

Commentary: Securing the Least Bad Outcome: The Options Facing Biden on Afghanistan

By Brian Michael Jenkins

Very soon, President Joseph Biden must decide whether to withdraw the remaining 2,500 U.S. troops from Afghanistan to meet a May 1 deadline agreed to by the previous administration. The consequences of the decision will decide the fate of Afghanistan and signal the United States' broader strategic intentions. The administration could decide that the United States is finally out and the Afghans are on their own, or it could announce that further troop withdrawals from Afghanistan would undermine U.S. national security interests. It could order further reductions while avoiding zero, reframe the U.S. mission, or ignore the deadline and try to extend diplomatic efforts beyond it. To the proponents and opponents of any course of action, the issues are clear. To a president who must reconcile often competing national interests, decisions are more complicated. Decisive action always looks good, but a turbulent world also means calculating risks, avoiding unintended consequences, and hedging bets.

In one of the most difficult decisions of his nascent administration, President Joseph Biden must very soon decide whether to withdraw the remaining 2,500 U.S. troops from Afghanistan to meet a May 1 deadline agreed to by the Trump administration. In launching a major diplomatic effort to advance the Afghan peace process in early March 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken made clear in a letter to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani that as the "policy process continues in Washington, the United States has not ruled out any option."¹

This article examines other possible courses of action the Biden administration could take if this diplomatic effort does not result in

Brian Michael Jenkins is a former Green Beret and currently serves as Senior Advisor to the President of the RAND Corporation, where he initiated one of the nation's first research programs on terrorism in 1972. His books and monographs on terrorism include International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict; Aviation, Terrorism and Security; Unconquerable Nation; Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?; The Long Shadow of 9/11; When Armies Divide; and The Origin of America's Jihadists. Twitter: @BrianMJenkins

Editor's note: The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the perspectives of the Combating Terrorism Center, the United States Military Academy, or the RAND Corporation.

© 2021 Brian Michael Jenkins

a major breakthrough in the coming weeks. What makes a decision on which path to follow so difficult is that each option carries a high risk of resulting in bad outcomes. As *The New York Times* recently put it:

If the Biden administration honors the withdrawal date, officials and analysts fear the Taliban could overwhelm what's left of the Afghan security forces and take control of major cities like Kandahar in a push for a complete military victory or a broad surrender by the Afghan government in the ongoing peace negotiations. But if the United States delays its withdrawal deadline, as a congressionally appointed panel recommended on Feb. 3, the Taliban would most likely consider the 2020 deal with the United States void, which could lead to renewed attacks on American and NATO troops, and potentially draw the United States deeper into the war to defend Afghan forces, whom the Taliban could still retaliate vigorously against.²

To a significant degree, the challenge facing President Biden is therefore to make the decision that leads to the least bad outcomes. Because his decision will have reverberations far beyond the future of Afghanistan, he will need to take account of the enduring threat posed by a global jihadi terror movement that could again threaten the United States from Afghanistan. The president will also need to weigh other key strategic and geopolitical interests of the United States, as well as the appetite of the American public for ongoing military commitments overseas and the budgetary pressures facing the United States a year into the global coronavirus pandemic.

The following discussion will focus first on the current strategic and political context. Next, it will focus on the nature of the continuing terrorist threat. It will then turn to the 2009 debate about troop levels in Afghanistan at the beginning of the Obama administration when then Vice President Biden offered a different view on how the United States should proceed. The article will then examine the diplomatic and political complexities of the decisions facing now President Biden—they are far more than purely military calculations. The section after this will review the president's options with regard to Afghanistan by weighing the arguments for and against what the author identifies as six different possible courses of action. The final section offers some concluding observations.

The Strategic and Political Context

Twenty years later, the 9/11 attacks, in which 2,977 people were killed, may seem a distant memory to many, eclipsed by the death toll of the coronavirus, which in the first two months of 2021 on average killed roughly that number of Americans daily. But as recent events attest, the global terrorist campaign begun by Usama bin Ladin three decades ago has not ended. Jihadi groups continue to plot major terrorist operations from abroad, while they incite homegrown terrorists to carry out attacks wherever they are.

In April 2020, German police thwarted a plot targeting U.S. and NATO air bases by a terrorist cell that was receiving instructions from the Islamic State in Syria and Afghanistan.³ Between September and November 2020, there was a surge in jihadi terrorist attacks in Europe, including an Islamic State-inspired attack on the streets of Vienna.⁴ In early February 2021, Danish and German authorities arrested 14 individuals, including three Syrians, for plotting a jihadi terrorist attack.⁵

On this side of the Atlantic, the U.S. Department of Justice in mid-December 2020 unsealed an indictment revealing the existence of a new plot to hijack an airliner and carry out a 9/11-style attack in the United States.⁶ U.S. authorities have been largely—but not always—successful in interrupting such plots.⁷ But as we have seen before, in the first year of the George W. Bush administration, a single bloody attack could change the narrative and sabotage the new administration's agenda.

