

Center for American Progress



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

By Kelly Magsamen and Michael Fuchs July 2019

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Introduction and summary

Shortly after al-Qaida attacked the United States on 9/11, the U.S. Congress authorized the use of military force against those groups or individuals who planned or perpetrated the attacks as well as those who harbored them. Ultimately, this led to the invasion of Afghanistan, where Osama bin Laden resided under the protection of the Taliban. Over the past almost 18 years, the mission and objective of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan has evolved over the course of three U.S. administrations, multiple military commanders, and multiple Afghan governments. Nearly 3,500 U.S. and NATO troops and tens of thousands of Afghans have been killed.¹ As of fiscal year 2019, the United States has spent approximately \$900 billion on direct war and reconstruction costs.²

With this massive loss of human life and financial cost, what has the international community achieved? The core of al-Qaida's capacity in the region has been decimated—which was the original aim of the U.S. military response—and the United States has significantly degraded the transnational capability of terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, today, the Taliban has regained in strength, and Pakistan remains a host and protector of certain terrorist and insurgent groups. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford—a former commander of the U.S. and NATO missions in Afghanistan—recently described the situation as a “stalemate.”³

The array of threats confronting the United States has also changed since 2001. Afghanistan is no longer the most urgent or important national security challenge facing the United States. America faces a wide array of other threats—including the rise of China, an aggressive Russia, and climate change—that require serious investments of U.S. resources and attention in the coming years. Meanwhile, the current deployment of 14,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan is the largest deployment of U.S. troops to any conflict in the world. U.S. annual financial investments of roughly \$45 billion a year in Afghanistan⁴—in addition to the significant time and attention of U.S. leaders—is dedicated to confronting a challenge that no longer ranks as one of the most significant national security threats the United States faces. Under

President Donald Trump, the Pentagon's own National Defense Strategy describes the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security to be the "reemergence of long-term strategic competition" with Russia and China.⁵ Terrorism is described as "a persistent condition" and certainly not an existential threat to the United States.

One challenge with U.S. policy in Afghanistan is that there is no convincing theory of victory—no matter what strategy the United States pursues, there is no guarantee that the United States can turn Afghanistan into a secure, well-governed democracy in the foreseeable future. And for many policymakers across administrations, the unknown risks of leaving have always outweighed the known risks of staying—and to stay requires a disproportionate burden on the U.S. military. It is time for a thorough evaluation of those risks and the assumptions that undergird them. And while the situations are not the same, the experience with the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and the subsequent rise of the Islamic State have made policymakers even more risk averse with respect to withdrawal from Afghanistan in recent years.

Thus, the United States has suffered from strategic inertia for at least a decade. But what has also become increasingly clear is that most of the American people are no longer connected to this war, and very few have been bearing the burden. According to a recent Pew Research Center poll, 58 percent of veterans say that the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting. In 2018, 49 percent of Americans believed that the United States had mostly failed to achieve its goals in Afghanistan, compared with only 35 percent who believed that it had mostly succeeded.⁶ And it is not just Americans who are pessimistic. In 2018, 61 percent of the Afghan people said that the country was moving in the wrong direction.

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:

- 1. Pursue more aggressive multilateral diplomacy.** Pursue multipronged diplomacy with the Taliban, 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.** 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 this 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. 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.

This report will review how the United States got to this point and the current status of U.S. and international efforts in Afghanistan. It will examine long-standing policy assumptions and weigh the risks of leaving Afghanistan militarily versus the strategic opportunity costs of staying.

After almost 18 years of war, the United States must place its strategy in Afghanistan within the context of broader U.S. national security priorities. Today, the United States must recognize that its military involvement in Afghanistan will not be the determining factor in Afghanistan’s future and must transform its strategy to advance U.S. interests and encourage peace in Afghanistan.

U.S. strategies in Afghanistan: Past and present

Over the past almost 18 years, the United States has tried numerous different strategies in Afghanistan to go after terrorists and build a stable government. Under the leadership of President George W. Bush, President Barack Obama, and now President Trump, the United States has tried a massive military footprint—nearly 100,000 U.S. troops alone at one point—and a smaller presence, reaching as low as 8,400 troops at the end of President Obama’s two terms in office.⁷ The United States has invested tens of billions of dollars in economic assistance to support development in Afghanistan. And the United States has engaged with regional and global actors to help stabilize the situation. However, few of these strategies have had a coherent set of goals or the means to achieve them.

