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The U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: The Perils of Withdrawal

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Recent events in Afghanistan have reenergized those in favor of a U.S. military withdrawal. [“Let someone else take up the burden,”](#) urged one opinion piece in Slate. Another in the UK-based Guardian newspaper bluntly noted: [“It’s time for America to end its war in Afghanistan.”](#) Some media reports have also suggested that U.S. negotiators in Doha, Qatar [have agreed to discuss the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan](#) as part of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban.

Yet without a political settlement, which is still a longshot, a U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan would have serious risks. Chief among them would be the resurgence of terrorism and the deterioration of human rights—including women’s rights—that come with a Taliban victory.

On October 18, 2018, General Abdul Raziq, chief of the Afghan National Police in Kandahar province and one of Afghanistan’s most powerful security officials in the country, was killed along with the local head of Afghanistan’s intelligence service. U.S. Army Sergeant James A. Slape also died in October, bringing the total number of U.S. forces killed in Afghanistan since 2001 [to nearly 2,400](#) (with approximately three-quarters of the total killed from hostile action).

The United States’ involvement in Afghanistan since 2001 has, in many ways, come full circle. It began with a “light footprint” composed of roughly 350 U.S. special operations forces and 100 CIA paramilitary units, supported by U.S. air power. These forces worked with Afghan tribes, sub-tribes, and militia forces from the Northern Alliance to overthrow the Taliban regime in 2001 and stabilize the country.

Over the next several years, the United States steadily shifted to a “heavy footprint,” which peaked at [100,000 U.S. troops in 2010 and over 40,000 NATO and other foreign soldiers](#). Today, the U.S. has returned to a light footprint with approximately 15,000 forces. Many of the U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan today are special operations forces. For the first time since 2001, the U.S. commander is also from U.S.

special operations. General Austin “Scott” Miller was commander of Joint Special Operations Command through 2018, and he commanded U.S. special operations forces during two previous tours in Afghanistan.

Despite the shift back to a light footprint approach and the Trump administration’s announcement of a new South Asia strategy in 2017, the war is a draw. There has been an increase in Taliban and other insurgent control or influence of Afghanistan’s population—[from 9 percent in August 2016 to roughly 14 percent in May 2018](#). The Taliban has also conducted attacks in every major Afghan city, sowing fear. While U.S. soldiers and diplomats could once move around cities like Kabul with limited security concerns, many are stuck on their bases and can move around only by helicopter.

There are numerous reasons for the challenges in defeating the Taliban or reaching a negotiated settlement:

- A collective failure to integrate the Taliban into Afghan society beginning in 2001, when Taliban leaders were hunted down instead of being co-opted;
- A weak and ineffective Afghan government, which has been plagued by corruption and inefficiency;
- A mistaken U.S. and Western focus on largely building a top-down government in Kabul, rather than also working at the grass-roots level and supporting local communities and tribes;
- A U.S. and Western mistaken decision to try to win the war *for* Afghans by deploying large numbers of Western military forces and flooding Afghanistan with large amounts of assistance, which fueled corruption;
- The Taliban’s sanctuary in Pakistan and support from Pakistan’s spy agency, the Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which allowed senior Taliban leaders to run the war in relative security.

Despite these mistakes, withdrawing from Afghanistan in the absence of a peace deal—as some have argued—would have significant risks.

First, a U.S. exit would likely trigger a departure of European and other foreign forces from the country and a collapse of the Afghan regime. It is difficult to overstate the psychological impact of a U.S. exit, as Afghans fled—or tried to flee—the country. The Taliban, with support from Pakistan and limited assistance from countries like Iran and Russia, would likely attempt to seize and hold urban centers like

Kandahar, Lashkar Gah, and eventually Kabul. At the moment, the Taliban does not control *any* cities in Afghanistan.

Second, a successful Taliban-led insurgency would likely allow the Islamic State Khorasan (the Islamic State's local province), al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (al-Qaeda's local affiliate), and other groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Haqqani Network, and Lashkar-e-Taiba to increase their presence in Afghanistan. Most of these groups have already expanded their presence in Afghanistan and conducted attacks either against the U.S. homeland (al-Qaeda and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan), U.S. forces and U.S. government installations in Afghanistan (Taliban and Haqqani Network), or Westerners in the region (Lashkar-e-Taiba).

A Taliban victory in Afghanistan would also be viewed by Salafi-jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State as a *major triumph* against the United States. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 was a tremendous source of inspiration and recruitment for al-Qaeda. According to CSIS estimates, Afghanistan has the largest number of Salafi-jihadist fighters and allies anywhere in the world next to Syria—more than in Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Nigeria, and Somalia.

Third, a successful Taliban-led insurgency would deal a severe blow to human rights, including women's rights. The Taliban remain deeply opposed to women's liberties and would likely reverse progress in a country that has experienced a notable rise in the number of female business owners; female government officials; and primary, secondary, and university students (including girls).

Fourth, a Taliban victory could increase regional instability and security competition as countries like India and Pakistan—which both have nuclear weapons—support a mix of central government forces, sub-state militias, and insurgent groups.

What should the United States do? The Trump administration should work with the Afghan government and regional powers—including Pakistan—to reach a political settlement with the Taliban. But it is unclear whether the United States will succeed. After all, only a quarter of insurgencies end with a settlement. Nearly three-quarters end on the battlefield. Since World War II, insurgent groups successfully [overthrew a government or gained independence in 35 percent of insurgencies](#), and [governments defeated insurgents on the battlefield another 36 percent of the time](#).

If negotiations fail or continue to drag on, then what? U.S. policymakers and the public need to carefully think through the implications of withdrawal. A precipitous exit might be worse than the status quo.

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