.S. operations in Afghanistan remains the 2001 AUMF, over which there is considerable debate in Congress. In the FY2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 116-260), Congress made available just over $3 billion in support for Afghan forces (the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund, ASFF), down over a billion from the amount appropriated in FY2020, in addition to billions in Overseas Contingency Operations funding for U.S. military operations. Since FY2001, the United States has spent over

[5] "President Delivers State of the Union Address," White House (archived), January 29, 2002.

[6] "Rumsfeld: Major combat over in Afghanistan," CNN, May 1, 2003.

[7] See, for example, Matt Waldman, "The Sun in the Sky: The Relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents," Crisis States Research Centre, June 2010.

[8] See Matthew Calvin, "The Use of English-Language Internet Propaganda by the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2007-2010," *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, June 2011, available at https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/108; Thomas Ruttig, "How Tribal are the Taliban?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010.

[9] Rod Nordland, "Troop 'Surge' in Afghanistan Ends with Mixed Results," *New York Times*, September 21, 2012.

[10] Evan MacAskill and Simon Tisdall, "White House shifts Afghanistan strategy towards talks with Taliban," *Guardian*, July 19, 2010.

$141 billion for reconstruction efforts and related activities (including military assistance), and over $720 billion to support U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.[11]

As the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan has fallen to a number not seen since 2001, some have reflected on the circumstances under which U.S. forces entered the country and the subsequent evolution of U.S. policy. Some maintain that the United States and its international partners have achieved significant and meaningful gains in Afghanistan, namely fostering a democratic U.S. ally and counterterrorism partner in a difficult region.[12] Others disagree, seeing the expansion of U.S. mission sets (and investment of personnel and resources) after 2001 as an error. In a December 2020 visit to Afghanistan, former Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller (who previously served in Afghanistan as early as 2001) said

> I always felt it was a huge strategic error by expanding the war. I thought the war was for special operations, small footprint. And I just personally thought, if we were smart strategically, Afghanistan would always have a special operations force... I think we would have had a different outcome if we had maintained what we were doing then.[13]

When and why did the most recent drawdown begin?

When President Donald Trump came into office in January 2017, approximately 11,000 U.S. troops were reportedly in Afghanistan, with U.S. force levels having declined from their 2009-2011 high point of approximately 100,000 U.S. troops.[14] In June 2017, President Trump delegated to then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis the authority to set force levels, reportedly limited to around 3,500 additional troops; Secretary Mattis signed orders to deploy them in September 2017.[15] Those additional forces (all of which were dedicated to NATO-led RSM) arrived in Afghanistan within months, putting the total number of U.S. troops in the country at 14,000-15,000 by the end of 2017.[16]

By mid-2018, President Trump was reportedly frustrated with the lack of military progress against the Taliban, and he ordered formal and direct U.S.-Taliban talks without Afghan government participation for the first time. As those talks developed under Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, President Trump continued to express frustration with the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan and a desire to withdraw U.S. forces, saying in August 2019 that he wanted to do so "as quickly as we can."[17] U.S. force levels began

[11] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress," October 30, 2020. Both of these figures appear to be in nominal dollar terms.

[12] For a wide range of views on the U.S. project in Afghanistan, see CRS Report R46197, *The Washington Post's "Afghanistan Papers" and U.S. Policy: Main Points and Possible Questions for Congress*, by Clayton Thomas.

[13] Patrick Tucker, "Acting SecDef Miller Visits Troops in Afghanistan," *DefenseOne*, December 22, 2020.

[14] While the level was publicly reported at 8,400, media outlets reported in August 2017 that the figure was actually around 11,000 on any given day due to units rotating in and out of theater. See Gordon Lubold and Nancy Youssef, "U.S. Has More Troops in Afghanistan Than Publicly Disclosed," *Wall Street Journal*, August 22, 2017. See also CRS Report R44116, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018*, by Heidi M. Peters and Sofia Plagakis.

[15] Tara Copp, "Mattis signs orders to send about 3,500 more US troops to Afghanistan," *Military Times*, Sept. 11, 2017.

[16] Dan Lamothe, "Trump added troops in Afghanistan. But NATO is still short of meeting its goal," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2017; Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, "Up to 1,000 more U.S. troops could be headed to Afghanistan this spring," *Washington Post*, January 21, 2018. As of September 30, 2017, the total number of active duty and reserve forces in Afghanistan was 15,298. Defense Manpower Data Center, Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country Quarterly Report, September 2017.

[17] Kevin Baron, "Trump Says US Troops Shouldn't be 'Policemen' in Afghanistan. So Why Are They There?" *DefenseOne*, July 22, 2019; "Trump Wants to Get Out Of Afghanistan 'As Quickly As He Can,'" *Tolo News*, August 1,

to descend in 2019: at an October 9, 2019, news conference, General Austin S. Miller, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, said that the number of U.S. forces had been gradually reduced by 2,000 over the past year, to between 12,000 and 13,000.[18]

In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a formal agreement in which the United States committed to withdrawing all of its troops, contractors, and nondiplomatic civilian personnel from Afghanistan, with a drawdown in military forces to 8,600 by mid-July 2020 and a complete withdrawal by the end of April 2021. In return, the Taliban committed to prevent any groups, including Al Qaeda, from threatening the United States or its allies by not allowing those groups to reside, train, or fundraise in Afghanistan. The U.S. withdrawal commitment was not conditioned explicitly on progress in intra-Afghan talks, but U.S. officials have suggested that U.S. forces would not be obliged to withdrawal if talks collapsed.

Throughout 2020, although U.S. officials stated that the Taliban were not in full compliance with the agreement, U.S. force levels continued to drop, reaching 8,600 a month ahead of the mid-July 2020 deadline in the U.S.-Taliban accord.[19] Confusion about the United States' future military posture grew in October 2020 due to contradictory visions expressed by senior Administration officials, including President Trump's tweet that, "We should have the small remaining number of our BRAVE Men and Women serving in Afghanistan home by Christmas!"[20]

On November 17, 2020, then-Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller announced, "we will implement President Trump's orders to continue our repositioning of forces from" Afghanistan, and that 2,500 U.S. forces would remain in Afghanistan by January 15, 2021. Acting Secretary Miller characterized the drawdown (announced alongside a similar reduction of U.S. forces from Iraq) as "consistent with our established plans and strategic objectives," and said it "does not equate to a change in U.S. policy or objectives."[21] On January 15, 2021, Acting Secretary Miller confirmed that the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan had reached 2,500.[22] The Biden Administration reportedly is conducting a review of the U.S.-Taliban agreement and broader U.S. Afghanistan policy, and might take action to endorse or amend the U.S. troop drawdown (see below).[23]

How might the drawdown affect the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan?

In general, U.S. officials insist that the reduction of troops to 2,500 will not result in any major changes to the two complementary U.S. missions in Afghanistan: counterterrorism and training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces. However, some officials have implied that the troop level

2019.

[18] Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, "U.S. Is Quietly Reducing Its Troop Force in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, October 21, 2019.

[19] Kylie Atwood and Ryan Browne, "US troop drawdown in Afghanistan running ahead of schedule," CNN, April 30, 2020; "Taliban not living up to its commitments, U.S. Defense Secretary says," Reuters, May 5, 2020; Robert Burns, "US General: Taliban Not Yet Met Conditions for US Withdrawal," Associated Press, June 10, 2020.

[20] "U.S. troops in Afghanistan should be 'home by Christmas': Trump," Reuters, October 7, 2020.

[21] "Acting Secretary Miller Announces Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq," Department of Defense, Nov. 17, 2020.

[22] "Statement by Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller on Force Levels in Afghanistan," Department of Defense January 15, 2021.

[23] "Biden Administration to review Taliban deal," Al Jazeera, January 23, 2021.

order by President Trump was not ideal from their perspective and might result in some adjustments to U.S. operations and limits to U.S. options.

In a mid-December 2020 interview, General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), said of the 2,500-troop level, "We believe that is a practical way forward. Might not be where you want to be. But I think it is a practical way forward, I think is something that's very defensible."[24] Later that month, he said a U.S. troop level of 2,500 "gives us the ability to do [counterterrorism] operations when we need to do it. It gives us the ability to protect ourselves, and it gives us the ability to reach out with focused advise and assist to our Afghan partners where they need it."[25] However, he conceded, "We will not be as robust as we were in the past. That's a fact and we recognize that."

Limitations may also manifest themselves geographically; one media account described former Acting Secretary Miller as saying that the United States will be able to provide training at the corps level in the north but perhaps not in the south. Miller did say that the United States would maintain "the ability to project to what we refer to as 'points of need,' which are lower than the corps level."[26]

The drawdown of U.S. forces to 2,500 may have limited effects on the training mission. The steady drawdown of U.S. forces since the post-2017 high of approximately 15,000 already has reduced the number of U.S. trainers working with Afghan partners, especially at lower levels of the Afghan military. Moreover, U.S. commanders have limited face-to-face advising to mission-essential circumstances since the beginning of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic early in 2020.[27] U.S. forces have assessed that COVID-19-mandated remote training activities, held via email, videoconferencing, text messaging, and other platforms, are still effective, if less so than in-person training.[28]

Additionally, Acting Secretary Miller implied that U.S. air support, which many view as critical for sustaining the Afghan military, will remain a part of the U.S. presence: "Our competitive advantage as the United States military is our control of the air and I think we can do a lot in this regard, even if we don't have a large physical presence on the ground."[29] How the now-reduced U.S. presence and projected U.S. withdrawal might impact Afghan forces and their battle against the Taliban is explored below.