Today, the United States’ primary goal remains counterterrorism, but it continues to be involved in a wide variety of tasks from training the Afghan military to combat operations to supporting economic growth. President Trump has appointed a special envoy, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, who has begun engaging in direct diplomacy with the Taliban after early engagements with the Taliban yielded a brief ceasefire in the summer of 2018.⁸ With diplomacy with the Taliban gaining more traction than ever before, there is cautious hope among long-time observers that reconciliation efforts could yield results.

Each administration has made its top priority eliminating the threat of terrorism and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists with global reach. But the fundamental problem has always been that without a stable Afghan government that has control over its territory, there will be no guarantee that terrorists will not find safe haven in Afghanistan—and no Afghan government has been able to secure the country on its own. Another key problem has been the role of Pakistan in enabling terrorists and insurgents in Afghanistan. The United States has been unable to effectively counter that threat without having troops in Afghanistan, which has also made the United States reliant on Pakistan for military supply, retrograde routes, and its support in negotiations with the Taliban.

While the original terrorist threat that the United States went to Afghanistan to fight is a shell of its former self, threats indeed remain and have evolved. According to a 2018 U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) report to Congress, 20 terrorist or insurgent groups exist in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁹ President Obama's decision at the end of his term to maintain a U.S. force posture of 8,400 troops¹⁰ rather than drawing down further—as originally intended—is an illustration of how the United States has viewed its battle in Afghanistan for almost 18 years: U.S. policymakers consistently come to the conclusion that a U.S. withdrawal may 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. Thus, the status quo remains in place.

The current state of the war

The current situation in Afghanistan defies simple characterizations. Below is a snapshot of the country today, taking into consideration the quality of life for Afghans, the security situation, and U.S. involvement:

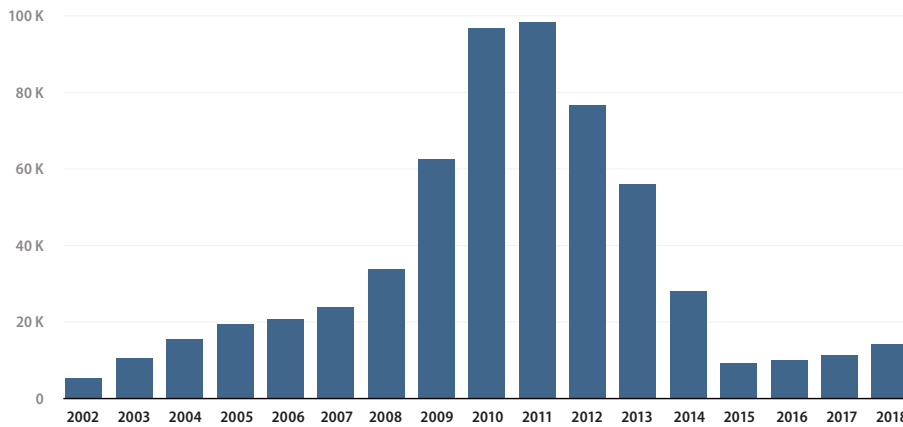
- **The United States, Afghanistan, and international allies have suffered extensive casualties and financial costs.** Since 2001, more than 2,400 U.S. soldiers have died in the war, as have more than 1,100 allied soldiers.¹¹ Roughly 100,000 Afghan civilians and military/police have died in the war.¹² The United States has spent roughly \$900 billion in direct costs on the war and reconstruction as of FY 2019.¹³ The Pentagon spent about \$45 billion on Afghanistan in FY 2019 alone—roughly the size of the entire budget of the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development as well as more than most federal departments and agencies.
- **Afghanistan’s security situation remains unstable, and the Taliban continues to make gains.** Afghanistan remains mired in a low-level civil war, and the Congressional Research Service notes that “by some measures insurgents are in control of or contesting more territory today than at any point since 2001.”¹⁴ According to 2018 Pentagon data, the Afghan central government controls or influences 65 percent of the country’s population—with the Taliban and insurgents directly controlling 12 percent and the remainder contested.¹⁵ The Taliban is by far the largest security threat; there are estimates of as high as a few thousand ISIS-K fighters; al-Qaida is much smaller than it once was; and the Haqqani network poses threats to U.S. troops stationed in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Attacks on Afghan and foreign forces and civilians—most of which are carried out by the Taliban and Haqqani network—continue on a regular basis. The U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) estimates there have been roughly 32,000 civilian deaths and 60,000 injuries since UNAMA began formal record keeping in 2009, with 2018 being the deadliest year for civilians since records started.¹⁷