The Biden administration faces daunting domestic challenges—taming the still-raging coronavirus pandemic, which will require accelerating the rate of vaccinations; restoring an economy cratered by the pandemic, while leading a deeply divided nation; restoring morale and public trust in battered government institutions; and confronting an unreconciled opposition and continuing challenges to his legitimacy. Abroad, the new administration must address the challenges posed by an assertive China, an aggressive Russia, a belligerent Iran, and an unpredictable North Korea,

always dangerous at the best of times but especially when ignored. Repairing alliances, starting with NATO, will also be a challenge for the new administration.

Jihadi terrorism does not top the list of the new administration's immediate concerns, but the threat remains and could grow. President Biden will have to decide whether and how fast to continue American troop withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as a smaller contingent in Syria, and to what extent the United States will continue its military support for local counterterrorism operations in other African and Asian countries. There will be pressure to reduce the defense budget in order to address immediate domestic concerns, finance the national shift toward great-power competition, and get the country out of the seemingly endless wars that started with the Global War on Terror in 2001.⁸

Americans view war as a finite undertaking, not an enduring condition. Instead of anything that resembles “military victory,” nearly 20 years of fighting, at great cost in blood and treasure, have produced what has been variously described as a “modicum of success,”⁹ “fragile gains,”¹⁰ and a “dismal failure.”¹¹ Many ask why we do not just call it quits and bring the troops home, let other countries fend for themselves. This thinking encapsulates the views of the previous administration.

When to withdraw from Afghanistan is not just about bringing American forces home, although that will be the most salient and



*An Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter transports troops across Afghanistan on March 6, 2019.
(Army Captain Roxana Thompson/U.S. Department of Defense)*

immediate question facing the administration. It is about how the United States will continue to defend itself against foreign and foreign-inspired terrorist threats against U.S. targets abroad and especially on U.S. soil.

For the past quarter-century, U.S. counterterrorism strategy has been driven by the assumption that security at home depends on engaging the terrorists abroad: “We will fight them over there so we do not have to face them in the United States of America.”¹² This linkage seemed clear immediately after 9/11; those responsible for the attack had to be scattered and destroyed before they could carry out further—potentially even larger-scale—attacks.

There is no exchange rate that tells us how many troops deployed to fight terrorists and their allies abroad reduces the risk of a particular number of foreign-directed or -inspired terrorist attacks in the United States. We cannot say that withdrawing a certain number of troops from Afghanistan increases risk here by a certain number of percentage points.

Some would argue that the equation goes the other way: Continuing U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East inflame our foes, boost their recruiting, and increase the likelihood of further terrorist attacks. Al-Qa`ida propaganda certainly exploited the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. A new wave of jihadi attacks in the United States only began six years later.¹³

At the same time, the number of U.S. troops deployed in Afghanistan has plummeted by more than 90 percent since 2012;¹⁴ it declined in Iraq after 2007, resulting in complete withdrawal in 2011. The number of jihadi terrorist attacks and plots in the United States reached a high point in 2015 and 2016.¹⁵ That peak coincided with the rise of the Islamic State in 2014 and the return of U.S. troops to Iraq that year to lead the campaign to destroy the group. These events provide evidence for both sides of the argument—the rise of jihadi groups abroad can prompt terrorist attacks in the United States, which may decline when the United States goes after the groups, but engaging them militarily can also provoke a violent backlash and revenge attacks.

We must take care here not to fall into what Lieutenant General (Ret) H. R. McMaster has called “strategic narcissism,” that is, the view that the level of the terrorist threat is determined exclusively by what the United States does.¹⁶ Doing so underestimates the risks of both military intervention and military extrication. It is narcissistic in that it overestimates the role of U.S. decisions and ignores the agency of the terrorist foes—as if Washington has exclusive control of the volume switch.

As a veteran of the Vietnam War, I find that this has a familiar ring. From the Pentagon to the U.S. headquarters in Saigon down to the local U.S. district advisor, that war was viewed exclusively through briefing slides that counted the things we could count, mostly our “inputs”—troop strength, number of sorties, tonnage of ordnance, and so on. Enemy actions were seen as responses to what the United States did.¹⁷ Rarely did U.S. commanders in Vietnam or political leaders in Washington mentally switch sides to ask, what do the enemy’s briefing slides say? They were, assuredly, not the mirror image of our own.

The “strategic narcissism” that McMaster warned against has a corollary reflected in the mistaken view that conflicts end with U.S. withdrawal. The United States may choose to extricate itself from an armed conflict, but that does not mean others will stop fighting. What for the United States is a strategic choice is for them a mission mandated by history or by God. We learned this in Vietnam, too.

What we can say in the current circumstances is that our jihadi adversaries have their own worldview. They have not abandoned their ambitions. What they do depends on their capabilities and their own strategic assessments of how to proceed. Moreover, the jihadi enterprise has metastasized since 9/11.

The Continuing Terrorist Threat

The United States and its allies have succeeded in degrading al-Qa`ida’s ability to launch large-scale attacks abroad, but the global jihadi enterprise survives. The competing branches and affiliates of today’s global jihadi enterprise have suffered setbacks, but their determination appears undiminished.

