

Afghanistan Withdrawal: A Strategic Mistake

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After the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001 the United States took military action in concert with the Afghan Northern Alliance to force the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, thereby denying terrorist organizations safe haven for planning and resourcing terror attacks worldwide.

Afghanistan is adjacent to oil- and gas-rich countries, making it potentially important to the pipelines that transport those fuels. China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia all have strategic interest in this issue. The combined presence of the United States, NATO and other allies provided them with leverage in this contest. Additionally, the military/intelligence position vis a vis China, Iran, Pakistan and Russia was a strategic advantage for the United States and NATO.

The alliance engaged in combat against the Taliban through 2014 while also training and equipping Afghan security forces. From January 1, 2015, the United States and allies ceased combat operations and turned over responsibility to Afghan security forces, while continuing to provide training and assistance. This included combat air support and real-time

intelligence. Additionally, thousands of US contractors provided essential maintenance for the sophisticated military equipment supplied to Afghan security forces.

Though Afghanistan remained a dangerous place to serve, US and allied casualties greatly diminished after the end of combat action. From January 2015 through mid-August 2021 the United States lost 130 military personnel in Afghanistan, seventy-seven of which were from hostile action.¹ All those should be honored, but descriptions such as “America’s longest war” or “the endless war” are inaccurate, and they distort the public perception of cost to the nation.

Before the final debacle there were 2,500 US troops, 5,300 other NATO troops, over 10,000 contractors and 3,500 CIA paramilitary forces in Afghanistan.² This level of support was sufficient for Afghan security forces to maintain the stalemate that secured the strategic advantages outlined above. Complete withdrawal would make the position of Afghan security forces untenable. Once it became clear that such a withdrawal was

¹ US Department of Defense, Defense Casualty Analysis System, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Casualty Summary by Month and Service as of September 22, 2021, [DCAS - Conflict Casualties \(osd.mil\)](https://www.osd.mil/DCAS).

² There are many sources for US and NATO troop strengths. See especially Lieutenant General Keith Kellogg (USA, Ret.), chief of staff of the National Security Council during the Trump administration, interview by Mark Levin, *Life, Liberty and Levin*, Fox News, August 22, 2021. Kellogg includes CIA paramilitary and contractors in the discussion. See also Anthony H. Cordesman, “The State of Fighting in the Afghan War in Mid-2019,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 13, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/state-fighting-afghan-war-mid-2019>, for a discussion of the contractors.

underway, the end was inevitable. Complete withdrawal was a terrible strategic error that should never have been attempted.

Strategic Considerations

In the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks on the United States, US special operations forces, CIA paramilitary and British special forces working with the Afghan Northern Alliance supported by US air power ousted the Taliban government. A United Nations-sponsored conference selected Hamid Karzai to be Afghanistan's interim leader. Special operations forces from Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, and Norway joined the US-led effort to continue the battle against the now deposed Taliban. In April 2002, US president George W. Bush announced a "Marshall Plan" for Afghanistan in a speech at Virginia Military Institute. Thus began the long US/NATO involvement in Afghanistan, the stated purpose of which was to deny terrorists the safe haven they enjoyed under Taliban rule.³

As a result of the recent Taliban takeover, the terrorist threat to the United States has increased exponentially. The Taliban interior minister is Sirajuddin Haqqani, head of the Haqqani network. The US government designated this network a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2012, and its leaders, including Haqqani, are on the US most wanted list. His father was one of Osama bin Laden's most important mentors and he recently declared he was building a fountainhead of Jihad in Afghanistan. Besides committing terrorist acts, he has provided significant

³ History.com Editors, "US Attack on Afghanistan Begins [October 7, 2001]," History, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/u-s-led-attack-on-afghanistan-begins>, updated September 25, 2021.

funding for terrorism through criminal enterprises such as counterfeiting, car theft, and drugs. As interior minister he now has the powers of government at his disposal. He controls the security services, has access to the central bank and controls an international airport from which to export terrorism.⁴

There were other strategic advantages that accrued from Afghanistan's geographic location. Afghanistan is surrounded by countries rich in oil and natural gas, much of it underdeveloped. Competition for development and transport of the resources affects China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, UAE, Qatar, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

China has been building positions in the region, including development of oil fields in Uzbekistan, and construction of an export pipeline from Kazakhstan to Xinjiang in northwestern China designed to transport 200,000 barrels per day. China also constructed a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China. This gas export is critical to Turkmenistan's economy. Pakistan depends on access to the resources of Central Asia.