- **The U.S. military and NATO forces continue to invest significant personnel, equipment, and resources into the conflict.** The United States has about 14,000 troops in Afghanistan alongside 8,500 troops from 38 other countries.¹⁸ U.S. forces train, advise, and assist the Afghan forces while also conducting counterterrorism operations. The NATO Resolute Support Mission focuses mostly on training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces while also providing noncombat enabler support such as intelligence and medical support to Afghan forces. This support includes the fundamental building and functioning of the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), which has required significant investment in new equipment and technology, all of which must be sustained by the United States and NATO allies given Afghan forces' limited institutional capacities.
- **Quality of life for the Afghan people has improved but remains low.** The quality of life for some Afghans has improved in the past almost 18 years; the economy has grown; women and girls have more rights than they did under Taliban rule; and life expectancy and mean years of schooling have increased significantly since 2000. Afghanistan's U.N. Human Development Index (HDI)—“a summary measure for assessing long-term progress in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living”—has improved in recent years. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's HDI remains in the “low human development category,” ranking 168 out of 189 countries.¹⁹ Economic conditions are still very poor for large swaths of the population; the poverty rate rose to 55 percent in 2016-2017; and hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced.²⁰
- **The Afghan central government remains politically unstable and has severe governance challenges.** The Afghan government is unstable, only controls half the country, and is constantly plagued by infighting among government officials and corruption. A power-sharing agreement was reached between rival factions in 2014 that resulted in the national unity government, but it remains tenuous heading into the presidential elections currently scheduled for 2019—elections that have already been delayed multiple times before.²¹

- **Pakistan continues to sabotage efforts at peace in Afghanistan.** Pakistan continues to play a double game as it both helps to fight insurgents and terrorists in the border regions and provides safe haven to the Taliban and al-Qaida.²² The turbulent relationship between the United States and Pakistan is once again at a low point, and even as Pakistan is wary of continued U.S. scrutiny, it relies on a U.S. presence in Afghanistan for both security and financial remuneration of its own efforts to combat terrorist and extremist dynamics that are a significant threat inside Pakistan as well. Elements of the Pakistani government believe that ties to the Taliban and terrorists help Pakistan retain influence in Afghanistan and prevent Afghanistan from being controlled by an Afghan government hostile to Pakistan.

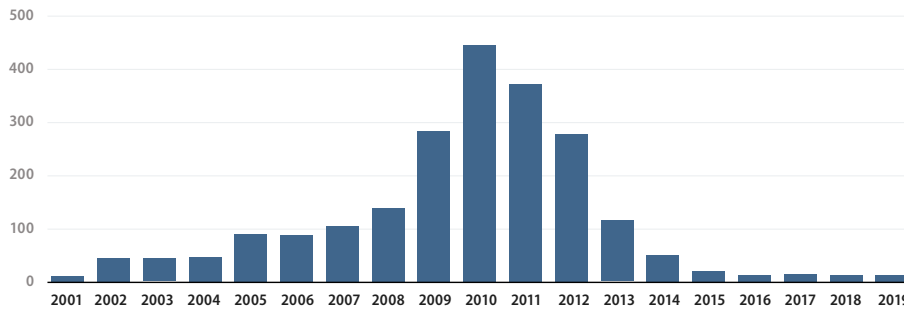
The United States' efforts in Afghanistan have advanced certain U.S. and Afghan interests, but structural challenges remain that prevent the United States from fully achieving its objectives. It is obvious that the United States cannot dictate outcomes in Afghanistan.

FIGURE 1
U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan, 2002–2018



Sources: Congressional Research Service, "Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2018" (Washington: 2019), p. 10, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf>; Amy Belasco, "Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001–FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues" (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2009), p. 14, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf>; Congressional Research Service, "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief" (Washington: 2019), available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf>.