What is the status of other international forces in Afghanistan and how have U.S. partners reacted to the U.S drawdown and commitment to withdrawal?

International troops from U.S. allies have been deployed alongside U.S. forces in Afghanistan since 2001 under the command of two successive NATO-led training missions: the International

[24] "General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. Defense One Interview with Katie Bo Williams," U.S. Central Command, December 10, 2020.

[25] "Gen McKenzie and Luis Martinez On The Record Interview," U.S. Central Command, December 22, 2020.

[26] Katie Bo Williams, "Milley Meets with Taliban in Fragile Peace Negotiations," *Defense One*, December 17, 2020.

[27] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress," October 30, 2020, pg. 78.

[28] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress," January 30, 2021, p. 57.

[29] Tucker, op. cit.

Security Assistance Force (ISAF, 2003-2014) and Resolute Support Mission (RSM, 2015-present). According to a recent NATO factsheet, RSM forces provide training, advice, and assistance to develop the capabilities of Afghan military forces (particularly the air force and special forces) as well as the civilian institutions that oversee them.[30]

NATO partners drew down their forces in Afghanistan in 2020 alongside the U.S. drawdown, but the exact figure has often been unclear in recent months: a NATO table breaking down troop contributions by country dated June 2020 shows 15,937 troops, including 8,000 U.S. personnel.[31] After the United States, the largest troop-contributing nations as of June 2020 were Germany (1,300), the United Kingdom (950), Italy (895), Georgia (860), and Romania (738). On November 23, 2020, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that there were "less than 11,000 troops in the train and advice mission."[32]

In the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, the United States committed to withdrawing all allied and coalition partner forces, in addition to its own. No U.S. partners have separately confirmed an intention to draw down their own forces in line with the U.S. to reach full withdrawal by April 2021, per the U.S-Taliban agreement. British Defense Minister Ben Wallace said that he "expected" that if the United States drew down its troops "at some stage," the United Kingdom would do so as well.[33] German officials have expressed concern about the pacing of the U.S. drawdown and conditionality attached to U.S. withdrawal commitment to the Taliban, with Foreign Minister Heiko Maas warning that a "rash exit" from Afghanistan would create additional hurdles for the fragile intra-Afghan negotiations.[34] Maas and other German officials have stated their belief that the condition for a military withdrawal should be progress in those negotiations.

NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg has also voiced caution, saying that while there are risks to staying, "if we leave, we risk Afghanistan once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorists, and the loss of the gains made with such sacrifice."[35] Stoltenberg also emphasized the importance of intra-alliance coordination:

> We need to assess whether the conditions for leaving are met, together. We need to make these decisions together. And as we have said many times in NATO: we went into Afghanistan together, we should make decisions on adjustments of a presence there together, and when the time is right we should leave together, but then in a coordinated and orderly way.[36]

U.S. officials often cite the higher number of total NATO and other partner country forces in Afghanistan to argue that current missions can continue with reduced U.S. troop presence. However, a full U.S. withdrawal would likely disrupt partner country forces' abilities to continue their training mission in several ways. First, any deterioration in security conditions resulting from the U.S. drawdown could spur international partners to withdraw as well; German Defense

[30] "NATO-Afghanistan Relations," NATO, December 2020. Available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/2012-backgrounder-afghanistan-e.pdf.

[31] "Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures," August 2020. Available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/6/pdf/2020-06-RSM-Placemat.pdf.

[32] "Adapting NATO for 2030 and Beyond," North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), November 23, 2020.

[33] "UK will likely follow the U.S. in cutting Afghanistan troops, minister says," Reuters, November 19, 2020.

[34] Nina Werkhauser and Sandra Petersmann, "German government opposes Donald Trump's Afghan troop withdrawal," *Deutsche Welle*, November 19, 2020.

[35] Online press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, NATO, December 1, 2020.

[36] Interview with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, NATO, November 22, 2020.

Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer said after the U.S. drawdown announcement that "however things develop, our soldiers' safety is the top priority."[37]

Also, the United States provides allies with key logistical support, without which other international forces may find operating more difficult. A German defense ministry spokesperson said after the U.S. drawdown was announced, "We are of course trying to find out…what this means in concrete terms for capabilities on the ground because …[the United States] has a significant role to play in capabilities that are necessary to sustain" the German troop presence.[38] Secretary Stoltenberg said in November 2020 that NATO military officials have confirmed with U.S. counterparts that "they will maintain enablers as the support, especially aviation support helicopter, support fixed wing and rotary wing support to the NATO missions" as the United States draws down to 2,500 troops. He added that the alliance would assess at its February 2021 defense ministerial meeting whether the conditions have been met for a full withdrawal by April as envisioned in the U.S.-Taliban agreement.[39]

How have Afghans, including the Taliban, reacted to the drawdown?

Press reports suggest many Afghans view the U.S. troop drawdown warily, given fears that the drawdown could lead to a Taliban military resurgence, though Afghan officials generally maintain that Afghan forces will be able to defend themselves regardless of U.S. troop levels.

Pro-government Afghans and those who have benefitted from the socio-political reforms of the past two decades, particularly women and Afghans in urban areas, have reacted to the U.S. drawdown and commitment to withdrawal with anxiety and concern that the drawdown portends a Taliban return to power that will curtail their rights and freedoms.[40] For their part, Afghan government officials have generally downplayed the effect that U.S. withdrawals have on their own forces' capabilities.[41] In the days after the most recent U.S. drawdown announcement, Afghan Defense Minister Asadullah Khalid said that he did not "see any clear indication that the U.S. or NATO forces will fully withdraw [from] the country," and stated that only 4% of operations require U.S. air support.[42] Other Afghan officials are less sanguine, suggesting that a U.S. force level reduction to 2,500 will have a disruptive impact on the Afghan military and its ability to keep the Taliban at bay in key parts of the country.[43]

For their part, the Taliban, who attribute the war to the presence of international forces, have welcomed the U.S. drawdown announcement, with one representative describing it as a "good

[37] Werkhauser and Petersmann, op. cit.

[38] Hans von der Burchard, "Germany expresses 'serious concern' over US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Politico*, November 18, 2020.

[39] "Adapting NATO for 2030 and Beyond," North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), November 23, 2020.

[40] Sune Engel Rasmussen and Ehsanullah Amiri, "Afghanistan Braces for the Worst as U.S. Troop Withdrawal Accelerates," *Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2020; Diaa Hadid and Tom Bowman, "People in the Afghan capital Kabul are uneasy about U.S. troop drawdown," NPR, December 16, 2020.

[41] See "Afghan President Says Possible U.S. Troop Withdrawal Won't Affect Security," RFE/RL, December 21, 2018; Rebecca Blumenstein and Mujib Mashal, "Afghanistan is Ready for Major U.S. Troop Reduction, Ghani Says," *New York Times*, January 23, 2020.

[42] Anthony Capaccio and Jonathan Stearns, "NATO Chief Warns Trump's Afghanistan Troop Cuts Risk Terrorism," *Bloomberg*, November 17, 2020.

[43] Phillip Walter Wellman, "Premature US exit could embolden terrorists, Afghans say," *Stars and Stripes*, November 17, 2020; Thomas Gibbons-Neff, et al., "U.S. Troops Are Packing Up, Ready or Not," *New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2020.

step."[44] A Taliban spokesman stated in February 2021 that the group has "a legal right to free its homeland from the presence of occupying forces with every lawful means necessary" and that "if some discard the Doha accord … history has proven that the Afghan Mujahid nation can valiantly defend its values, soil, homeland and rights."[45]

How might the drawdown affect Afghan forces and the Afghan government?

The drawdown could affect the Afghan government and its ongoing fight against the Taliban in two separate but interrelated ways, each of which is difficult to quantify. Most directly, the drawdown, by reducing the number of U.S. personnel available to train, advise, and accompany Afghan forces, could negatively impact those forces' capabilities. Additionally, the U.S. drawdown, as a step toward the full withdrawal of U.S. forces, could accelerate long-standing centrifugal forces in the fragile Afghan state if powerbrokers increasingly take matters into their own hands.

In terms of how the U.S. drawdown may affect Afghan forces' capabilities, much depends on the extent to which the NATO-led training mission can continue without interruption. As noted above, U.S. military officials maintain that training activities can continue (pointing to the larger NATO presence), though SIGAR reports that trainers will be working at the ministry and corps levels, citing statements from General Miller.[46] Many of the U.S. forces deployed to Afghanistan (including the Army's Security Force Assistance Brigades) as part of the Trump Administration's increase in force levels provided support at the battalion (or *kandak*) level; it appears unlikely a reduced U.S. force would maintain that kind of lower level tactical support. Some also have warned that a complete U.S. withdrawal could damage the morale of Afghan forces, which is reportedly already fragile.[47]

Some U.S. policy tools might counter any potentially detrimental consequence of the drawdown or eventual withdrawal on Afghan forces. Continued provision of U.S. air support (discussed above) to Afghan forces until or after withdrawal may have an outsized positive influence on Afghan forces in the field.[48] It arguably may counterbalance the tactical impact of any reduction in U.S. training for Afghan forces after the drawdown. Continued U.S. financial support also may be instrumental in keeping Afghan forces in the field against the Taliban. In January 2018, President Ghani said, "[W]e will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. [financial] support."[49] Still, a full U.S. military withdrawal could affect the level and types of security assistance the United States may provide to Afghanistan.