The indictment detailing a new plot to hijack an airliner in the United States, unsealed by the U.S. Department of Justice in December 2020, charged an alleged operative of al-Shabaab (al-Qa`ida’s affiliate in Somalia) who had allegedly gone to flight school in the Philippines, practiced breaching cockpit doors, and scouted targets in preparation for a 9/11-style attack in the United States.¹⁸ Such ambitious plots now seem far-fetched, but had authorities arrested the 9/11 hijackers in July or August 2001, their plot would have seemed equally improbable. Who would have seriously believed that a small gang of 19 conspirators could hijack four airliners, bring down the World Trade Center with two of them, and fly a third into the Pentagon? And even if this latest al-Shabaab plot had not been discovered, it still might not have succeeded. It was simply another try, which highlights the sober conclusion that as long as these groups exist, they will never stop plotting attacks. Terrorist plots involving U.S. aviation that the public knows about were also uncovered in 2001, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2017.^a

Some plots to bomb commercial airliners involved al-Qa`ida veterans in Pakistan and later al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), its affiliate in Yemen. Meanwhile, Islamic State affiliates in Egypt brought down a Russian airliner in 2015, killing 224 on board, and al-Shabaab was responsible for a bomb that exploded on a Somali airliner in 2016.¹⁹ The al-Shabaab aviation plot disclosed in December 2020 underscores the continuing threat. As the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky reportedly once said, “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.”²⁰

Both al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State also continue to incite homegrown terrorists to carry out attacks. In the fall of 2020, jihadi attacks occurred in Dresden, Germany; Paris; Nice; Vienna;

a In 2001, the so-called “shoe bomber” attempted to sabotage a U.S.-bound commercial airliner; in 2006, British authorities uncovered an al-Qa`ida plot to sabotage U.S.-bound airliners using liquid explosives; in 2009, the “underwear bomber” attempted to bring down a U.S.-bound jet; in 2010, bombs were smuggled into two air cargo shipments bound for the United States; in 2012, U.S. and foreign intelligence services disrupted an al-Qa`ida network plot targeting civilian aviation; and in 2017, the United States and the United Kingdom banned laptops on flights from a number of Middle Eastern countries to prevent suspected sabotage attempts by the Islamic State.

and the Swiss town of Lugano.^b Most of the recent incidents have been stabbings or shootings, reflecting the limited capabilities of individual attackers. But while the latest attacks resulted in few casualties, single offenders can be lethal. A jihadi driving a truck into a crowd in Nice in 2016 killed 86 people,²¹ and a 2017 vehicle ramming attack in New York killed eight people.²² Four died in the shooting in Vienna, and three died in the Nice stabbings. In 2016, a lone jihadi shooter killed 49 people at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida.²³

Although every single death is tragic, it is a testament to U.S. counterterrorism efforts that jihadi-directed or -inspired terrorists were able to kill only a few over 100 people in the United States since 2001.²⁴ That was far fewer than feared in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. However, body counts do not capture the psychological effects of terrorism. A single dramatic attack can have great impact, create a major crisis, and alter the political landscape.

The kidnapping and murder of a Canadian official in 1970 and threat of further terrorist violence prompted the Canadian prime minister, with the support of more than 80 percent of the population, to invoke the War Measures Act and deploy the armed forces internally for the only time in the history of the nation.²⁵ The August 2014 murder of an American hostage by the Islamic State and the release of footage of the crime on the internet changed the rhetoric in Washington and was a turning point in U.S. military efforts to destroy the Islamic State.²⁶ The gruesome murder of a teacher in France in October 2020 has threatened President Macron's political future and exacerbated long simmering tensions in French society.

Biden Has Been Here Before

During the 2020 campaign, candidate Biden pledged to “end the forever wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East.”²⁷ However, ending forever wars may lie beyond the limits of American power. The United States controls only the level and mode of its own participation. The question for the Biden administration will be, how much can the United States stay out of war-fighting without shutting down counterterrorism operations?

President Biden has been there before, and the proposals he made earlier may offer clues about his future preferences. In 2009, the new Obama administration, which wanted to end U.S. military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, faced a dilemma: While American attention and resources were focused on dealing with the insurgency that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Taliban had regrouped and made a strong comeback in Afghanistan. By 2009, they posed a growing threat that the limited U.S. and allied forces and weak Afghan forces could not handle. The Pentagon and most of the president's advisors favored sending reinforcements.²⁸

Then Vice President Biden took a contrary view. The United States, he argued, lacked a clear strategy. The Afghan government

was dysfunctional and corrupt. Biden argued that counterinsurgency operations conducted by foreign forces were futile and would only further alienate the Afghan population. Americans were foreigners killing Afghans, and even if the casualties were Taliban and even though the Americans sought (not always successfully) to avoid civilian casualties, those facts alone would not endear them to the Afghan people.²⁹

Instead of increasing American involvement, Biden proposed a counterterrorism strategy that would reduce the U.S. military footprint and limit the direct involvement of U.S. ground forces in counterinsurgency operations. He suggested deploying the remaining American forces in the cities, thus preventing a Taliban takeover there. The U.S. military operations would focus on destroying al-Qa`ida, mainly by attacking its leadership.³⁰

Would it have worked? Could the United States have destroyed al-Qa`ida without defeating Taliban insurgents? The counterterrorism strategy outlined by Vice President Biden would have allowed the Taliban to dominate the countryside until Afghanistan's own forces were able to establish government control. Given the dreadful state of the Afghan army, that might take decades. As long as the Taliban survived in the countryside, would not al-Qa`ida survive in its shadow?