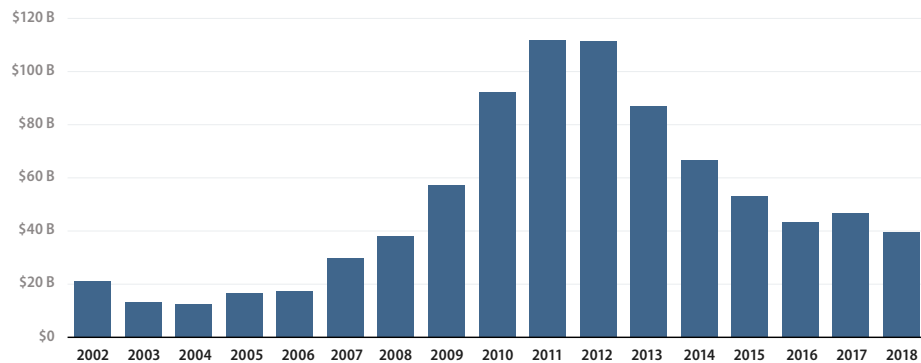
FIGURE 2
U.S. casualties in Afghanistan, 2001–2019



Source: ICasualties.org, "Home," available at <http://icasualties.org/> (last accessed July 2019).

FIGURE 3
Total U.S. spending in Afghanistan

Costs of war and reconstruction



Source: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress" (Washington: 2019), p. 48, available at <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-01-30qr.pdf>.

Questioning assumptions of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan

The debate over Afghanistan policy has reflected a certain set of assumptions—assumptions that are important to address to the extent possible in considering U.S. policy options. Only by doing so can the United States formulate a pragmatic strategy.

Assumption 1: The United States can only fight terrorists in the region with a presence in Afghanistan. Without a U.S. military presence, the United States' ability to disrupt terrorists in Afghanistan will be diminished. 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. However, while the United States will lose much of its current capacity for intelligence gathering in Afghanistan without the current military presence in Afghanistan, the United States also now has far better systems—such as international cooperation for information sharing, global National Security Agency surveillance techniques, and systems to screen people who might try to come to the United States—than it had before 9/11 to help foil terrorist plots and defend against them. The United States has bolstered security for air travel and ports as well as in cities.²³ The United States has also been able to decimate core al-Qaida capacity, cooperating closely with regional partners to do so, such that the threat that remains is much diminished compared with 2001 and even 2008. Furthermore, most of the terrorists and insurgents that U.S. forces are currently fighting are not focused on attacking the U.S. homeland—they are focused on fighting against the Afghan government.

Assumption 2: Diplomacy will not work without sustained U.S. military pressure. For the first time, the United States has gained what appears to be some traction in negotiations with the Taliban through a combination of U.S. willingness to talk and the Taliban's apparent interest in a dialogue. But is a deal with the Taliban possible without ongoing U.S. military pressure?

The Obama administration attempted diplomacy with the Taliban during a period when the United States had publicly announced a withdrawal timeline for U.S. troops, which some criticized as undermining the diplomatic effort because the Taliban knew the United States was leaving. Some claim that the current round of

diplomacy with the Taliban has a better chance because there is no troop withdrawal date. At the same time, the Taliban have always made clear that they are opposed to the U.S. military presence as a main rationale for their insurgency—whether or not that is to be believed. One 2017-2018 study—based on numerous discussions with low- and mid-level Taliban leaders—revealed a consistent private Taliban message that they were not interested in reconciliation unless the United States left Afghanistan, reinforcing what has long been the Taliban’s public position.²⁴ And the current round of U.S.-Taliban negotiations is attempting to tackle this assumption.

With so many unanswerable questions about whether or not negotiations can succeed, it seems difficult to argue that the U.S. military presence must be linked explicitly to diplomacy with the Taliban. There is, in fact, another untested diplomatic possibility—namely, that U.S. withdrawal could help foster a peace deal. While difficult to know for sure, based on their actions, it seems that the Taliban leadership may have never believed in the U.S. intent to leave Afghanistan and have used its presence as an excuse to rally their supporters. Likewise, the Afghan government has never wanted to make tough concessions in negotiations and has been able to rely on strong backing from the U.S. government. In some ways, the American 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.

Assumption 3: The train, advise, and assist mission for the ANDSF 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. The DOD itself doesn’t know whether or not it is making progress. As the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) noted in 2018:

Although the advising effort at the MOD and the MOI is one of DOD’s primary missions in Afghanistan, SIGAR found that DOD has not fully evaluated these efforts, and does not know whether the advisors assigned to MOD and MOI are meeting goals and milestones because it has not assessed, monitored or evaluated the advising efforts as required by its own guidance.²⁵

A 2019 report by the Congressional Research Service noted a number of concerns about the quality of the ANDSF, including “absenteeism ... widespread illiteracy within the force ... credible allegations of child sexual abuse and other potential

human rights abuses ... and casualty rates often described as unsustainable.”²⁶ It seems highly unlikely that just a few more years of training will make a substantial difference.