Beyond the immediate effects on U.S. missions in support of Afghan forces, the U.S. military drawdown may have second- or third- order effects on the Afghan polity, especially when it

[44] "Taliban hails US troop drawdown from Afghanistan as 'good step,'" *France 24,* November 18, 2020.

[45] "Remarks by spokesman of Islamic Emirate concerning statement.by representatives of some countries," *Voice of Jihad,* February 1, 2021. Available at https://alemarahenglish.net/?p=42271.

[46] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress," January 30, 2021, p. 56.

[47] Brian Glyn Williams and Javed Rezayee, "The perils of a US troop drawdown to the Afghan army and tribes," *The Hill*, November 28, 2020; Gibbons-Neff, et al., op. cit.; Kathy Gannon, "US troop withdrawal will be serious blow to Afghan forces' morale, generals say," Associated Press, December 21, 2018.

[48] Susannah George, "The Taliban is on the offensive. Keeping the militants at bay: U.S. airstrikes, even as bases close and troops leave," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2020.

[49] Anwar Iqbal, "Afghan Army to Collapse in Six Months Without US Help: Ghani," *Dawn*, January 18, 2018.

comes to perceptions of U.S. intentions and of the impact of the U.S. drawdown on Afghan capabilities, and the resulting calculations that Afghans make. Some Afghans (including those who remember the complex, multi-sided civil war of the 1990s) have suggested that their communities (and, often, their associated militias) may pursue more independent courses of action in the event that the Afghan government is unable to provide security in the context of the U.S drawdown and withdrawal. For example, in late December 2020, the former governor of Balkh Province and widely viewed powerbroker Atta Mohamad Noor warned, "If the government does not pay attention to areas lacking security, then we must take action and we don't care if they call us militia," adding, "If you cannot improve the security situation, then let us do something."[50]

Fractures between the central government and local powerbrokers are likely to break down along ethnic lines; Noor and others are associated with the Northern Alliance, which comprised mostly Tajiks and other ethnic minorities from northern Afghanistan and fought the majority-Pashtun Taliban in the 1990s.[51] Some who oppose the Afghan government's talks with the Taliban have proposed reestablishing the Northern Alliance under a new name.[52] Members of Afghanistan's only majority Shia ethnic group, the Hazaras, have long faced Taliban persecution and may also look to protect their communities via extralegal means; as one Hazara leader said in a recent media account, "If America leaves, the Hazaras have no choice but to take up weapons."[53]

How is the drawdown related to ongoing intra-Afghan talks?

U.S. officials have given conflicting accounts of whether the U.S. withdrawal is contingent upon, or otherwise related to, the Taliban holding talks with Kabul or the outcome of such talks. In a February 29 2020, briefing ahead of the U.S.-Taliban agreement signing, one unnamed senior U.S. official said, "if the political settlement fails, if the talks fail, there is nothing that obliges the United States to withdraw troops," while another said, "the withdrawal timeline is related to counterterrorism, not political outcomes."[54] The deputy U.S. negotiator Molly Phee said on February 18, 2020, "We will not prejudge the outcome of intra-Afghan negotiations, but we are prepared to support whatever consensus the Afghans are able to reach about their future political and governing arrangements."[55]

On September 11, 2020, Afghan government and Taliban representatives met in Doha, Qatar, to begin the first formal intra-Afghan talks to end the war. It remains unclear what kind of security and political arrangements could satisfy both Kabul and the Taliban to the extent that the latter abandons its armed struggle. Many Afghans, especially women, who remember Taliban rule and oppose the group's policies and beliefs, remain wary.[56] Those Afghans doubt the Taliban's trustworthiness and express concern that, in the absence of U.S. military pressure, the group will

[50] "Atta Noor threatens to 'take action' against security situation," *Ariana News,* December 24, 2020.

[51] Siddhant Kishore, "Rallying old friends: Adapting to an evolving Afghan threatre," Observer Research Foundation, January 7, 2021.

[52] Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Fatima Faizi, "In Proud Corners of Afghanistan, New Calls for Autonomy," *New York Times,* September 28, 2020.

[53] Rasmussen and Amiri, op. cit.

[54] "Briefing with Senior Administration Officials on Next Steps Toward an Agreement on Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," U.S. Department of State, February 29, 2020.

[55] Molly Phee, remarks at "Ending Our Endless War in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, February 18, 2020.

[56] Pamela Constable, "The Return of a Taliban Government? Afghanistan Talks Raise Once-Unthinkable Question," *Washington Post,* January 29, 2019.

have little incentive to either remain in talks or comply with the terms of any agreement reached with Kabul.[57] The Taliban denied involvement in the January 2021 assassination of female supreme court judges in Kabul and other recent targeted attacks, but the United States and other nations released a joint statement on January 31, 2020, charging that "the Taliban bears responsibility for the majority of this targeted violence."[58] Some Afghan officials reportedly suspect the Taliban of trying to "run out the clock on the withdrawal of American troops," remaining in negotiations long enough to secure a full U.S. withdrawal.[59]

A December 2019 survey reported that a "significant majority" of Afghans were both aware of (77%) and strongly or somewhat supported (89%) efforts to negotiate a peace agreement with the Taliban, while opposing the group itself.[60] Nearly 80% of respondents in a November 2020 survey said that they were strongly or somewhat optimistic that talks would lead to a "lasting peace," though over a quarter expect the Taliban to defeat the Afghan government if talks fail.[61] At least some Afghans support "peace at any cost" given the decades of conflict through which the country has suffered.[62]

How have Members of Congress reacted to the withdrawal commitment and subsequent drawdown?

While the congressional reaction to the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement was diverse but relatively limited, reaction to the Trump Administration's November 2020 withdrawal announcement was more extensive.[63] Some Members welcomed the announcement or did so with reservations, while others expressed concerns or opposed it outright. Additionally, Congress enacted restrictions on the President's ability to reduce troops in Afghanistan below certain levels in the FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, P.L. 116-283); President Trump waived those restrictions in January 2021.

Members who have expressed support for the drawdown and withdrawal generally contend that the U.S. military presence cannot bring about an intra-Afghan settlement to end the conflict and that the ability of that military presence to achieve U.S. interests is limited. Citing those and other arguments, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith described the drawdown as "the right policy decision."[64] Other Members welcome the drawdown as a step toward the full withdrawal of U.S. troops: in a letter to Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller, Senator Josh Hawley argued that the United States had demonstrated sufficient counterterrorism

[57] "Afghans voice fears that the U.S. is undercutting them in deal with the Taliban," *Washington Post*, August 17, 2019.

[58] Ayaz Gul, "Gunmen Assassinate 2 Female Afghan Judges in Kabul," VOA, January 17, 2021; "Statement on Continuation of Assassinations, Kidnapping, and Destruction of Vital Infrastructure," U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, January 31, 2021.

[59] Mujib Mashal, "Violent attacks plague Afghanistan as peace talks in Doha slow," *New York Times*, September 19, 2020.

[60] The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People," released December 3, 2019.

[61] "The Afghan People's Peace Perception Survey: Third Survey," Institute of War and Peace Studies, November 2020. Available at https://iwps.org.af/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/English-3th-Peace-Perception-Survey-IWPS-2020.pdf.

[62] Susannah George and Sharif Hassan, "Faced with the prospect of formal peace talks, Afghans consider what they're willing to concede," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2020.

[63] "Acting Secretary Miller Announces Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq," Department of Defense, Nov. 17, 2020.

[64] "Smith Statement on Afghanistan Troop Drawdown," House Armed Services Committee, November 17, 2020.

capabilities to justify an expeditious full withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, characterizing what he called the "broader nation-building mission" as a "mistake."[65]

On the other hand, some Members advocate for an eventual U.S. withdrawal, but criticize the Trump Administration's motivations, methods, or timing, particularly emphasizing the potential effects on security conditions and intra-Afghan negotiations. Senator Tim Kaine argued that the "haphazard nature of President Trump's decision will harm our national security and jeopardize countless American [and] Afghan" lives.[66] Senator Chris Murphy expressed his support for a "swift and orderly drawdown of U.S. forces" but contended the decision was made without sufficient consultation with allies and that the "Afghan government is currently engaged in sensitive negotiations with the Taliban over the future status of the country's political and social order, and we should use our leverage to help them get the best deal possible."[67] House Oversight and Reform National Security Subcommittee Chairman Steven Lynch argued in a letter to Acting Secretary Miller and then-Secretary of State Pompeo that drawing down U.S. forces could have serious consequences for U.S. interests, and requested that they provide documentation of Taliban compliance with the February 2020 agreement as well as executive branch communications regarding the drawdown decision.[68]

Other Members have emphasized the importance of conditionality: Senator Lindsey Graham, for example, said that a "drawdown to 2,500 counter-terrorism forces may be sufficient but should be conditions-based, to protect America's interests."[69] Similarly, in floor remarks, then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell praised President Trump's Afghanistan policy, saying "[t]hat same successful approach should continue until the conditions for the long-term defeat" of terrorist groups are achieved.[70] He also warned, "A rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan now would hurt our allies and delight the people who wish us harm," comparing a "premature American exit" to the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq and the "humiliating American departure from Saigon in 1975."[71]

Finally, some Members expressed opposition to the drawdown announcement: Senator Mitt Romney called on the Trump Administration to reverse what he called a "politically-motivated decision," saying that "conditions for withdrawal [from Afghanistan] have not been met."[72] Senator Ben Sasse said, "this weak retreat is not grounded in reality and will make the world a more dangerous place."[73] House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Michael McCaul called on the Trump Administration to "ensure a residual force is maintained for the foreseeable

[65] "Hawley Praises President Trump's Plan to Bring Troops Home from Afghanistan," Office of Senator Josh Hawley, November 17, 2020.