The same issue comes up in the current negotiations between the United States and the Taliban. The United States cannot be certain whether the Taliban will ever sever their ties with al-Qa`ida. The coordinator of the United Nations Monitoring Team that tracks the Taliban and global jihadi terror groups warned that al-Qa`ida continues to be deeply embedded with the Taliban, and the two groups carry out joint operations and training.³¹ If the Taliban are brought into the Afghan government as part of a political settlement, or if Kabul quickly falls after a U.S. pullout, will al-Qa`ida again have its sanctuary? Echoing the UN Monitoring Team warning, some analysts have pointed out, the Taliban and al-Qa`ida, and other groups that it hosts are so deeply intertwined that counterterrorism is inseparable from counterinsurgency.³²

Whether Biden's counterterrorism strategy would have worked was not tested. President Obama decided in February 2009 to send in 17,000 more American combat forces, less than the 30,000 the Pentagon thought were needed but still nearly a 50 percent increase in the troop level. President Obama also agreed to deploy an additional 4,000 military personnel to train the Afghan army and police. Following a further review of the situation later in the year, President Obama approved a major surge in U.S. military operations and ordered 30,000 additional troops to be deployed, bringing the total up to 100,000.³³

However, President Biden's opposition to large-scale deployments of U.S. troops to fight insurgents abroad, in fact, coincided with President Obama's own wariness about deploying American ground forces. Even as he approved sending additional reinforcements to Afghanistan, President Obama expanded the air campaign against al-Qa`ida and Taliban leadership, which has remained a significant component of U.S. counterterrorism strategy. Greater emphasis was also placed on preparing the Afghan military to take over counterinsurgency operations.

To increase pressure on the Afghans, in December 2009, President Obama announced a timetable for U.S. withdrawal³⁴—but the timetable was not met. Obama, on his own counsel, in 2014 avoided putting U.S. combat forces into Iraq and Syria to engage the Islamic State and instead relied on Kurdish and Arab

b On September 25, 2020, two people were injured in a stabbing attack in Paris; on October 4, one man was killed and another was injured in a stabbing attack in Dresden; on October 16, a jihadi attacked and beheaded a teacher in Paris; on October 20, three people were killed in a stabbing attack at a Catholic basilica in Nice; on November 2, a gunman who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State opened fire on people at various locations in Vienna, killing four people; and on November 23, a Swiss woman wounded one in a department store in Lugano, Switzerland, in what authorities called a suspected terror attack.



Then Vice President Joe Biden and then International Security Force Commander General David Petraeus are pictured at Kabul Military Training Center in Afghanistan on January 11, 2011. (Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs)

proxies, supported by U.S. airpower, to fight the ground war. The United States moved away from counterinsurgency and toward the counterterrorism strategy sought by both Biden and Obama.

To a certain degree, that is the current situation in both Afghanistan and Iraq, where U.S. military personnel are primarily involved in training and logistics support of local armies while continuing active counterterrorism operations.

Diplomatic and Political Complexities Facing Biden Current Deployments

As of early 2021, approximately 2,500 U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan and 2,500 troops remain in Iraq. The U.S. deployments to counterterrorism missions in Syria, various African nations, and the Philippines measure in the hundreds. The greatest numbers of U.S. forces are deployed mainly in Bahrain (about 4,700), Djibouti (about 4,000), Kuwait (13,500), Qatar (about 10,000), Saudi Arabia (about 2,000), and United Arab Emirates (5,000) where they are deployed at U.S. military headquarters and naval and air bases supporting a variety of missions, including countering threats from Iran and Russia.³⁵ In addition, there are about 2,300 American troops deployed in Jordan.

The Trump administration wanted all U.S. forces out of

Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia by May 2021.³⁶ American forces have been almost entirely redeployed from Somalia and are now mainly based in Kenya where operations against al-Shabaab continue.³⁷ Congress has opposed further withdrawals from Afghanistan without an assessment of the risks withdrawing will create.³⁸

Political Pressures, Political Risks

What President Biden decides to do will depend on the situation, the advice of his civilian and military advisors, and his own judgment. As all political leaders must, President Biden probably will also weigh the political costs and risks of each possible course of action. Domestic politics always influence wartime strategy, but they loom larger today, given the intense partisanship that characterizes U.S. politics.

Some in Biden's own party will want to see the war on terrorism shut down. What was seen as a necessary response to 9/11 has been tarnished by excesses, revelations of abuses, and, in their eyes, morally dubious strategies and tactics—drone strikes, for example.

At the same time, President Biden's political opponents have more angles of attack. Failure to continue President Trump's withdrawals will mean reversing a popular policy of getting the

United States out of what Trump called “ridiculous, endless wars.”³⁹ At the same time, Biden’s opponents will be on the watch for any sign of weakness they can contrast with President Trump’s *declared* success, allowing Biden to be blamed for *losing Afghanistan*. And a bloody jihadi attack on American soil would prompt accusations that the Democrats have once again demonstrated their inability to prevent terrorism here. In 2016, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani reflected this line of thinking when he asserted that jihadi attacks in the United States “all started when Clinton and Obama got into office,”⁴⁰ perhaps forgetting the 9/11 attacks that occurred during George Bush’s administration (and when Giuliani was mayor of New York). In fact, no president since George H. W. Bush has escaped jihadi attacks on U.S. soil.^c

A serious terrorist attack against a U.S. target, which no U.S. president since the 1940s has avoided,⁴¹ would bring similar condemnation, especially if it took place in the context of further U.S. troop withdrawals, even though these were already accelerated by the Trump administration.