Many have recognized the strategic position of Afghanistan in this milieu. The United States in the early years of the 21st century encouraged and supported the development of the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline (TAPI) from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and, eventually, to India. This would be critical for Pakistan, important for India and offer Turkmenistan a non-Chinese source of revenue. The aim of the pipeline was to export thirty-three billion cubic meters of natural

⁴ Congressman Michael Waltz (R-FL), interview by Steve Hilton, *The Next Revolution*, Fox News, October 10, 2021.

gas annually. The US presence in Afghanistan would give the United States considerable influence on this issue.⁵

Even the Taliban recognize the potential political and economic leverage of the pipeline. Taliban spokesman Muhammad Suhailm Shaheen in an interview with *Sky News* said that TAPI is a long-term priority project for the regime, only now the leverage belongs to the Taliban.⁶

In addition to the oil and gas issue, an American military and intelligence presence in the region provided advantages with regard to the strategic challenges of China, Russia, and Iran. Maintenance of the relatively small US military footprint served as a check on the growing political, military, and economic reach of these three adversaries. Russia has been attempting to expand its hold on Central Asian states and control the transport of oil and gas to South Asia. At the same time China is increasing its own drive to dominate Central Asia, to a certain extent in cooperation with Iran—evidence of a nascent strategic understanding between the two countries. President Xi Jinping

⁵ Robert L. Canfield, “Notes on the Strategic Importance of Afghanistan,” robertlcanfield.com, February 12, 2020; “TAPI Project,” Ministry of Mines and Petroleum Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2018, momp.gov.af; Soraya Parwanj, “The TAPI Pipeline in Post US Withdrawal Afghanistan,” southernvoices.org, July 21, 2021; Asian Development Bank, Regional: “TAPI Gas Pipeline Project (Phase 1), project 52167-001,” adb.org; and John Foster, “Afghanistan, the TAPI Pipeline, and Energy Geopolitics,” johnfosterwrites.com, March 23, 2010.

⁶ Kanat Shakei, “How Taliban Rule Will Either Assure or Doom TAPI,” intellinews.org, October 7, 2021; “Turkmenistan Officials Due in Afghanistan as Taliban Back TAPI Pipeline,” *Reuters*, October 27, 2021.

has made expanding Chinese influence in Central Asia a key priority by pushing the idea of a “community of common destiny.” Given these pressures most Central Asian and Gulf states would welcome continuation of a US military footprint in Afghanistan.⁷

Further, the secure proximity to adversaries provided an effective staging area for gathering intelligence, especially via airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms. Bagram Air Base was a crucial site that housed the ISR assets and supported US combat aircraft.⁸ The combat radius of the F-15 tactical fighter aircraft is 1,900 kilometers, making Bagram a strategic factor that China, Russia and Iran had to consider.⁹ All other basing opportunities place US air power at a far greater distance. The proximity of US air power in Bagram greatly reduced Chinese warning time and complicated their planning. Abandoning an established military and intelligence

⁷ Julian D. Alford and Amin Tarzi, “The Need for Enduring US Military Presence in Afghanistan,” thediplomat.com, September 11, 2020; and Mark Gilchrist, *The Great Game Reinvigorated: Geopolitics, Afghanistan, and the Importance of Pakistan*, thestrategybridge.org, August 12, 2019.

⁸ Abbie Tingstad, Dahlia Anne Goldfeld, Lance Menthe, Robert A. Guffey, Zachary Haldeman, Krista Langeland, Amado Cordova, Elizabeth M. Waina, and Balys Gintautas, *Assessing the Value of Intelligence Collected by U.S. Air Force Airborne Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Platforms* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), [Assessing the Value of Intelligence Collected by U.S. Air Force Airborne Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Platforms | RAND](#)

⁹ Vladimir Lytkin, “Top Modern Fighter Aircrafts with Largest Combat Radius,” defensereview.in, July 19, 2021.

outpost near to foes does not make sense. But that is exactly what we did. And the argument that we were ending an endless war does not hold water.

The War

On November 12, 2001, Taliban forces abandoned Kabul and by early December, Kandahar, the last Taliban stronghold, fell. The Taliban continued a guerrilla-style war as the United States and its NATO allies built up military strength in Afghanistan. In August 2003, the United Nations established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) under NATO command in Afghanistan and in August 2006 ISAF assumed command of the theater of operations.¹⁰ The NATO commander was always in American who also oversaw a separate US contingent. NATO non-member partners, such as Australia, also contributed forces to ISAF.¹¹

At its height ISAF had 130,000 troops and conducted the fight against the Taliban. At the same time, ISAF trained and equipped Afghan security forces. From 2011 forward ISAF began to transition combat responsibility to Afghan security forces. ISAF completed its mission at the end of 2014. At that point, the

¹⁰ Griff Witte, "Afghanistan War, 2001-2014," Britannica.com, updated August 16, 2021; "NATO and Afghanistan," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, [NATO - Topic: NATO and Afghanistan](#), updated December 7, 2021.