[66] "Kaine Statement on Trump Decision to Withdraw Troops from Afghanistan and Iraq," Office of Senator Tim Kaine, November 17, 2020.

[67] "Murphy Statement On Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq," Office of Senator Chris Murphy, November 17, 2020.

[68] Letter from Chairman Stephen Lynch to Secretary of State Pompeo and Acting Secretary of Defense Miller, November 17, 2020.

[69] "Graham on Afghanistan Drawdown," Office of Senator Lindsey Graham, November 17, 2020.

[70] "Premature Afghanistan Exit Would Jeopardize Trump Administration's Record of Success," Office of Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, November 16, 2020.

[71] Ibid.

[72] "Romney Statement on Proposed Troop Withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq," Office of Senator Mitt Romney, November 17, 2020.

[73] "Sasse Statement on Retreat from Middle East," Office of Ben Sasse, November 17, 2020.

future to protect U.S. national and homeland security interests and to help secure peace in Afghanistan."[74]

Beyond Member statements, Congress also passed legislation containing provisions directly related to U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan. Section 1215 of the FY2021 NDAA (P.L. 116-283) prohibits the use of funds to reduce U.S. forces in Afghanistan below the level as of enactment or 2,000 (whichever is lesser) until the Secretary of Defense submits a report that includes, among other points, an assessment of the effects of U.S. troop reductions on counterterrorism, Afghan military capabilities, the NATO-led training mission, and other U.S. policy priorities. Section 1215 also allows the President to waive the reporting requirement with the submission of a written determination that such a waiver is in U.S. national security interests with a "detailed explanation" of how it furthers those interests. President Trump signed such a waiver on January 13, 2021, arguing that the U.S. drawdown to 2,500 troops was necessary to support Afghan talks and sufficient to continue the U.S. counterterrorism mission.[75]

What is the status of U.S. contractors in Afghanistan?

Overseas contingency operations in recent decades have highlighted the role that contractors play in supporting the U.S. military, both in terms of the number of contractor personnel and the type of work being performed by these individuals.[76] Analysts have highlighted numerous benefits of using contractors. Some of these benefits include freeing up uniformed personnel to focus on military-specific activities; providing supplemental expertise in specialized fields, such as linguistics or weapon systems maintenance; and providing a surge capability to quickly deliver critical support tailored to specific military needs. Just as the effective use of contractors can augment military capabilities, the ineffective use of contractors can prevent troops from receiving what they need when they need it and can lead to wasteful spending. Contractors can also compromise the credibility and effectiveness of the U.S. military and undermine operations, as many analysts believe occurred during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.[77]

Since 2008, CENTCOM has published quarterly contractor census reports, which provide aggregated data–including elements such as mission category and nationality–on contractors employed through DOD-funded contracts who are physically located within the CENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR), which includes Afghanistan.[78] During the first quarter of FY2021, CENTCOM reported that 18,214 contractor personnel working for DOD were located in Afghanistan, down nearly 20% from the previous quarter.[79] In Afghanistan as of the first quarter

[74] "McCaul Statement on Afghanistan," Foreign Affairs Committee Republicans, November 16, 2020.

[75] Letter from President Donald J. Trump, January 13, 2021.

[76] For past CRS analysis, see CRS Report R43074, *Department of Defense's Use of Contractors to Support Military Operations: Background, Analysis, and Issues for Congress*, by Heidi M. Peters.

[77] Some observers believe that the fallout from Abu Ghraib and other incidents, such as the shooting of Iraqi civilians by private security contractors hired by the United States government, have hurt the credibility of the U.S. military and undermined efforts in Iraq. See also: Department of Defense, "Quadrennial Defense Review Report," February 2010, p. 93; Commission on Wartime Contracting In Iraq and Afghanistan, "Transforming Wartime Contracting: Controlling Costs, Reducing Risk, Final Report to Congress," August, 2011, p. 5; U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Operational Contract Support: Management and Oversight Improvements Needed in Afghanistan," GAO-12-290, March 29, 2012, p. 1-2.

[78] See CRS Report R44116, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018*, by Heidi M. Peters and Sofia Plagakis.

[79] See Department of Defense, "Contractor Support of U.S. Operations in the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility," January 2021, at https://www.acq.osd.mil/log/ps/.CENTCOM_reports.html/FY21_1Q_5A_Jan2021.pdf.

of FY2021, about 35% of DOD's 18,214 reported individual contractors were U.S. citizens. Approximately 39% were third-country nationals and roughly 26% were local/host-country nationals (i.e., from Afghanistan).

In Afghanistan, armed and unarmed private security contractors have been employed to provide services such as protecting fixed locations; guarding traveling convoys; providing security escorts; and training police and military personnel. The number of private security contractor employees under contract with DOD in Afghanistan has fluctuated significantly over time, depending on various factors. As of the first quarter of FY2021, DOD reported contracting 2,920 private security contractors in Afghanistan (down from 4,164 in the previous quarter), with 1,575 specifically categorized as armed private security contractors (compared to 1,813 in the previous quarter). In the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, the United States committed to withdrawing the "private security contractors" of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners as part of the military withdrawal.[80] It is unclear if contractors in other mission categories would also be subject to the same withdrawal commitment.

What will happen to DOD materiel and other physical assets in the country?

As the U.S. military withdraws forces from Afghanistan, DOD plans to redeploy materiel and physical assets to the United States or to other AORs, transfer materiel to the Afghan government, or dispose of materiel according to statutory requirements and DOD regulations.[81] Joint redeployment operations—detailed in *Joint Publication 3-35 Deployment and Redeployment Operations*—typically begin with "prepare the force" activities. During these activities military planners determine movement requirements, identify materiel to be removed (or "retrograded") from the combat area, and identify materiel for other disposition via reutilization, transfer, sale, or destruction.[82] General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Commander of CENTCOM, stated in September 2020 that logistical efforts to remove or transfer materiel currently in Afghanistan were underway.[83] In December 2020, General McKenzie confirmed that equipment levels would be further reduced to match decreased troop levels.[84]

[80] See Department of State, "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," February 29, 2020, at https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf.

[81] See Department of Defense, "Manual 4160.21, Defense Materiel Disposition: Disposal Guidance and Procedures Volumes 1-4," at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodm/416021_vol1.pdf?ver=2019-10-02-080613-750.

[82] See Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-35 Deployment and Redeployment Operations*, January 10, 2018, at https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_35.pdf.

[83] Department of Defense, "General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. interview with Courtney Kube Sept. 10th 2020," September 16, 2020, at https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2349252/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-interview-with-courtney-kube-sept-10th-2020/.

[84] Department of Defense, "General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. interview on the record Media Round Table – Dec. 20th, 2020," December 21, 2020, at https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2453511/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-interview-on-the-record-media-round-table-dec-20t/.

Department of Defense, "Gen McKenzie and Luis Martinez On the Record Interview 22 DEC 20," December 24, 2020, at https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2456788/gen-mckenzie-and-luis-martinez-on-the-record-interview-22-dec-20/.

U.S. Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) moves equipment and supplies belonging to redeploying units to the unit's new location, whether the unit's home station or another area of operations. Non-unit redeployed equipment and supplies are typically redistributed according to plans developed by the Joint Staff, Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), and the military services with input from Combatant Commanders.[85] This materiel may be redistributed to other U.S. forces, transferred to the host nation or other foreign nations, or moved to storage and maintenance facilities belonging to the military services, DLA, or the General Services Administration. Certain physical assets, such as concrete barriers, may be left in place due to their low value and high transportation costs. Additionally, DLA may demilitarize and destroy items deemed unserviceable or whose transportation costs exceed their demilitarization costs.[86] As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley said of some U.S. equipment in a December 2020 visit to Afghanistan, "It's more efficient and cost-effective to just destroy it."[87]

The Defense Security Cooperation Agency is responsible for monitoring the end use of defense materiel transferred to the Afghan government in accordance with the transfer agreement, the Foreign Assistance Act, and the Arms Export Control Act.[88] The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has identified deficiencies in U.S. end use monitoring efforts, in part "because the security situation in Afghanistan prevents some inventories from taking place."[89] Further deteriorations in security conditions would likely further constrain the United States' ability to account for the use of U.S.-supplied materiel.