Assumption 4: A smaller counterterrorism force will adequately protect U.S. security interests and does not require a larger U.S. military presence. This option was discussed and debated during the Obama administration and continues to be an attractive so-called Goldilocks option to policymakers. However, there would still be significant challenges to implementation and effectiveness. First, the Afghan government may not buy into a U.S. military presence that is only focused on U.S. counterterrorism goals and not training and supporting Afghan forces. Under a new Afghan government that shares power with the Taliban, this option would likely be impossible. Second, the force protection requirements would require a greater level of ANDSF capability as an outer layer of defense at bases; otherwise, a larger U.S. military or contractor presence would be necessary just to provide force protection. There is also a larger logistical, capabilities, and intelligence tail that comes with any counterterrorism force, which will also need force protection. Finally, a smaller U.S. counterterrorism presence would still need to rely on intelligence networks that a broader U.S. withdrawal would diminish. Therefore, a smaller U.S. force will face real constraints on mission effectiveness, which—when weighed against a force protection risk—may not look to be as attractive an option.

Assumption 5: Afghan women will be better off if the United States remains. Even with a U.S. presence and extensive international assistance, the indicators for the quality of women’s lives in Afghanistan today are still exceptionally poor. A 2018 poll found Afghanistan to be the second most dangerous country in the world for women.²⁷ According to Human Rights Watch, an estimated two-thirds of Afghan girls do not go to school.²⁸ UNICEF has found that at least 42 percent of households report at least one instance of child marriage in their household.²⁹ 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 and a long-term U.S. political effort to keep the interests of Afghan women front and center.

The fear of the unknown is a powerful force in policymaking. It is vital that the United States thoroughly review the assumptions upon which its strategy is based.

Weighing the risks of leaving and the opportunity costs of staying

The risks of leaving

Ultimately, the decision on whether or not to withdraw rests on what level of risk the United States is willing to accept given the strategic opportunity costs with respect to other national priorities. The primary risks of withdrawal include:

- **Risk #1: Terrorists could reconstitute a safe haven.** Afghanistan will always present a safe haven risk by the nature of its lack of effective governance and terrain that is difficult to monitor comprehensively. However, the current terrorist threat in Afghanistan is very different from the one faced in 2001. A 2018 DOD report described most terrorist organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan as domestically focused, while stating, “The al-Qa’ida threat to the United States and its allies and partners has decreased, and the few remaining al-Qa’ida core members are focused on their own survival.”³⁰ Furthermore, the current threat to the U.S. homeland emanating from Afghanistan is not high compared with other countries where the United States does not maintain a troop presence such as Yemen. Fears that global terrorists may once again find safe haven in Afghanistan to plan attacks against the United States cannot be ruled out, but American investment in its homeland security and global intelligence capacity as well as the U.S. relationship with the Afghan government mitigate some of this risk. Finally, the main threat to Afghan stability today is the Taliban, and the Taliban are not—and never have been—focused on attacking the U.S. homeland. Any future agreement with the Taliban will need to contain necessary guarantees prohibiting the use of Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorists.
- **Risk #2: Violence might spread, and the Afghan government could collapse.** This risk is real but will depend heavily on the status of peace talks and subsequent agreements between political factions in Afghanistan. In 2018, with U.S. military presence, Afghanistan had more civilian deaths than at any point since the United Nations began keeping records.³¹ It is true that without critical sustaining capabilities provided by the United States, the Afghan military is likely to be less effective against

the Taliban. But whether the Taliban's gains will be material to the threat posed in Afghanistan to the United States and its allies remains unclear. The United States may need to face the fact that political and security instability will be the inevitable result of a diminished U.S. presence. A U.S. military withdrawal would likely mean a more difficult immediate path for the Afghan people, especially women, who could face restrictions on some of the rights they currently have. A RAND Corporation study, titled "Consequences of a Precipitous U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan," suggests that a U.S. military withdrawal would likely result in a situation in which "civilian deaths rise sharply, and refugee flows increase."³² The question, at the end, is whether the risk is manageable and necessary when weighing all U.S. interests together.

With respect to Afghan government stability, it is also important to question the idea that the United States should be in the business of militarily propping up governments or whether it can even effectively do so in a sustainable way. The United States has other tools to bring to bear to support Afghan political stability, including financial assistance, diplomatic engagement, and capacity-building support—and no matter what happens, the United States should continue to provide this support to help the Afghan people.

