



FACT SHEET

The Case for a New U.S. Relationship with Afghanistan

Kelly Magsamen and Michael Fuchs July 29, 2019

Today, the United States must recognize that its military involvement in Afghanistan will not be the determining factor in Afghanistan's future, and it must transform its strategy to advance U.S. interests, encourage peace in Afghanistan, and focus on bigger threats to U.S. national security.

Questioning assumptions of U.S. strategy

For almost two decades, U.S. policymakers have consistently concluded that a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could result in unbearable costs, but they are unsure of how to achieve victory or end the war on acceptable terms for U.S. and Afghan security interests. The result, in one form or another, has been the status quo. U.S. policymakers must confront the assumptions underpinning U.S. policy, including:

- **The United States can only fight terrorists in the region with a presence in Afghanistan.** There is always an element of risk when it comes to counterterrorism, and there will be a risk in Afghanistan as well, just like there is right now. But the United States has also been able to decimate core al-Qaida capacity, and most of the terrorists and insurgents that U.S. forces are currently fighting are not focused on attacking the U.S. homeland.¹
- **Diplomacy will not work without sustained U.S. military pressure.** There is another untested diplomatic possibility—that U.S. withdrawal could help foster a peace deal. In some ways, the U.S. military presence has equally served as a strong incentive for the status quo to the parties in conflict. This does not mean that a U.S. withdrawal would induce a peace deal, but it should raise serious questions about the assumption that the U.S. military presence is necessary as leverage with the Taliban.
- **The train, advise, and assist mission for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces just needs more time to work.** The United States has been training the Afghan security forces for roughly 17 years, and despite improvements, the Afghan forces are still not capable of securing the country on their own.² It seems highly unlikely that just a few more years of training will make a substantial difference.



For more detail, see also, "The Case for a New U.S. Relationship with Afghanistan" by Kelly Magsamen and Michael Fuchs

- **A smaller counterterrorism force will adequately protect U.S. security interests and does not require a larger U.S. military presence.** There would still be significant challenges to this option: The Afghan government may not buy into a U.S. military presence that is not training and supporting Afghan forces; force protection requirements would require a greater level of Afghan capability as an outer layer of defense at bases or a larger U.S. military presence for force protection; and a smaller U.S. counterterrorism presence would still need to rely on intelligence networks that would be diminished by a broader U.S. withdrawal. Therefore, a smaller U.S. force will face real constraints on mission effectiveness, which may not be as attractive an option.
- **Afghan women will be better off if the United States stays.** While women's rights have improved significantly since 2001, the American military presence is not the key driver of improvements for Afghan women. The only way women's rights are going to improve and not face setbacks post-U.S. withdrawal is through the choices of the Afghan people and its government, which can be pushed by sustained international political engagement in the context of peace negotiations.

Weighing the risks of a U.S. military withdrawal

Another driver of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan are the supposed risks of leaving. Any U.S. strategy must grapple with the following risks:

- **Terrorists could reconstitute a safe haven.** Afghanistan will always present a safe haven because of its lack of effective governance. But the main threat to Afghan stability today is the Taliban, and they are not—and never have been—focused on attacking the U.S. homeland.
- **Violence might spread, and the Afghan government could collapse.** This risk will depend heavily on the status of a political agreement between Afghan factions. But the U.S. military is not solving the problem; in 2018, even with the U.S. military presence, Afghanistan had more civilian deaths than at any point since the United Nations began keeping records.³
- **The Taliban could fail to live up to their political or security commitments.** The U.S. military cannot mitigate this risk. It depends heavily on Afghan politics, the looming threat of U.S. reengagement, and international pressure and financial incentives.
- **Without a military presence, the U.S. intelligence picture on the ground will be less clear.** While the United States would lose some intelligence insight with a military withdrawal, it is used to operating with less than optimal intelligence pictures in places such as Iran, North Korea, and Yemen. This risk is real but should be weighed against the potential benefits of a withdrawal.