Afghanistan's landlocked location affects the costs and time required to transport materiel out of the country. While materiel retrograded from Iraq was largely moved through Kuwait's seaports, materiel in Afghanistan has in the past been moved by means of multiple routes and modes of transportation.[90] In general, airlifting equipment to nearby seaports for multimodal transport is typically more expensive than surface transportation and may be limited by the size and availability of cargo aircraft. Transporting materiel to seaports via ground routes is often less costly, however, in the case of Afghanistan, such transport requires the cooperation of other nations, such as Pakistan.

What is the future of the U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan?

As the position of U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan is vacant, the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires currently serves as the Chief of Mission (COM) in Afghanistan. The Foreign Service Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-465, as amended) provides that each COM has full responsibility for the direction, coordination, and supervision of all U.S. executive branch employees in the country in question, with the exception of Voice of America correspondents on official assignment and employees under the command of a United States area military commander.[91] Additionally, National Security

[85] Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-35 Deployment and Redeployment Operations*, Jan. 10, 2018, pp. IV-7.

[86] For examples of equipment destroyed in previous drawdowns, see U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Afghanistan Equipment Drawdown: Progress Made, but Improved Controls in Decision Making Could Reduce Risk of Unnecessary Expenditures*, GAO-14-768, September 30, 2014, pp. 27.

[87] Williams, *Defense One*, op. cit.

[88] See CRS Report R46337, *Transfer of Defense Articles: Sale and Export of U.S.-Made Arms to Foreign Entities*, by Nathan J. Lucas and Michael J. Vassalotti.

[89] SIGAR 21-11 Audit Report "Military Equipment Transferred to the Afghan Government: DOD Did Not Conduct Required Monitoring to Account for Sensitive Articles," SIGAR, December 2020. See also SIGAR 14-84Audit Report "Afghan National Security Forces: Actions Needed to Improve Weapons Accountability," SIGAR, July 2014.

[90] "*Afghanistan Equipment Drawdown*," op. cit., pp. 9-10, 25.

[91] See 22 U.S.C. §3927.

Decision Directive 38 (NSDD-38) establishes a process through which the COM exercises their authority to determine the size, composition, and mandate of U.S. Government executive branch agencies at their mission.[92] The State Department, through the Chargé d'Affaires (or the U.S. Ambassador, when this position is not vacant) and with the support of the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, is responsible for overseeing and coordinating inter-agency civilian operations and personnel in Afghanistan.[93]

The number of U.S. personnel under COM authority in Afghanistan appears to have fluctuated over the past several years, at times roughly correlating with the U.S military footprint there. While the State Department does not publicly discuss the number of U.S. personnel at overseas posts for security reasons, public reporting indicates that the number of such personnel assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul increased from 340 in 2008 to as many as 1,330 in 2012, in the midst of the so-called civilian surge that corresponded with a major surge in U.S military personnel in the country.[94] Yet as the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan declined during most of the previous decade, Embassy Kabul underwent an $800 million expansion project and the number of civilian personnel there increased.[95]

The State Department has not announced a new initiative to adjust the U.S. civilian footprint in Afghanistan in connection with the recent military drawdown. However, in 2019 the State Department ordered a comprehensive review of its overseas presence in Afghanistan shortly after President Trump indicated his support for cutting the number of U.S. troops from the then-existing level of 14,000. The State Department reportedly maintained that the results of this review would allow the United States to maintain a strong diplomatic presence in Afghanistan "focused on achieving a sustainable peace, supporting a successful presidential election, and moving the Afghans toward self-reliance."[96] The State Department subsequently began efforts to reduce the U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan by approximately 50%, with the goal of completing the cuts by September 2019. The State Department is required to submit quarterly reports to certain congressional committees on the number of U.S. personnel in Afghanistan under Chief of Mission authority, including locally employed staff and contractors.[97]

With respect to the review, the State Department's Office of Inspector General (OIG) observed that the right-sizing review was expedited because Embassy Kabul had already been directed to reduce staff. The OIG further noted that the State Department refrained from reassessing and adjusting its strategic objectives in the country to align with the staff reductions. It noted, for example, that "preventing the recurrence of a terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan... remained [a] stated policy objective even though personnel who advanced [this] objective were significantly reduced."[98] Others acknowledged that reductions of diplomatic personnel may be necessary, but stressed their opposition to any cuts that would impede the ability of U.S. diplomats to report on local events and interact with Afghan stakeholders.[99] The State Department

[92] U.S. Department of State, Foreign Affairs Manual, "6 FAH-5 H-351.2 NSDD-38 Process."

[93] U.S. Department of State, Foreign Affairs Manual, "2 FAM 113.1 Chief of Mission and Principal Officer."

[94] Lara Jakes, "As U.S. Troops Leave Afghanistan, Diplomats Are Left to Fill Uncertain Mission," *New York Times*, March 22, 2020.

[95] Tom Bowman, "U.S. Looking To Reduce Kabul Embassy Staff As Afghanistan Mission Changes," National Public Radio, February 14, 2019.

[96] Ibid.

[97] For example, see Sec. 7019(e) of P.L. 116-260 and pp. 114-115 of H.Rept. 116-444.

[98] U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General, "Inspector General Statement on the Department of State's Major Management and Performance Challenges," OIG-EX-21-01, November 18, 2020.

[99] Kylie Atwood, "US scaling back Afghanistan embassy at crucial moment in peace talks," *CNN*, August 1, 2019.

and others defended the cuts as necessary, arguing that the department needed to focus its limited resources on confronting Russia and China, and that Afghanistan was a logical place to seek cuts due to the embassy's unique status as the largest U.S. overseas post.[100]

Similar sentiments may accompany efforts by the Biden Administration to further adjust the U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. The scope of such efforts also may depend on implementation of the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement and the course of negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban representatives on the future of the Afghan state.

What are the security implications for the U.S. Embassy and diplomatic personnel?

Under reciprocal treaty obligations, host nations are obligated to provide security for the diplomatic facilities of sending states.[101] However, instances in which host nations have been unable or not fully committed to fulfilling this responsibility have sometimes left U.S. facilities vulnerable, especially in extraordinary circumstances. U.S. embassies and other overseas posts therefore employ a layered approach to security, including not only the measures taken by a host country, but also additional U.S.-coordinated measures, to include armed Diplomatic Security Service agents, U.S.-trained and/or contracted local security guards, and U.S. Marine Security Guard (MSG) detachments. In Afghanistan and elsewhere, these elements, including the MSG detachments, are under the supervision and control of the COM and the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) Regional Security Officer at post rather than the U.S. military.

Some observers note that following the 2012 killing of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Benghazi, Libya, DS have improved strategic and interagency contingency planning, along with much closer coordination with military partners.[102] Furthermore, Congress has passed laws intended to enhance the State Department's capabilities while providing for more robust congressional oversight in these areas. For example, P.L. 114-323 included provisions that required the State Department to provide monthly briefings to Congress on diplomatic security matters, updated the criteria the State Department must employ when developing contingency plans at overseas posts, and expanded mandatory security training requirements for personnel. As demonstrated by the U.S. response to the January 2020 siege of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, DS can also request support from Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Forces, Crisis Response units to augment an embassy's MSG detachment in crisis situations. These units are tailored to conduct crisis response, contingency operations, theater security cooperation, enabling operations, and other missions as directed by their assigned combatant command. One such unit is assigned to CENTCOM, and comprises a rotational contingent of approximately 2,000 Marines, sailors, and support elements.[103] Despite these developments, concerns persist regarding the State Department's diplomatic security programs. The State OIG regularly cites the protection

[100] Jonathan Landay and Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: U.S. accelerates plan to drastically downsize Kabul embassy," Reuters, April 25, 2019; Robbie Gramer, "U.S. Eyes Plans to Cut Diplomatic Staff in Afghanistan, Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, April 5, 2019.

[101] For example, see the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations at https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?src=treaty&mtdsg_no=iii-3&chapter=3&lang=en. The United States and Afghanistan are among the states parties to this treaty.

[102] Fred Burton, "Protecting Diplomats Following Soleimani's Death," *Lawfare*, January 5, 2020.

[103] United States Marine Corps, "Special Purpose MAGTF Crisis Response-Central Command," at https://www.imef.marines.mil/Units/SPMAGTF-CR-CC/About/.

of people and facilities among the most significant management and performance challenges the State Department faces in its annual reporting on this subject.[104]

Neither the State Department nor the Department of Defense disclose the number of MSGs or other security elements serving at each overseas post. However, press reports indicate that as the State Department has reduced the U.S. diplomatic footprint in Kabul, this has affected the number of security personnel at the embassy.[105] Some observers have raised concerns that security restrictions affecting the movement of diplomats in Afghanistan prevent them from regularly leaving embassy grounds to engage with Afghan officials and local stakeholders. They add that in the past, U.S. diplomats who served in provincial reconstruction teams were able to travel throughout the country and engage closely with local governments.[106] Reductions in the number of security personnel in Afghanistan may further limit the ability of diplomats to operate in the field. However, others may view these restrictions as appropriate given acute security risks both in Kabul and throughout Afghanistan.

How do the drawdown and withdrawal commitment compare to possible historical analogues?

Policymakers and analysts have compared the U.S. drawdown in, and potential full withdrawal from, Afghanistan to a number of historical episodes, usually to argue that such U.S. moves would be detrimental to U.S. interests.

