

# Escaping the Graveyard of Empires? U.S. Options in Afghanistan

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One of the Biden administration's most contentious war-related decisions will likely be what to do about Afghanistan. The U.S. military has been fighting in Afghanistan for two decades in a war that has persisted nearly continuously since the late 1970s. However, a precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan at this point—without an intra-Afghan peace agreement—will likely shift the military balance of power in favor of the Taliban and increase the possibility of an eventual Taliban takeover of the capital city, Kabul, and significant rural and urban areas of the country.

## **Q1: What is the current U.S. military presence in Afghanistan? What are U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region?**

**A1:** On February 29, 2020, U.S. and Taliban leaders signed an agreement that was intended to be an initial step toward an intra-Afghan peace deal. There were significant problems with the agreement, such as its failure to involve the Afghan government in the negotiations. Nevertheless, important provisions of the deal included a U.S. pledge to eventually withdraw all U.S. and foreign soldiers from Afghanistan, a Taliban commitment to prevent al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations from using Afghan territory to threaten the United States and its partners, and a promise by both sides to support intra-Afghan peace negotiations. Over the course of 2020, the United States withdrew its forces from a high of roughly 14,000 at the beginning of the year. On November 17, 2020, [Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller announced](#) that the United States would cut its forces in Afghanistan to approximately 2,500 troops by January 2021.

While some U.S. policymakers and the public have focused on U.S. troop numbers, any discussion about the U.S. presence in Afghanistan needs to begin with U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region. The United State's national security interests have significantly evolved since 2001, when U.S. military forces and intelligence operatives first deployed to Afghanistan. Today, the United States has more important national security interests than Afghanistan, such as competing with China, Russia, and Iran. The United States also has to deal with the economic and health implications of Covid-19, among other problems at home and abroad. Yet the United States still has some interests in Afghanistan and South Asia.

First, the United States has an interest in preventing the resurgence of international terrorist groups that could threaten the United States and its partners. Al Qaeda still has a presence in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, though it has been weakened by persistent U.S. strikes. Al Qaeda's local affiliate, al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, continues to support the Taliban insurgency and retains close links with senior and lower-level Taliban leaders. As a [2020 United Nations report concluded](#), "al Qaeda is quietly gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under their protection." A successful Taliban-led insurgency would likely allow al Qaeda and other terrorist groups—such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Islamic State Khorasan—to

increase their presence in Afghanistan. Indeed, al Qaeda and other jihadists would likely view a withdrawal of U.S. military forces as their most important victory since the departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989.

Second, the United States has an interest in countering China, Russia, and Iran, all of which are active in Afghanistan and South Asia. A continuing U.S. military and intelligence presence in Afghanistan may be helpful to balance against these competitors. Even a small presence could help check their activity, prevent a major rise in their influence, and allow the United States to collect intelligence on their activities. U.S. forces in western Afghanistan, for example, have helped monitor and counter activity by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force, Iran's primary paramilitary arm. Moving forward, the United States could establish a force posture composed of "lily pads"—bases with a small number of rotating troops—in countries like Afghanistan to compete with China, Russia, and Iran.

Third, a burgeoning war could increase regional instability as India, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia support a mix of Afghan central government forces, local militias, and insurgent groups. In addition, an intensified war—particularly if the United States withdrew its military forces without a peace deal—would likely increase the already tense balance of power competition between India and Pakistan.

Fourth, the United States has an interest in preventing a worsening humanitarian crisis. Neighboring countries like Pakistan would likely experience increasing violence and refugee flows if the war in Afghanistan spills over its border, as it did in the 1980s and 1990s. A precipitous U.S. withdrawal without a peace settlement would almost certainly increase refugee flows to neighboring countries and other regions, such as Europe. With almost 2.5 million registered refugees, Afghanistan already [has the second-largest refugee population](#) in the world behind Syria, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

## Q2: What is the current state of the Afghan peace process?

**A2:** One of the most important goals of the Biden administration should be to continue supporting the intra-Afghan peace process. On September 15, 2020, representatives from the Taliban and Afghan government gathered in Doha, Qatar to begin face-to-face peace negotiations. Yet peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban have stalled. It is unclear whether the Taliban is serious about reaching a deal or whether its leaders are negotiating simply to get U.S. troops to withdraw so that Taliban forces can overthrow the Afghan government. The Taliban—whose leadership council (also referred to as the Rahbari Shura or Quetta Shura) remains in Pakistan with support from the government's premier spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate—[has an extreme ideology](#) rooted in the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence.

Taliban leaders [support the creation](#) of a government by sharia (Islamic law) and the establishment of an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan. Some Taliban [leaders claim they have moderated](#) their views on some issues, such as the education of girls. Still, the Taliban [has a well-documented record](#) of repression, intolerance, and human rights abuses against aid workers, women, and ethnic minorities. Taliban governance in areas like Helmand Province has been repressive and, in some cases, virtually non-existent. As [a 2021 study published by the Afghanistan Analysts Network concluded](#), "in terms of authoritarian behaviour—banning music, forcing public praying, enforcing dress codes—nothing appears to have changed." It also noted that Taliban leaders "provide no services to the public, apart from their courts."