One can also imagine President Biden being blamed for failure (as well as humanitarian catastrophe) if Afghanistan were to fall during his administration. At a time when there is low tolerance for refugees, the United States would be under pressure to open its doors to refugees fleeing the country as it did after the fall of Cuba in 1959, the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, and the ‘Islamic Revolution’ in Iran in 1979.

Avoiding blame—which may be impossible no matter what occurs—would not be President Biden’s sole or even primary concern. A major terrorist attack on Americans abroad could increase popular pressure for a robust response. Not going after al-Qa`ida following the 9/11 attacks was unthinkable. As mentioned previously, the beheading of American hostages by the Islamic State demanded a response and was a major factor in expanding U.S. military operations against it. But any administration will want to avoid being forced to play into the hands of fanatics who may seek exactly that result.

Biden’s Options

Despite differences in political rhetoric, U.S. troop levels generally were on a downward trajectory in Iraq after 2007 and, after coming back to deal with Islamic State in 2014, resumed a downward trend. They have been on a downward trajectory in Afghanistan since 2011, indicating a shared desire by four presidents to reduce the U.S. military role and curtail new deployments in the region. President Biden would like to continue that trajectory.

However, each president has acted cautiously, not wanting to risk losing a war or allowing a jihadi return. Even President Trump backed off from what many regarded as an impulsive announcement of withdrawing U.S. troops from Syria when confronted with sober advice about the military and foreign policy consequences. The result is an asymptotic curve—as the number of remaining U.S. troops declines, the cuts get smaller. President Biden’s decisions will involve the last few thousand. Although the numbers are small, however, what the Biden administration does will have great symbolic importance. It will signal a strategic decision to the American public and to U.S. allies and adversaries

abroad. That decision could define the Biden foreign policy for the next four years.

The Biden administration seems unlikely to shut down counterterrorism operations. No one expects the FBI to announce one day that organized crime has been defeated once and for all and continuing law enforcement operations are no longer necessary. Counterterrorism can be seen in the same way—as an enduring task. It requires diplomacy, intelligence, law enforcement, and at some times, in some places, military operations short of sending large contingents of U.S. troops into a ground war.

Right now, the looming May 1 decision point, accepted by the previous U.S. administration under the February 2020 agreement with the Taliban,^d makes Afghanistan the most salient issue. What the United States decides will affect upcoming decisions elsewhere. In early March 2021, the Biden administration launched a high-level diplomatic effort to advance the peace process. Secretary of State Blinken in a letter to Afghan President Ghani stated that the United States would be sharing proposals with the Afghan government and the Taliban to accelerate discussions and would ask the United Nations to convene the foreign ministers of the United States and regional powers. He also stated that the United States would ask Turkey to host a senior-level meeting of “both sides in the coming weeks to finalize a peace agreement.” To coincide with these efforts, he stated the United States had drafted “a revised proposal for a 90-day Reduction in Violence, which is intended to prevent a Spring Offensive by the Taliban.” Importantly, the administration has said it is fully consulting with NATO and other partners.⁴²

If these diplomatic efforts do not result in a major breakthrough in the coming weeks, what then are the options? Essentially, there are only two. Either the United States removes all of its remaining forces by May 1 or it does not. However, there are variations that prioritize various strategic and political goals. These are briefly discussed below.

Option 1: The administration could announce that it is ordering the expeditious withdrawal of the remaining U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

The Biden administration has not shut off this option. In his early March 2021 letter to Afghan President Ghani, Secretary of State Blinken stated, “We are considering the full withdrawal of our forces by May 1st, as we consider other options.”⁴³ In this scenario, the withdrawal will not be dictated by the May 1 deadline, but rather determined by the security and logistics requirements for a safe departure and necessary adjustments by Afghan and allied forces. The United States could offer to continue its efforts with government officials and Taliban representatives to assist in bringing about a peaceful resolution to the conflict, but recognizes that this ultimately is in the hands of Afghans. However, so long as al-Qa`ida and Islamic State terrorists remain at large in Afghanistan, the United States will take whatever measures it deems necessary to protect itself until such time as Afghan authorities can guarantee that Afghan territory is not being used to mount new terrorist operations against the United States or its allies.

Proponents of this course of action argue that the war, which has cost 2,400 American lives and more than \$2 trillion,⁴⁴ has turned into a catastrophe for the United States. The Taliban remain

c To date, there have been no jihadi terror attacks on U.S. soil during the nascent Biden administration.

d Officially known as the “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan.”

stronger than ever. Their argument is that fixing Afghan society is beyond U.S. capabilities or responsibility. If the Afghan government cannot defend the country after 20 years, when can it? They warn that keeping American troops in Afghanistan beyond May 1 will make them targets of renewed Taliban violence. Moreover, they argue, it will undermine the peace process by signaling to the Afghan government that the United States will continue to back it despite its corruption and ineffectiveness.⁴⁵ A total withdrawal will also be a political crowd-pleaser for Americans at both ends of the political spectrum.