The Collapse Scenario: U.S. Withdrawal from Vietnam and Aftermath

Some, including former Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, have used the 1973 negotiated withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam and the subsequent fall of the South Vietnamese government to warn that a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan might have a similar result.

In January 1973, after years of talks, negotiators representing the United States, U.S.-backed South Vietnam, and North Vietnam (as well as the North Vietnamese-backed shadow Provisional Revolutionary Government, or PRG, in South Vietnam) signed an agreement in Paris, France, to end the decades-long U.S. involvement in the war. The Paris Peace Accords called for a cease-fire, the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. troops within 60 days, a prohibition on the provision of new U.S. military equipment to South Vietnam beyond a replacement basis, a political reconciliation commission in the south, and a demilitarized zone between the north and the south.

Other than the full withdrawal of U.S. forces (completed by the end of March 1973), few of the provisions were implemented, as violence continued unabated on both sides. U.S. military aid to the government of South Vietnam decreased significantly as well, under a congressionally imposed funding ceiling and other restrictions. In early 1975, in light of what North Vietnamese leaders perceived as a more ambivalent U.S. attitude toward South Vietnam and reduced U.S. military assistance, North Vietnam launched a major military offensive against the South. South Vietnamese forces withdrew from wide swaths of territory with the intention of holding important coastal areas, but withdrew from these as well in the face of the North Vietnamese advance. North Vietnamese forces took the capital Saigon on April 29, 1975, and the South Vietnamese

[104] See U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General, "Inspector General Statement on the Department of State's Major Management and Performance Challenges," OIG-EX-20-02, January 22, 2020.

[105] See footnote 98.

[106] See footnotes footnote 98 and footnote 99.

government unconditionally surrendered the next day to the communist PRG (which merged with North Vietnam in 1976 to form the present-day Socialist Republic of Vietnam).

Some observers charge that the goal of U.S. policy in Afghanistan is to secure a "decent interval" before the collapse of the government in Kabul as then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called the period between a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and the inevitable fall of the U.S.-supported government there.[107] For their part, U.S. officials have stated that the "strategic stalemate" of recent years between the Afghan government and Taliban is likely to persist, but only with U.S. support. In December 2020, General Milley described the stalemate as a situation "where the government of Afghanistan was never going to militarily defeat the Taliban and the Taliban, as long as we were supporting the government of Afghanistan, was never going to militarily defeat the regime."[108] The military defeat of the Afghan government would have potentially dramatic effects on the security and human rights of the Afghan people (possibly spurring a mass exodus of refugees, as happened in South Vietnam in 1975),[109] and on U.S. security concerns.

The Civil War Scenario: Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Aftermath

The Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the subsequent civil war there, has emerged as a frequently referenced possible historical analogue for the U.S. experience there.

The Soviet Union deployed troops into Afghanistan in December 1979 to buttress the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government, which was established after a 1978 coup. Growing instability in Afghanistan, including factional fighting within the PDPA and a nascent grassroots popular uprising against the PDPA's reform program, led Soviet leaders to order the initial invasion of about 80,000 Soviet troops, which quickly took control of urban centers, major lines of communication, and other strategic points. Soviet troops, which numbered over 100,000 at their peak, partnered with Afghan government forces and various paramilitaries but generally bore the brunt of fighting against armed opposition groups, collectively known as the *mujahideen*. *Mujahideen* groups, supported by Pakistan, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and others, led a guerilla campaign against Soviet and Afghan government forces. The Soviet Union also "sent thousands of technical specialists and political advisors" to Afghanistan to "help stabilize the government and broaden its base of support," though these missions were often undermined by "infighting and lack of coordination among advisers and other Soviet officials."[110]

By 1985, newly installed Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had decided to seek a withdrawal from Afghanistan.[111] Increasingly, Soviet attention turned to pressuring squabbling Afghan leaders to unify and building up the Afghan military, which suffered from high rates of desertion, attrition, and casualties. U.N.-mediated talks in Geneva between delegations from the

[107] James Pinkerton, "Searching for Kissinger's 'Decent Interval' in Afghanistan," *American Conservative*, September 4, 2019.

[108] "A Conversation with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley," Brookings Institute, December 2, 2020.

[109] "Peace with Honor: What Vietnam Can Teach Us about How To Leave Afghanistan," *Time*, May 24, 2019.

[110] Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal From Afghanistan* (Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 33-35.

[111] Soviet military losses were substantial (around 13,000 Soviet troops killed and 40,000 wounded over the course of the decade-long intervention), but experts disagree about the extent to which these casualties motivated the decision to withdraw. Other reasons cited include international isolation, the economic cost of the war effort, the potential for political unrest within the Soviet Union, and the greater importance Gorbachev placed on his reform program. See Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

governments of Afghanistan (supported by the Soviet Union) and Pakistan (supported by the U.S.) began in March 1982 and continued fitfully until the signing of the Geneva Accords in April 1988. The Soviet withdrawal began in May 1988, per the Accords, and finished in February 1989.

Mujahideen forces, as a coalition of rival nonstate movements, were excluded from U.N. negotiations. Various entities among them continued to receive support from the United States, Pakistan, and other backers after the Soviet withdrawal, as the Afghan government continued to receive military and financial support from Moscow. With this support, the Afghan government (led by Najibullah Ahmadzai, commonly known by his first name) defied expectations among some in the U.S. government that it would collapse after the Soviet military withdrawal and instead maintained its position for several years.[112]

In September 1991, as the Soviet Union was engulfed in a major political crisis that would eventually lead to its dissolution in December 1991, Soviet and U.S. officials announced a final cutoff in their countries' support to their respective clients, effective January 1992. With the help of key defections, *mujahideen* and other Afghan groups overthrew Najibullah in April 1992. The country entered into a four-year civil war from which the Taliban would emerge and eventually take control of most of the country (and later offer sanctuary to Al Qaeda). Upon their entry to Kabul in September 1996, one of the Taliban's first acts was to torture and publicly hang Najibullah, a scenario President Ghani has referenced publicly to warn against a U.S. withdrawal.[113]

Other Afghans and officials describe a ruinous civil war as a potential outcome if the United States withdraws and/or intra-Afghan talks fail.[114] National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib said in October 2020 that the threat of civil war was real and even "very likely."[115] Some U.S. officials also raise the prospect: Afghan commander General Scott Austin said in an October 2020 interview that "what we are trying to do is…keep pushing the situation back into a place where Afghanistan is not faced with civil war."[116]

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan also demonstrates the importance of financial and material support in buttressing a partner government. In addition to the nearly twenty-year U.S. military presence, Congress has appropriated over $86 billion for Afghan security since FY2002, largely through the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF). The ASFF, which has averaged between $4 billion and $5 billion in recent years, funds a wide range of activities, including procuring ammunition, vehicles, spare parts, and facilities for Afghan forces and contracting logistical support to paying Afghan forces' salaries. The appropriation of assistance funding is a congressional prerogative. Some Members have raised concerns that a withdrawal might impair the United States' ability to monitor the distribution and effectiveness of U.S. aid, a long-standing U.S. concern.[117]

[112] See, for example, Special National Intelligence Estimate 37-89, "Afghanistan: The War in Perspective," Director of Central Intelligence, November 1989 (approved for release December 16, 2010).

[113] "Transcript: Afghanistan's vision for peace: A conversation with H.E. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani," Atlantic Council, June 11, 2020.

[114] Kathy Gannon, "Afghans say preventing next war as vital as ending this one," Associated Press, October 18, 2020.

[115] Lyse Doucet, "Taliban conflict: Afghan fears rise as U.S. ends its longest war," BBC, October 20, 2020.

[116] Ibid.

[117] See Senator Reed's remarks at Senate Armed Service Committee Hearing on U.S. Central Command, February 5, 2019.

The ISIS Scenario: U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq and aftermath

A more recent possible analogue is the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, which some have said allowed for the subsequent rise of the Islamic State, warning that a withdrawal from Afghanistan could similarly empower terrorist groups.

In response to rising U.S. domestic opposition to the U.S. military presence in Iraq (reflected in increasingly large congressional votes in favor of a U.S. withdrawal), the George W. Bush Administration negotiated two bilateral agreements with the Iraqi government, including a status of forces agreement. These accords, signed in November 2008 and approved by the Iraqi government the next month, required the United States to withdraw combat forces from Iraqi cities, towns, and localities by June 30, 2009, with all U.S. forces withdrawing from Iraq by the end of December 2011. President Barack Obama subsequently announced his plans to execute a drawdown and eventual withdrawal from Iraq in compliance with the status of forces agreement, setting and achieving his Administration's goal of withdrawing all U.S. combat forces from Iraq by the end of August 2010. On September 1, 2010, remaining U.S. forces in Iraq inaugurated Operation New Dawn—the U.S. mission to continue training and support for Iraqi security forces.