- **Risk #3: The Taliban will fail to live up to their political or security commitments.** This risk will not necessarily be effectively countered by a large U.S. military presence. It will depend heavily on Afghan politics, the looming threat of U.S. reengagement, as well as international pressure and financial incentives.
- **Risk #4: Without a military presence, the U.S. intelligence picture on the ground will be less clear.** In Afghanistan, the U.S. military presence directly enables the U.S. intelligence picture on threats. Without it, the United States will lose significant visibility into emerging threats and will need to rely heavily on its Afghan partners. However, the United States has a number of hard intelligence targets around the world, including Iran, North Korea, and Yemen. This should be a risk that is weighed in the context of potential benefits to U.S. national security interests of a withdrawal.
- **Risk #5: When the U.S. military leaves, the international community will follow.** It is certainly possible that international and U.S. civilian organizations may not accept the increased security risks of operating in Afghanistan in the absence of U.S. forces. In the absence of a large U.S. military presence, there will be a risk that U.S. political and international attention will wane and, by extension, so will its economic and development assistance. But 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 strategic partners such as Israel and Egypt, where there is far less active conflict to be managed. This illustrates that it is possible to build the support to provide large amounts of assistance that is not part of a war effort.

The potential opportunity costs of staying

While these are indeed risks, they should not be the main determinants of what is in the United States' broader national security interests. It is time to recognize that the opportunity costs of a perpetual U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan could be greater than the risks of ending U.S. involvement in the war, even if there is no peace. By staying in Afghanistan, the United States is diverting attention and resources away from more important national security threats and domestic priorities. While the tradeoffs in national security decision-making are almost always imprecise, today, the United States is overinvested in Afghanistan compared with the relatively low-level threat it poses. And over almost two decades, the United States has spent finite political, economic, and military resources on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency wars, while competitors such as China have invested their resources and attention elsewhere. The main opportunity costs for staying in Afghanistan are as follows:

- **Opportunity cost #1: America faces bigger national security challenges.** In the 2018 “Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community,” the intelligence community identifies the top threats as a return to great power competition with China and Russia and the fraying of international norms and institutions. The assessment only mentions Afghanistan as a threat in the context of many countries—including Somalia, Yemen, Syria, and others—where terrorists operate.³³ When it comes to the threat of international terrorism, Afghanistan does not rank as high as other threats; the Trump administration’s 2018 “National Strategy for Counterterrorism” does not even mention Afghanistan once.³⁴ The 2018 National Defense Strategy states, “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”³⁵ As climate change worsens, authoritarianism grows, and powers such as Russia and China become more assertive, the United States must significantly reorient its priorities. The main threat from Afghanistan is terrorism—and it is debatable just how much of a threat these terrorists pose to U.S. interests today. Right now, the United States is fighting a war in Afghanistan in order to mitigate the terrorist threat while similar terrorist threats elsewhere are acceptably managed with far less effort.

- **Opportunity cost #2: Afghanistan diverts attention and resources away from more potent terrorist threats.** The global terrorism threat remains dynamic, and major shifts have occurred since 9/11. Terrorism experts Peter Bergen and David Sterman note that, “Jihadist organizations are no longer the main terrorist threat facing the country,” and “the most glaring terrorist threat facing the United States today is primarily domestic in nature.”³⁶ Today, the United States faces even more likely and potent terrorist threats from domestic extremists and those inspired online. Yet, the Trump administration has reduced funding to combat domestic terrorism.³⁷ Two former White House homeland security advisers in the Bush and Obama administrations have made clear that there is an “insufficient focus by the federal government on the threat of domestic terrorism.”³⁸ Furthermore, the core threat from the Islamic State is largely manifesting itself in Europe and the Middle East—not South Asia. While these trends could change, the current level of intelligence and defense resources allocated to Afghanistan outpaces the actual terrorism threat.
- **Opportunity cost #3: The United States needs to make critical national investments at home to remain competitive with China.** To be competitive with China in the long term, the United States needs to make serious strategic investments in the economic competitiveness of the American people, specifically in education, scientific research and development, infrastructure, among other priorities. 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. As the United States looks forward to the challenges of this century and the resource constraints it faces, it is time to take a more strategic view on priorities.
- **Opportunity cost #4: Managing a war saps U.S. focus and diplomatic energy.** While the United States is a global power, it does not have endless capacity. Inevitably, the attention of high-level policymakers is focused on the highest-priority concerns—and as long as the war in Afghanistan continues, it will rightly garner significant attention and resources from all sectors of the U.S. government. When it comes foreign policy priorities, urgency outweighs importance, so regular decisions about the war require the highest-level attention at the White House, the State Department, and the DOD. For the senior-most national security officials, time is precious, and dedicating enough time to issues such as climate change or China can be crowded out by the need for regular, high-level engagement on life-or-death decisions in Afghanistan.