Total withdrawal would signal that the United States is finally out and probably will not come back, although that is not guaranteed. (President Obama, despite overseeing the full withdrawal of troops from Iraq in 2011, began bombing Islamic State forces when they swept across northern Iraq in 2014 and redeployed American troops to Iraq and Syria to destroy the jihadi entity.) Opponents of this course of action warn that precipitate American withdrawal will encourage the United States' allies to get out and demoralize Afghan forces. The argument is that it is unlikely to accelerate negotiations. Instead, U.S. withdrawal will encourage the Taliban to escalate military operations in a final offensive to impose their control over the countryside and cities,^e leading to panic and a possible humanitarian disaster. Opponents of withdrawal also argue that U.S. withdrawal will have consequences beyond Afghanistan. It could lead to developments that destabilize the region, in particular Pakistan. And they warn that it will erode U.S. credibility with its allies and foes in dealing with future challenges.

Option 2: The administration could announce that further troop withdrawals from Afghanistan would undermine U.S. national security interests at this time.

Proponents of this view tend to make the following observations. The negotiations envisioned in the Doha Agreement are still in the beginning stages. The Taliban have not met their commitment to lower the level of violence. According to the United Nations team monitoring, the Taliban, despite their pledge to stop cooperating with terrorist organizations, retains close ties with al-Qa`ida, which has been gaining strength in Afghanistan.⁴⁶ Counterterrorism operations continue. The argument is that the United States should not abandon its allies. Thirty-seven other nations, mostly NATO members, have deployed roughly 7,000 troops to assist the Afghan government. A bipartisan report commissioned by Congress urges postponing a U.S. exit.⁴⁷ That represents a rare national and international consensus. If it opts for this option, the Biden administration would likely stress that decisions regarding strategy and U.S. troop deployments will be continually reviewed and adjusted according to the changing requirements of the situation and U.S. national security priorities.

A recent net assessment in this publication of the balance of forces between the Afghan security forces and Taliban concludes

that the absence of U.S. forces would give the Taliban a "slight military advantage."⁴⁸ However, absent U.S. advisors to assist in maintenance and support function, the Taliban's advantage would begin to grow. The author of the assessment, Jonathan Schroden, points to the fact that the Afghan forces chronically fail to meet their recruiting goals and therefore remain understrength. A second factor is that the Afghan forces are far too complex and expensive for the government to sustain.⁴⁹

This was a problem that arose in Vietnamization more than 60 years ago. The United States created local forces and taught them the costly tactics that mirrored those of its own armed forces and that vastly exceeded local resources and capacity to support.⁵⁰ Withdrawal of American troops thus means more than loss of military manpower. It creates the perception that defeat is inevitable, and thus hastens political and military collapse.⁵¹ The U.S. agreement to completely withdraw its forces from Vietnam had a major impact. "The physical side of it ... was no more disastrous than the concomitant psychological effects of no longer being regarded by the United States as worth saving."⁵²

Proponents of this option are not arguing for an endless commitment, but rather against precipitate action to meet an arbitrary deadline. They tend to argue that the short-term risks of immediate withdrawal exceed the short-term benefits. "Victory" in the classic military sense is not an option in Afghanistan, but losing is. They could point out that the longer-term risks and benefits are uncertain, but for now, the costs to the United States are manageable.

Not withdrawing U.S. troops leaves open the possibility of continuing military operations. Instead of seeing negotiations as an alternative to fighting, the United States would thus recognize that fighting and negotiations are not alternatives, but rather are simply different dimensions of an armed struggle, which is the Taliban view. Americans—especially but not exclusively the last administration—are looking for an exit deal. The Taliban accept a condition of continuing war. Some elements might seek peace, but others see the war as divinely inspired or in some cases lucrative.

Opponents may agree with the last observation that the Taliban are uninterested in peace, arguing that it indicates unending armed conflict, which is not an entirely inaccurate summary of Afghanistan's history. But they could also argue that the destruction of the Taliban would require an American military investment and a ruthless application of military power unacceptable to the American people and antithetical to American values. The argument is that since the United States cannot change things in Afghanistan, U.S. withdrawal at some time is a unilateral decision, determined solely by American interests, not conditions in Afghanistan. In this view, the sole justification for an American military presence in Afghanistan today would be an imminent threat of terrorism directed at the United States. The argument is that because this no longer exists, the United States can still deal with that threat through preventive and punitive actions without troops in the country.