Given ongoing security challenges posed by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and other groups, Obama administration officials expected that the Iraqi government would request a continued U.S. presence beyond 2011. U.S. and Iraqi differences over the terms of such a continued presence, and specifically whether or not U.S. forces would be extended legal protections consistent with the existing status of forces agreement, created an impasse. After consulting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki, President Obama announced on October 21, 2011, that all remaining U.S. forces would be withdrawn by the end of the year. The last convoy of U.S. troops left Iraq for Kuwait on December 18, 2011; a NATO training mission (NATO Training Mission-Iraq, or NTM-I) also came to an end at the close of 2011.[118]

After the withdrawal of international forces in 2011, infighting between Iraqi political elites (largely along sectarian lines) led to a series of political crises and security conditions worsened as ISI attacks increased. ISI also infiltrated fighters into neighboring Syria to take part in the uprising there, and the group proclaimed itself the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also referred to as ISIS) in April 2013. In June 2014, ISIL fighters launched an offensive that captured wide swaths of northern Iraq, including Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, as Iraqi forces abandoned their positions (and, in many cases, their U.S.-supplied equipment). After again rebranding themselves as the Islamic State (IS) and declaring a caliphate in areas under their control, IS fighters neared Erbil in August 2014, the seat of the federally recognized Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), and committed mass atrocities against Iraqi Yazidis in northwestern Iraq. The United States launched airstrikes at the Iraqi government's request against IS targets.

Later, in September 2014, the Iraqi government of new Prime Minister Hayder Al Abadi formally requested international military intervention and support in a letter to the United Nations Security Council, and a nearly five year U.S. and coalition campaign against the terrorist group began. Congress enacted unique train and equip authorities to enable the executive branch to provide training and equipment to Iraqi security forces and non-state partner forces in Syria.[119]

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[118] NATO, "NATO's assistance to Iraq (Archived)" September 1, 2015.

[119] See also CRS In Focus IF10040, *DOD Train and Equip Authorities to Counter the Islamic State*, by Nina M. Serafino (archived).

Additionally (and also in response to a request from the Iraqi government), NATO launched a new training mission in Iraq in 2015, which continues today.

Some attributed the resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq to the 2011 U.S. withdrawal, arguing that U.S. disengagement from Iraq reduced pressure on terrorist groups and enabled an increase in sectarian tensions by allowing Iran-linked Iraqi politicians to behave provocatively toward Iraqi Sunnis.[120] U.S. officials saw and warned about the growing extremist threat to Iraq, although U.S. responses were insufficient to prevent military collapse in the face of poor decision making by Iraqi leaders and the opportunities presented to extremists by the conflict and chaos of neighboring Syria. Some Members of Congress who opposed the Trump Administration's November 2020 Afghanistan drawdown announcement cited the 2011 Iraq withdrawal as a cautionary example.[121] However, some U.S. officials argue that while continued U.S. training after 2011 could have improved some Iraqi military capabilities, the root of the Islamic State's success in Iraq was sectarian antagonism, exacerbated by actors in the Iraqi political system: as former U.S. Ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey wrote in 2014, "the common argument that U.S. troops could have produced different Iraqi political outcomes is hogwash."[122]

President Obama appeared to express a related view. When asked in August 2014 about whether conditions in Iraq gave him pause about the then-planned U.S. pullout of Afghanistan, he said:

> I think the real lesson in Afghanistan is that if factions in a country after a long period of civil war do not find a way to come up with a political accommodation; if they take maximalist positions and their attitude is, I want 100 percent of what I want and the other side gets nothing, then the center doesn't hold…So that's a real lesson I think for Afghanistan coming out of Iraq is, if you want this thing to work, then whether it's different ethnicities, different religions, different regions, they've got to accommodate each other, otherwise you start tipping back into old patterns of violence. And it doesn't matter how many U.S. troops are there.[123]

In the case of Afghanistan, the regional Islamic State affiliate (Islamic State Khorasan Province, or ISKP, established in 2015) is still active, though not as much as in recent years, when it had a measure of territorial control in some parts of the country. Crucially, the Taliban opposes ISKP and has fought and defeated the group, sometimes in tandem with Afghan forces. The United States has even provided air support that "helped" Taliban offensives against the Islamic State in some limited circumstances.[124] It therefore seems unlikely that the Taliban exercising a greater measure of control in Afghanistan (via a political settlement or military conquest) would result in gains for ISKP. However, in a more unstable and decentralized scenario, where the Taliban further weaken the Afghan government but are unable to take power themselves, ISKP could increase its activity.

Whereas any post-U.S. withdrawal increase in Taliban influence would likely have negative implications for ISKP, Al Qaeda would seem to benefit. Al Qaeda is still assessed to have a presence in Afghanistan and its decades-long ties with the Taliban appear to remain close: in May 2020, the United Nations reported that senior Taliban leaders "regularly consulted" with their AQ

[120] Danielle Pletka, "What Obama Has Wrought in Iraq," *U.S. News and World Report*, June 13, 2014.

[121] See statements by Senator Mitch McConnell, Senator Ben Sasse, and Representative Adam Kinzinger.

[122] James Jeffrey, "Behind the U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2, 2014.

[123] White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the President on Iraq," August 9, 2014.

[124] "General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. *Defense One* Interview with Katie Bo Williams," U.S. Central Command, December 10, 2020.

counterparts during negotiations with the United States.[125] Afghan forces' killing in October 2020 of a high-ranking AQ operative in Afghanistan's Ghazni province, where he reportedly was living and working with Taliban forces, further underscores questions about AQ-Taliban links and Taliban intentions with regard to Al Qaeda.[126]

U.S. officials have disagreed on the extent to which the Taliban are fulfilling their counterterrorism commitments concerning Al Qaeda. On July 1, 2020, then-Secretary Pompeo said he had seen indications that the Taliban were actively combatting Al Qaeda, while on July 15, 2020, General McKenzie said, "right now, it is simply unclear to me that the Taliban has taken any positive steps."[127] Other assessments align with General McKenzie's analysis: the U.S. Treasury reported in a January 4, 2021, letter that "as of 2020, al-Qaeda is gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under the Taliban's protection."[128] It is unclear what verification mechanisms might be in place to ensure Taliban compliance with the commitment to prevent Al Qaeda from operating in Afghanistan, and to what extent the U.S. withdrawal might be paused or reversed based on Taliban action with regard to Al Qaeda.

What views has President Biden expressed about U.S. policy in Afghanistan?

President Biden, when Vice President, reportedly opposed the Obama Administration's decision to increase U.S. force levels in 2009.[129] He also expressed skepticism about both U.S. development assistance and troop levels as a candidate during the 2020 primary campaign, indicating that he may be supportive of withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Some relevant statements from then-candidate Biden are below:

- "I also think we should not have combat troops in Afghanistan. It's long overdue. It should end." (June 28, 2019)[130]
- "I would bring American combat troops in Afghanistan home during my first term. Any residual U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would be focused only on counterterrorism operations." (July 30, 2019)[131]
- "The whole purpose of going to Afghanistan was to not have a counter insurgency, meaning that we're going to put that country together. It can not be put together." (September 12, 2019)[132]

[125] Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan, U.N. Document S/2020/415, released May 27, 2020.

[126] Jeff Seldin, "US Calls Death of al-Qaida Official a Major Setback for Terror Group," Voice of America, October 26, 2020.

[127] U.S. Department of State, "Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo with Bret Baier of Fox News Special Report," July 1, 2020; Carla Babb, "VOA Exclusive: CENTCOM chief says US can do job in Iraq with fewer forces," Voice of America, July 15, 2020.

[128] "Memorandum for Department of Defense Lead Inspector General, Department of the Treasury," January 4, 2021. Available at https://oig.treasury.gov/sites/oig/files/2021-01/OIG-CA-21-012.pdf.

[129] Coll, *Directorate S*, op. cit., pp. 353-354, 367.

[130] "Transcript from Night 2 of the First 2019 June Democratic Debates," Rev.com, June 28, 2019.

[131] "The Presidential Candidates on the War in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, July 30, 2019.

[132] "September Houston Democratic Debate Transcript – Third Debate," Rev.com, September 12, 2019.

- "The first thing I would do as president the United States of America is to make sure that we brought all combat troops home and into a negotiation with the Taliban. But I would leave behind special forces in small numbers to be able to deal with the potential threat unless we got a real good negotiation accomplished to deal with terrorism." (December 20, 2019)[133]
- "…with regard Afghanistan…The only thing we should be doing is dealing with terrorism in that region… there is no possibility of uniting that country, no possibility at all of making it a whole country. But it is possible to see to it that they're not able to launch more attacks from the region on the United States of America." (February 7, 2020)[134]
- "I can think of 10 countries where women and or children and or people are being persecuted or being hurt. But the idea of us going to be able to use our armed forces to solve every single internal problem that exists throughout the world is not within our capacity. The question is, is America's vital self-interest at stake or the vital self-interest of one of our allies at stake?" (February 23, 2020)[135]

Members of the Biden Administration have stated publicly that they will review the U.S.-Taliban agreement and broader U.S. policy in Afghanistan. In remarks on January 29, 2021, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan noted the late April 2021 deadline for U.S. withdrawal, but argued that it should be conditional on Taliban actions, specifically that they (1) cut ties with terrorist groups; (2) "meaningfully reduce levels of violence," and (3) participate in serious negotiations with the Afghan government.[136] Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on January 28, 2021, that the Taliban are "not meeting their commitments" with regard to al Qaeda and reducing violence.[137] He further argued that unless they met those commitments, reaching a negotiated political settlement would remain difficult, but he did not say how the Taliban's failure to meet to those conditions or the failure of intra-Afghan negotiations might impact the U.S. troop presence.