Given these challenges, the risk of the peace process collapsing or stalling indefinitely is high. After all, a peace agreement or stalemate has occurred in only one-quarter of insurgencies since World War II, while [three-quarters of insurgencies ended](#) because the government or insurgents won on the battlefield. Still, an agreement with the Taliban that ends the war would be a welcome development. Since 2001, the war has [led to the deaths](#) of over 157,000 people (including 43,000 civilians), created massive suffering among the Afghan population, and decimated the country's economy. A successful peace settlement would also allow the United States and other countries to withdraw their military forces. The United States has deployed combat forces to Afghanistan for nearly two decades (including a peak of roughly 100,000 U.S. soldiers), [spent over \\$800 billion](#) in military expenditures and development assistance between 2001 and 2019, and [suffered over 2,300 soldiers killed](#).

### Q3: What is the current state of the Taliban-led war?

**A3:** The war is roughly a stalemate, though, as CSIS's [Anthony Cordesman argues](#), the Trump administration's decision to classify so much information has made it difficult to assess the war. Taliban gains have largely been in rural areas of the country, where it enjoys some support among Afghans that are disillusioned with the central government, endorse the Taliban's religious zealotry, need a job, or support a tribe or community allied with the Taliban. The Taliban controls no major urban areas. While the Islamic State swept through Iraq in 2014, seizing key cities like Mosul, Fallujah, and Ramadi, the Taliban has done nothing of the sort in Afghanistan. In fact, the number of districts under Taliban control [may have slightly decreased](#) between 2019 and mid-2020.

Still, the Taliban and other insurgent groups have overrun some Afghan checkpoints, destroyed military bases, and seized some district centers. Cities like Kabul and Kandahar may also face a growing threat as the United States withdraws its military forces. In January 2021 in Kabul, for example, there were bombings in several neighborhoods in the city, and police, military, and intelligence officials were gunned down. [As Muqaddesa Yourish, a Kabul resident, remarked](#), "Fear is omnipresent. It's gone from a state of fear to a state of being."

While the Afghan war is, at best, a draw today, further U.S. withdrawals will likely continue to shift the balance of power in favor of the Taliban, its partner militant groups, and state backers such as Pakistan, Russia, and Iran. In a net assessment of Afghan security forces and the Taliban, [Jonathan Schroden concluded](#) "the Taliban would have a slight military advantage if the United States withdraws the remainder of its troops from Afghanistan, which would then likely grow in a compounding fashion." Afghanistan would likely become a sanctuary for international terrorist groups. Indeed, the United States cannot focus solely on counterterrorism. Terrorism and insurgency are deeply intertwined in Afghanistan. The Taliban is an active host for al Qaeda and other groups, so Taliban battlefield successes in the insurgency undermine the U.S.'s counterterrorism interests.

### Q4: What steps should the Biden administration take in Afghanistan?

**A4:** The United States' primary goals should be to build political consensus within Afghanistan, support intra-Afghan peace negotiations with the help of regional and international partners, and bolster Afghan security forces so that they can handle threats with limited outside involvement. To advance these goals, U.S. policymakers should consider taking the following steps.

First, the Biden administration should announce an agreement to provide long-term economic, military, and intelligence assistance to the Afghan government, particularly if the Taliban is the primary hindrance to a peace deal. This step should include financial support and aid to Afghan security agencies. An agreement between the

United States and the Afghan government would constitute a hedge against the possibility that the Taliban's pledges are primarily designed to bring about a U.S. military withdrawal. A commitment to the Afghan government would reassure its leaders and population that they were not being abandoned. Such an announcement would also be well received by U.S. partners, who have become concerned about the United States' multilateral commitments.

Second, the United States should shape intra-Afghan talks in ways that decrease the possibility of stalled negotiations. Examples include choosing a third-party mediator, agreeing on an approximate timeline and structure for the negotiations, and establishing a "[Friends of the Peace Process](#)" forum that includes major donors and neighbors of Afghanistan.

Third, the United States should maintain forces in Afghanistan if Taliban leaders renege on their commitment to a peace deal. The United States should keep, at a minimum, the current 2,500 U.S. military forces and CIA personnel in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future if Taliban intransigence is a major cause of collapsed or stalled intra-Afghan negotiations. A U.S. presence would be important as long as there are serious threats to U.S. national security, such as the presence of international terrorist groups. The United States should also be prepared to temporarily halt the withdrawal of forces if the implementation of a deal breaks down.

Fourth, the United States should develop credible threats to punish the Taliban from renegeing on its commitment to a peace deal. A weakness of some previously negotiated settlements has been the lack of a credible guarantee to punish parties that repudiate their pledges. If the Taliban reneges on its commitments to support a peace deal, the United States should reimpose sanctions against the Taliban and its members; ramp up the targeting of Taliban leaders in Afghanistan and possibly in Pakistan; and enlist Pakistan to pressure Taliban leaders who undermine the peace process, including by possibly banishing Taliban leaders who have undermined the prospects for peace from Pakistan (and their families, too).

The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 is instructive. By 2014, U.S. forces were back in Iraq to fight an Islamic State that eventually controlled territory the size of England, attracting foreign fighters from across the globe. The Biden administration should not make the same mistake in Afghanistan.

## Author

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