There is an additional argument that can be made against this and all other options which lead to the U.S. not withdrawing as envisaged by the Trump administration's agreement with the Taliban. The Taliban may determine that the peace agreement is defunct and renew attacks on American and NATO troops.⁵³

This gets into a discussion of what the Taliban actually agreed to and whether they have complied. The public version of the

^e The Biden administration is well aware of this risk. According to *The New York Times*, in a March 2021 letter to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that he was concerned that following a U.S. withdrawal, "the security situation will worsen and that the Taliban could make rapid territorial gains." Thomas Gibbons-Neff, David Zucchino and Lara Jakes, "U.S. Pushes U.N.-Led Peace Conference in Letter to Afghan Leader," *New York Times*, March 7, 2021, and updated March 8, 2021.

agreement includes no Taliban commitment to reduce the level of violence, and it is not clear they could even if Taliban leaders wanted to do so. In the public version of the agreement, the Taliban promised only that it “will prevent any group or individual in Afghanistan from threatening the security of the United States and its allies,” and that “it will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qa’ida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.”⁵⁴

This addressed (but did not assuage) U.S. concerns about Afghanistan again being used as a base for terrorist attacks. U.S. officials assert that American and Taliban representatives spoke about “all sides reducing violence by as much as 80 percent to pave the way for peace talks,”⁵⁵ but discussions are not agreements. The Afghanistan Study Group Final Report states that, “According to briefings with those close to the negotiations, the Taliban had further committed to not attacking international forces, large Afghan cities, and some other targets.” Whether this commitment was in writing and further details are not available. The Taliban have focused their recent attacks on Afghan forces and Afghan civilians.⁵⁶

Option 3: The administration could continue to cut the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, signaling its continuing commitment to eventual withdrawal, but avoiding zero.

This would mean smaller withdrawals and a smaller residual force. We are getting to the edge. Leaving even a small force behind indicates a continuing symbolic, albeit fragile, commitment. Politically, it also makes a surge easier if circumstances demand.

Clearly, this is a hedge. Proponents could argue that its benefit is that it allows the administration greater flexibility. Critics could argue that pursuing this course risks the Taliban renewing attacks on U.S. and NATO troops. They could also point out that the force reductions already anticipated guarantee that the few remaining combat forces are “insufficient to accomplish any outcome of strategic utility to the United States”⁵⁷ and can make no strategic contribution to the outcome of the conflicts. With no achievable objective, U.S. military personnel could be there forever.

The Biden administration could counter this by announcing a new tentative timetable for complete withdrawal, but would face criticism that this has not worked before and is not credible now. Neither President Obama’s timetable nor President Trump’s declared goals for withdrawal were met.

Option 4: The administration could argue that withdrawal applies only to U.S. ground forces engaged in combat operations other than counterterrorism, and that has been largely achieved.

Withdrawal was never intended to mean that the United States would deliberately cripple the Afghans by suspending assistance, training, or air operations, which are also directed against al-Qa’ida and other terrorist targets.

Essentially, this is reframing the U.S. role in Afghanistan. Proponents of this course of action could maintain that not all American troops there have to come home to signify that the war is over. They could point out that U.S. forces are deployed all over the world, fulfilling a variety of vital security missions. Some areas are more volatile than others, but they could note that American casualties in Afghanistan have been extremely low—four Americans died in Afghanistan in 2020. Every death is, of course, a tragedy, but

this is fewer than are killed in military training accidents.⁵⁸

The utility of this option is that it underscores the difference between the situation in 2009 and a very different situation today. The 2,400 Americans killed and the more than \$2 trillion spent is in the past. Sunk costs cannot be an argument against withdrawal, but neither can they support withdrawal. Today’s decisions begin with the current situation.

Option 5: The administration could ignore the deadline and instead intensify diplomatic efforts.

Looking for a quick deal, the United States agreed to an accelerated timetable for withdrawal by May 1, 2021. Predictably, the negotiations proceeded very slowly. Once the United States set its deadline for leaving Afghanistan and started removing its forces, there was little incentive for the Taliban to do much more than wait. The two sides did not even exchange proposed agendas until this January (2021), and the Taliban has not agreed to consider a ceasefire until all other matters are resolved.⁵⁹

If the diplomatic efforts launched by Secretary of State Blinken do not result in a breakthrough in the coming weeks, the United States could ignore the May 1, 2021, deadline, reasoning that it is self-imposed and dependent upon a reduction in violence, which has not occurred. In this scenario, the administration could announce that it has communicated to the Taliban a continued desire to lower the volume of violence to pave the way for meaningful discussions aimed at a political resolution of the conflict. The United States could also make clear that in consultation with the government of Afghanistan and its allies in the field, it will agree to a ceasefire during which all parties to the conflict will stand down. If the Biden administration pursues this option, it would likely do so in the hope that negotiations then can continue in an atmosphere of peace. A ceasefire would also facilitate humanitarian efforts—medical treatment, vaccination against COVID-19, and other health measures—that will benefit all Afghans.

Benefits of this option are that it would address the immediate problem of rising violence and at least temporarily allow some humanitarian concerns to be addressed. The Taliban, however, also get a vote.^f But if the Taliban overtly refuse to participate in further talks and instead escalate the violence as they might during their usual spring offensive and renew their targeting of U.S. and NATO forces, the onus of responsibility for continuing bloodshed would clearly be on them. One can rightly be skeptical, but proponents of this course of action would say it is worth a try. The question would be, what might the Taliban demand to extend negotiations? Alternatively, what coercive measures does the United States have?

The argument against trying to extend diplomatic efforts beyond May 1 is that it only delays the inevitable and even opens the door to the United States remaining in Afghanistan indefinitely or even increasing its military operations if the Taliban reject diplomacy. The logic is that since the United States cannot change the ultimate outcome, it should get out unconditionally as soon as possible.