What policies/actions might the Biden Administration pursue in light of the drawdown?

Experts have laid out a number of approaches that the Biden Administration, which is reportedly conducting a review of the U.S.-Taliban agreement and broader U.S. Afghanistan policy, might take in light of the U.S. troop drawdown.[138] One longtime Afghanistan observer, in surveying the policy landscape that the new administration confronts in Afghanistan, has said "there are no good or easy options—only less bad ones."[139]

- **Withdraw all U.S. troops immediately irrespective of conditions.** President Trump's nominee for ambassador to Afghanistan wrote in November 2020 to support an immediate total withdrawal of all U.S. troops. He argued that there is

[133] "December Democratic Debate Transcript: Sixth Debate from Los Angeles," Rev.com, December 20, 2019.

[134] "New Hampshire Democratic Debate Transcript," Rev.com, February 7, 2020.

[135] "Transcript: Joe Biden on Face the Nation," CBS News, February 23, 2020.

[136] "Passing the Baton 2021: Securing America's Future Together," United States Institute of Peace, January 29, 2021.

[137] Lolita Baldor, "Taliban violence raises questions about US troop withdrawal," Associated Press, January 28, 2021.

[138] "Biden Administration to review Taliban deal," Al Jazeera, January 23, 2021.

[139] Steve Coll, "Joe Biden Will Have to Address the War in Afghanistan—Again," *New Yorker*, January 20, 2021.

"little reason to wait for some more perfect moment in the future" given what he saw as the inevitability that the Taliban will both enter power in some fashion and reject any kind of U.S. military presence.[140] He also dismissed concerns that a withdrawal would empower Al Qaeda, arguing that an empowered Taliban would be unlikely to again risk its position by sheltering the group, which is no longer as much of a threat to the United States as it used to be.

Others, doubting the political viability of raising U.S. troop levels again, argue that given the choice between 2,500 U.S. forces and zero, the Biden Administration should take the latter option to avoid being bound to "an escalating civil war," even if that means the fall of the Afghan government.[141]

- **Pause withdrawal pending Taliban ceasefire or other conditions.** Some have asserted that an international military presence is necessary to force the Taliban to make substantive concessions. Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis argued that the United States should "state clearly that until the Taliban lives up to a cease-fire agreement for at least 180 days there will be no further troop withdrawals."[142] Others recommend "enforcement of the conditionality already contained in the U.S.-Taliban agreement" by extending troop withdrawal deadlines if counterterrorism or other commitments are not met.[143]

  Leaders of the congressionally mandated Afghanistan Study Group contend that "No deal will emerge as long as the Taliban believes the United States is withdrawing troops imminently, without regard for the Taliban's behavior."[144] Accordingly, they recommend that the United States "reemphasize to the Taliban that the full withdrawal of U.S. troops is strictly conditional on progress toward peace." They also recommend "affirm[ing] the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan's constitutional order and the country's gains in human rights, including the rights of women," though it is unclear whether that should be a condition of any U.S. withdrawal. In its February 2021 final report, the Group recommends conditioning further U.S. troop withdrawals on Taliban steps to "contain terror groups," a reduction in Taliban violence, and "real progress toward a compromise political settlement."[145]

  It is unclear how insisting on such conditionality, and thereby maintaining U.S. troops beyond May 2021, might impact intra-Afghan talks or Taliban military action. Some who have written favorably about conditioning the U.S. troop presence on progress in the intra-Afghan talks concede that the talks are likely to

[140] William Ruger and Rajan Menon, "It's Time to Withdraw from Afghanistan," *Washington Post,* Nov. 17, 2020.

[141] Carter Malkasian, "Joe Biden is facing a dead end in Afghanistan," *Washington Post,* November 23, 2020.

[142] James Stavridis, "I Commanded NATO Forces in Afghanistan. Here's How We Could End This 'Forever War,'" *Time,* December 10, 2020.

[143] Scott Worden, "Afghanistan Withdrawal Should Be Based on Conditions, Not Timelines," United States Institute of Peace, November 19, 2020.

[144] Kelly Ayotte, Joseph Dunford, and Nancy Lindborg, "An abrupt U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan undermines the fragile peace," *Washington Post,* November 25, 2020.

[145] "Afghanistan Study Group Final Report," United States Institute of Peace, February 2021.

go on past May 2021, after which the presence of international forces "could prompt the Taliban to walk away from talks and intensify their attacks."[146]

- **Indefinite U.S. military presence to support Afghan forces.** Former Ambassador to Afghanistan and Pakistan Ryan Crocker said in December 2020 testimony before the House Armed Services Committee that the U.S. troop withdrawal should be suspended. More broadly, he argued that the lack of U.S. "strategic patience" undermines U.S. alliances and empowers U.S. adversaries and that the United States can and must maintain its commitment to Afghanistan: "The cost for the US in blood and treasure is a small fraction of what it was at the height of the troop surge. I look at it as a very reasonable insurance premium against the return of the perpetrators of 9/11."[147] Similarly, one analyst suggests reframing the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, comparing the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan to the decades-long U.S. presence in Western Europe and East Asia and arguing that U.S. personnel in Afghanistan "are no longer prosecuting a war but advancing a peace."[148]

  Former U.S. official Lauren Miller argues that having any residual U.S. military presence remain in Afghanistan is "not a real option," because the Taliban will not "abandon its number one demand and the rationale for its insurgency: the removal of all foreign forces." Instead, she recommends that the Biden Administration should try to negotiate an extension of the troop withdrawal timeline to buy time for deeper analysis of the terrorism threat and whether U.S. troops are necessary to counter it.[149]
- **Increase U.S. troops.** Some argue that 2,500 troops are insufficient to adequately support the Afghan military and recommend increasing U.S. force levels. One expert recommends 4,500; former Commander Stavridis suggested 5,000.[150]
- **Focus on regional cooperation.** Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin argued in a December 2020 piece that the Biden Administration should pair U.S. troop drawdowns with a comprehensive regional strategy, including China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and India, focused not just on common concerns about security, but also shared commercial, trade, and infrastructure interests. Doing so, Rubin argues, is not just critical for ensuring international support without which any intra-Afghan settlement will fail, but can also "serve as the foundation of a more ambitious and effective Asia policy."[151]

What questions might Congress consider when debating U.S. policy in Afghanistan?

In hearings, public statements, investigations, and debate over appropriations and authorizations measures, Members of Congress might consider the following questions as they continue to

[146] Robert Malley, "10 Conflict to Watch in 2021," International Crisis Group, December 30, 2020.

[147] Testimony of Ryan Crocker, House Committee on Armed Services Hearing on Afghanistan, November 20, 2020.

[148] Elliot Ackerman, "The Afghan War Is Over. Did Anyone Notice?" *New York Times*, December 17, 2020.

[149] Laurel Miller, "The Myth of a Responsible Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, January 22, 2021.

[150] Mick Mulroy, "Troop withdrawals shouldn't come at the expense of everything we've fought for," Middle East Institute, December 3, 2020; Stavridis, op. cit.

[151] Barett Rubin, "There Is Only One Way Out Of Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, December 9, 2020.

oversee U.S. policy in Afghanistan in light of the U.S. drawdown and in advance of the possible full U.S. and international withdrawal by April 2021.

U.S. Policy Interests

- **Counterterrorism.** What is the nature of the threat posed by terrorist groups in Afghanistan? How does it compare to the threat posed by terrorist groups elsewhere, or by other U.S. adversaries? Which components of the U.S. military presence and of U.S. assistance programs are most effective in countering terrorism, and which components are least effective? What affect might a military withdrawal have on U.S. counterterrorism efforts and how, if at all, can the United States continue those efforts without a military presence on the ground in Afghanistan?
- **Human Rights.** To what extent should support for democracy and human rights (including the rights of women and girls) drive U.S. policy in Afghanistan? How might a U.S. withdrawal impact human rights in Afghanistan, and how can the United States incentivize or otherwise back protections for human rights? What compromises by the Afghan government, if any, should the United States support in a possible political settlement?
- **Supporting the Afghan government.** How important is the Afghan government to U.S. policy interests as a U.S. ally? As a counterterrorism partner? As a democracy in a difficult region? Without a U.S. and foreign military presence, how might intra-Afghan political and security relationships change? In the event of a full U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, how likely are the Taliban to establish control over the country by force? What, if anything, could the United States do to forestall such an outcome short of direct military intervention?

Congressional Levers

- **Development assistance.** For what purposes, and at what levels, should the United States provide development assistance in Afghanistan? To what extent, if any, should challenges in distributing and monitoring assistance in Afghanistan influence Congress's willingness to appropriate aid? How might a full U.S. military withdrawal affect State Department and USAID operations and programs?
- **Military assistance.** How effective has U.S. assistance been in developing Afghan forces' military capabilities? For how long, and at what cost, should the United States be prepared to provide financial and materiel assistance to Afghan forces against the Taliban?
- **Conditionality.** To what extent do conditions on U.S. assistance lead to outcomes more favorable to U.S. policy? To what extent, if at all, does U.S. assistance represent leverage over the Afghan government, the Taliban, or other actors?
- **Legal framework.** Are current legal authorities overly broad, restrictive, or appropriate for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan? How does the 2001 AUMF reflect current congressional thinking about the proper mission of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan?

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