- **Opportunity cost #5: Two decades of military conflict have eroded U.S. military readiness.** While the U.S. military has global responsibilities, it has finite resources, and nothing drains U.S. military readiness like an active war, as made clear by the 2017 report of a Task Force on Defense Personnel co-chaired by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and former National Security Adviser James Jones.³⁹ 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—from regular rotations of thousands of personnel to equipment to budget expenditures. With pressing needs to bolster U.S. force posture in Asia and Europe to deter threats from Russia and China and adapt the military to emerging threats such as cybersecurity, the U.S. military will have a difficult time dedicating the necessary attention and resources to these threats while fighting an indefinite war with roughly 14,000 troops in Afghanistan.

Ways forward: Implementing a strategic transition in Afghanistan

There are no easy choices when it comes to Afghanistan. Three consecutive U.S. presidents and countless senior officials and members of Congress have confronted this reality over nearly two decades. There is no choice that will yield a perfect outcome. 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, both foreign and domestic. Moving forward, the United States must be a lot more honest and realistic about where Afghanistan ranks with respect to those other priorities.

The authors recommend that the United States undertake an aggressive multilateral diplomatic effort to secure a sustainable peace and long-term international commitment to the Afghan people. In some cases, the following recommendations are not new and reflect the universe of bad and less bad policy options on Afghanistan. However, the authors recommend that the United States significantly adjust its security objectives to accept more risk and reassign U.S. strategic efforts to other, more pressing national priorities.

The United States should undertake a strategic transition in its relationship with Afghanistan. This strategic transition should contain three key elements:

Pursue more aggressive multilateral diplomacy. The security of Afghanistan will not be determined by a long-term U.S. military presence, but rather by sustainable political agreements between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The United States has conducted diplomacy in fits and starts over three administrations. It is time to pursue aggressive multilateral diplomacy to achieve a sustainable peace. This diplomacy should reflect the following principles:

1. **Diplomacy should be closely coordinated with the Afghan government, but the United States will also need to use its leverage with the Afghan government to make real gains.** While in the past the United States has been reticent of pushing the Afghan government into a deal with the Taliban, today, the United States must

press Kabul for necessary concessions on power-sharing. The United States must make clear that these compromises are required if the government in Kabul wants continued U.S. financial and political support after the U.S. military withdrawal.

- 2. The United States should make clear to the Taliban that it will take any future steps necessary to ensure that transnational terrorist threats to the homeland cannot reconstitute.** While pressing the Taliban to agree that it will not tolerate or work with any transnational terrorist threat, the United States should emphasize that it will take any steps necessary in the future to defend itself and its allies. The United States can make clear to the Taliban that if it reneges on this commitment, the United States will hold out the option for retaliatory action against the Taliban.
- 3. Afghanistan's regional neighbors should be pressed to step up their contributions.** Diplomacy with the Taliban should be paired with a renewed high-level U.S. diplomatic effort with India, Pakistan, Russia, China, and Iran to negotiate a regional compact on the security and stability of Afghanistan with new economic, political, and even security guarantees from neighboring countries. This effort will likely require head-of-state-level summit(s) to advance these agreements and a willingness to engage directly with Tehran. This process must include a specific discussion and agreement at the summit level of security guarantees that safeguard Afghan sovereignty and noninterference.

Immediately implement a phased military withdrawal. The United States, in coordination with NATO Resolute Support Mission partners, should begin to withdraw its military from Afghanistan in phases that support ongoing negotiations with the Taliban and responsibly transition of away from training, advising, and assisting the ANDSF. Any withdrawal should be deliberate and guided by the following principles:

- 1. Any withdrawal or change in mission must be done in close coordination with NATO Resolute Support Mission allies and partners.** NATO allies and other coalition partners have sacrificed alongside the United States since 2001, with 1,142 allied troops dying since the start of the war.⁴⁰ The United States should work through the NATO Resolute Support Mission to ensure that the security transition is as smooth as possible and conducted in complete coordination with NATO allies. This coordination should focus on transitioning the role of European and other partners from military contributions to financial contributions to the Afghan government.