- **When the U.S. military leaves, the international community could follow.** While a U.S. military withdrawal could sap political support for assistance to Afghanistan, continued U.S. support for the Afghan government and people is certainly possible: The financial cost will be far less than funding the deployment of U.S. troops and equipment, and the United States consistently funds billions of dollars for other strategic partners.

Strategic opportunity costs of the war for the United States

The United States must place its strategy in Afghanistan within the context of broader U.S. national security priorities. While the trade-offs in national security decision-making are almost always imprecise, today America is overinvested in Afghanistan compared with the relatively low-level threat that it poses. The opportunity costs for the United States to continue fighting a war in Afghanistan are enormous:

- **America faces bigger national security challenges.** As climate change worsens, authoritarianism grows, and powers such as Russia and China become more assertive, the United States must significantly reorient its priorities. And it is debatable just how much of a threat terrorists in Afghanistan pose to U.S. interests today.
- **Afghanistan diverts resources away from other critical terrorist threats.** The United States faces even more likely and potent terrorist threats from domestic extremists and those inspired online, while the Islamic State is largely a threat to Europe and the Middle East—not the United States. While these trends could change, the current level of intelligence and defense resources invested in Afghanistan are disproportionate to the terrorism threat.⁴
- **The United States needs to make critical national investments at home to remain competitive with China.** While budgets are not easily fungible, \$45 billion in annual war costs would make a notable difference on many other domestic priorities, not to mention international priorities.
- **Managing a war saps U.S. focus and diplomatic energy.** While the United States is a global power, it does not have endless capacity. As long as the war in Afghanistan continues, it will rightly garner significant attention and resources from all sectors of the U.S. government.
- **Two decades of military conflict have eroded U.S. military readiness.** For the Pentagon, prosecuting the war in Afghanistan is a top-level priority that requires significant time from its top officials as well as tremendous resources.

A strategic transition in Afghanistan

Ultimately, the decision rests on what level of risk the United States is willing to accept given the strategic opportunity costs with respect to other national priorities. It is time to end this war responsibly and make a strategic transition to more pressing national challenges. To do so, the United States must do the following:

- 1. Pursue more aggressive multilateral diplomacy.** The United States must pursue multipronged diplomacy with the Taliban, the Afghan government, and regional neighbors to strike a peace deal that can stabilize the political and security situation in Afghanistan.
- 2. Immediately implement a phased military withdrawal.** The United States must begin a phased military withdrawal from Afghanistan. While this process should not be tied explicitly to progress in negotiating a peace deal with the Taliban, and a peace deal cannot be a precondition for withdrawal, part of its goal should be to spark progress in talks with the Taliban—which has always made withdrawal a condition of progress—and to incentivize regional actors to play a more constructive role in Afghanistan.
- 3. Secure a long-term peace dividend for the Afghan people.** While the United States should withdraw its military from Afghanistan, ending the war should not end America's commitment to Afghanistan. In fact, in some ways, it may require greater U.S. financial and diplomatic commitments. The United States—together with international partners—must remain the leading financial supporter of the Afghan government and security forces.

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Endnotes

1 The vast majority of attacks in Afghanistan are carried out by the Taliban, which is not—and never has been—focused on attacking the U.S. homeland.

2 This assessment is based on numerous analyses, including: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan” (Arlington, VA: 2017), available at <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/reconstructing-the-andsf/index.html>.

3 Kathy Gannon, “2018 was the deadliest year for Afghan civilians since the UN started keeping track,” *The Associated Press*, February 24, 2019, available at <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/02/24/2018-was-the-deadliest-year-for-afghan-civilians-since-the-un-started-keeping-track/>.

4 U.S. Department of Defense, “Estimated Cost to Each U.S. Taxpayer of Each of the Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria” (Washington: 2017), available at https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2018/Section_1090_FY17_NDAA_Cost_of_Wars_to_Per_Taxpayer-July_2017.pdf; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Quarterly Report to the United States Congress” (Arlington, VA: 2019), p. 196, available at <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-04-30qr.pdf>; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), “Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Request” (Washington: 2019), available at https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/fy2020_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.