¹¹ The author was a member of the Operations Division of the NATO International Staff during the period in question, and provides this information based on his experience.

United States had lost 2,271 soldiers killed. The coalition as a whole had 3,407 killed.¹²

The United States and NATO continued in Afghanistan from January 1, 2015 in a support role. This included training, equipment, maintenance, intelligence, and air support. Afghan security forces were able to hold the Taliban to a stalemate on the battlefield. With change in role from combat to support, US casualties declined markedly. From January 2015 to mid-August 2021, 130 Americans died in Afghanistan, seventy-seven of those as a result of hostile action.¹³ My purpose is not to minimize the sacrifice of these soldiers. However, the magnitude of losses does not rise to the level of being termed an endless war. More service members die annually in training accidents.¹⁴

Withdrawal

The Trump Administration began negotiations with the Taliban in February 2020. The administration aimed to achieve the complete withdrawal of all US forces by May 1, 2021. This raised the specter of removing the support from Afghan security forces needed to maintain the battlefield stalemate. There were

¹² "ISAF's Mission in Afghanistan (2000-2014)" (Archived), NATO.int, updated August 19, 2021.

¹³ US Department of Defense, Defense Casualty Analysis System, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Casualty Summary by Month and Service as of September 22, 2021, [DCAS - Conflict Casualties \(osd.mil\)](#).

¹⁴ Zachary Cohen, "More US Troops Die During Training Than in Combat Operations," CNN Politics, June 6, 2019. See also Christopher T. Mann and Hannah Fischer, *Trends in Active Military Deaths Since 2006*, US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, rep. no. IF10899, May 17, 2021.

a number of conditions expected of the Taliban such as taking action to suppress Al-Qaeda and to enter negotiations with the Afghan government.¹⁵ Since the administration had to know that complete withdrawal would end Afghan security forces' ability to withstand a Taliban advance, the intent seemed to be to "normalize" the Taliban and leave with a peace deal and some sort of power-sharing arrangement between the Taliban and the government (termed a "Government of Reconciliation").¹⁶ It seems unlikely that such an outcome would have been possible. Even if it somehow had worked, the United States-NATO coalition would have lost the geostrategic advantages discussed above. What the Trump administration would have done when faced with the fact that a peaceful solution was not possible, thereby ensuring the collapse of Afghan security forces, is a matter for speculation. But it is irrelevant since the Biden administration took office January 20, 2021.

During his campaign and from the beginning of his presidency, Joe Biden endorsed the concept of withdrawal from Afghanistan. His military and intelligence officials, as is evident from the testimonies of General Mark A. Milley (USA), Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. (USMC), Commander, US Central Command, before the Senate on September 28 and the House on September 29, counseled against complete withdrawal. But Biden insisted on it. He amended the May 1 departure date and set September 11, 2021

¹⁵ Eugene Kiely and Robert Farley, "Timeline of US Withdrawal from Afghanistan," FactCheck.org, August 17, 2021; and "Timeline: The US War in Afghanistan, 1999-2001," Council on Foreign Relations, cfr.org.

¹⁶ Lieutenant General Keith Kellogg (USA, Ret.), interview by Mark Levin, August 22, 2021.

as the date, for some incomprehensible symbolic reason.¹⁷ Bagram air base was abandoned in early July without warning to allies or Afghans. Biden made it absolutely clear the United States was leaving completely, thereby ensuring the collapse of Afghan security forces.¹⁸ By any standard this was awful decision making. Poor execution merely worsened the implications.

The United States gave up significant strategic advantages because of the false impression that the costs in US blood and treasure were unbearable. But lives have been squandered for far less; and the strategic losses are grave.

¹⁷ "NATO Allies Agree to Leave Afghanistan Following US Move, *Deutsche Welle*, April 14, 2021, online at [dw.com](https://www.dw.com). There is almost no need to cite something that is common knowledge, but this article cites Biden giving the target date for withdrawal as September 11, 2021, and saying, "it is time to end America's longest war."

¹⁸ Aila Slisco, "After Kabul Airport Carnage, Trump, Republicans Hammer Biden's Decision to Abandon Bagram," *Newsweek*, August 22, 2021.