2. **Formally delink U.S. military withdrawal from negotiations.** Under a current Pentagon proposal, the U.S. military would possibly withdraw in three to five years only after a peace deal is reached with the Taliban. Instead, any phased U.S. military withdrawal should be formally delinked from end-game negotiations and designed to actively support confidence-building during the negotiations, including local ceasefires and even regional withdrawal. While the negotiating environment appears to be improving, there is no guarantee of successful negotiations with the Taliban or any guarantee that it will live up to its commitments—which, if formally linked to withdrawal, could easily become a justification for enduring or permanent U.S. presence and stalemate.
3. **Any U.S. military withdrawal should be done in close consultation with the Afghan government and support a broader transition of the ANDSF.** The United States and its NATO partners and allies should work with the Afghan government to adjust the overall size of the ANDSF—currently 352,000⁴¹—to a more fiscally sustainable and operationally relevant model. The Afghan government currently spends 38.3 percent of its annual budget on defense in addition to the \$5 billion per year from the international community.⁴²
4. **The United States must ensure the protection of U.S. diplomatic personnel.** It will likely be necessary to retain some U.S. military to ensure adequate protection of U.S. diplomatic personnel serving in Afghanistan. While challenging, the United States should simultaneously pursue an over-the-horizon rapid-reaction military capability to ensure that forces could be quickly deployed in the case of an urgent threat to U.S. diplomatic personnel or the Afghan government. This will require high-level diplomatic engagement and perhaps new security arrangements with regional countries.
5. **The United Nations must play a bigger role.** While the United Nations cannot bring security to Afghanistan, it can play an important role in contributing to peace. The United States should work with the United Nations and key stakeholders to explore what roles—including a possible peacekeeping deployment to Kabul—the United Nations could play in maintaining stability with or without an eventual political settlement between the central Afghan government and the Taliban.

Secure a long-term peace dividend for the Afghan people. The conventional wisdom is that the U.S. military presence drives the United States’ strategic partnership with Afghanistan, but the reality is that the partnership is undergirded by a much broader set of political and economic interests. The United States should reinforce the other core components of its strategic relationship, including by:

- **Sustaining international financial support for Afghanistan.** International donors at the October 2016 Brussels Conference on Afghanistan pledged \$15 billion in financial assistance to Afghanistan over four years in return for the Afghan government taking critical anti-corruption and political reform steps.⁴³ At the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO nations pledged a further \$5 billion per year to fund the ANDSF until 2020, with the United States providing approximately \$3.5 billion of that assistance each year.⁴⁴ The United States will need to lead international efforts to sustain long-term assistance through another international donor conference.
- **Supporting the Afghan government and Afghan people.** Nearly 70 percent of Afghanistan’s annual income is dependent on international donors, underscoring the importance of long-term and sustained high levels of assistance. The United States should work with the international community to focus support in three main ways: First, the United States should support the central Afghan government—including through the international Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and the U.N. Development Programme—to build capacity to improve the quality of life for the Afghan people. Second, the United States should push the Afghan government to tackle corruption. Despite the significant challenges, Afghanistan has slowly made modest improvements over the past few years, according to Transparency International⁴⁵, thanks to incremental efforts driven by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.⁴⁶ Finally, the United States should provide humanitarian assistance for those affected by the conflict, which is one of the most effective modes of support, with continued prioritization on supporting Afghan women.
- **Vastly increase U.S. acceptance of Afghan refugees.** There are millions of Afghan refugees, and yet in 2017, the United States only accepted 317 Afghan refugees.⁴⁷ The United States should exponentially increase the number of refugee admissions for Afghans, prioritizing individuals such as translators who worked with the United States and who are vulnerable to Taliban reprisals.

Conclusion

After almost 18 years in Afghanistan, the United States has achieved its primary goal of defeating al-Qaida and degrading its ability to use Afghanistan and Pakistan as a safe haven to attack the United States again. Today, the United States faces far greater national security challenges—including climate change and China—than the current threats posed in Afghanistan. The ongoing war there detracts from the United States’ global interests. The United States should begin the process of ending its war in Afghanistan, supporting the chances for a peace agreement, and transitioning to a longer-term strategic partnership with the Afghan people in concert with regional players. This strategy will maximize the chances for the United States to secure its interests and those of the Afghan people in a sustainable way.

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