^f In February 2021, *The New York Times* reported that “one option under consideration, [Biden administration] aides said, would be to extend the May 1 troop withdrawal deadline by six months to give all sides more time to decide how to proceed. But it is unclear that the Taliban would agree ...” Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, and David E. Sanger, “Stay or Go? Biden, Long a Critic of Afghan Deployments, Faces a Deadline,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2021.

Option 6: The administration could order a broad strategic review of its global counterterrorism strategy while it delays withdrawal.

The review would aim at deciding how best to continue necessary counterterrorism operations while increasing the capacity of other governments to successfully address security challenges that are of mutual concern. Although military training and assistance are a significant component of these efforts and provide a major source of influence in dealing with many governments, the review would address non-military measures, which are widely recognized as being chronically short-changed.

Hasty decisions can create unintended consequences. Proponents of this option could argue that it is another way to buy time to think through the broader consequences of withdrawal from Afghanistan as well as future troop withdrawals from Iraq, Syria, and other places. They would also point out that it is better to ignore an arbitrary near-term deadline in favor of a calm and thorough examination of where we go in the future.

Conclusions

The United States is in Afghanistan and other places to support its own national security interests beyond defeating the Taliban or even jihadi terrorists. There are a lot of moving parts—and this calculus does not take into consideration U.S. concerns about Iran's ambitions to dominate the Middle East or develop nuclear weapons or regional stability in South Asia.

The decision calculus goes beyond immediate military assessments and reflects broader strategic and philosophical views. The arguments about withdrawing troops from Afghanistan tend to fall into two categories:

Those who want to see immediate full withdrawal tend to reflect one or several of the following three lines of thought:

- (1) The "Global War on Terror" was a mistake from the beginning. It has been enormously costly in lives and treasure. We should end it now. The tagline to this argument is usually something

along the lines of 'if Biden does not get out now, he owns it.'

(2) There is no longer any serious terrorist threat, which from early on has been greatly exaggerated. Anyway, the United States can handle it without troops on the ground

(3) There are not enough American troops in Afghanistan to make a difference—a sort of continuation of the Weinberger or Powell Doctrines that U.S. forces should be committed only when we are determined to "win" and military victory is achievable. Numbers 1 and 3 reflect philosophical positions more than assessments of the current situation.

The arguments for not withdrawing in May include:

(1) The United States cannot erase almost 20 years and start over—we begin with where we are now. We are in Afghanistan. Withdrawing has consequences, too. It could lead to crises that we would want to avoid.

(2) There is a continuing threat. It could become worse as a consequence of rapid withdrawal.

(3) It is not about "victory" in the classic sense. The United States' (currently small) military deployment is still a component of international diplomacy as well as of its negotiating strategy. The differences appear irreconcilable. Do U.S. military operations abroad help protect the United States against terrorism or only increase the threat? Is U.S. withdrawal synonymous with ending the conflicts, or does it mean only that we are out? Should military operations be undertaken only to defeat foes, or does a military presence and assistance support diplomacy or achieve other non-military objectives? Is war finite, or is counterterrorism continuing work?

To the proponents and opponents of any course of action, the issues are clear. To a president who must reconcile often competing national interests, decisions are more complicated. Decisive action always looks good, but a turbulent world also means avoiding unintended consequences, hedging bets, not foreclosing options—and above all, responding to inevitable events. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, David Zucchino and Lara Jakes, "U.S. Pushes U.N.-Led Peace Conference in Letter to Afghan Leader," *New York Times*, March 7, 2021, and updated March 8, 2021.
- 2 Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Taimoor Shah, "The Taliban Close In on Afghan Cities, Pushing the Country to the Brink," *New York Times*, February 15, 2021.
- 3 Nodirbek Soliev, "The April 2020 Islamic State Terror Plot Against U.S. and NATO Military Bases in Germany: The Tajik Connection," *CTC Sentinel* 14:1 (2021).
- 4 Johannes Saal and Felix Lippe, "The Network of the November 2020 Vienna Attacker and the Jihad Threat to Austria," *CTC Sentinel* 14:2 (2021).
- 5 Rachel Treisman, "Danish, German Authorities Detain 14 Suspects In Counter-Terrorism Operation," NPR, February 12, 2021.
- 6 "Kenyan National Indicted for Conspiring to Hijack Aircraft on Behalf of the Al Qaeda-Affiliated Terrorist Organization Al Shabaab," U.S. Department of Justice, December 16, 2020.
- 7 Brian Michael Jenkins, *Paths to Destruction: Comparing Jihadist Travelers with Domestic Plotters* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020).
- 8 These issues are discussed in greater detail in Brian Michael Jenkins, "The Future Role of the U.S. Armed Forces in Counterterrorism," *CTC Sentinel* 13:9 (2020).
- 9 Katie Bo Williams, "US Has Achieved 'Modicum of Success' in Afghanistan, Top General Says," *Defense One*, December 2, 2020.
- 10 Andrew Hammond, "Afghanistan Must Safeguard Its Fragile Gains," *Arab News*, August 10, 2019; "Common Country Analysis 2020," United Nations Somalia, September 2020.
- 11 Nick Turse, "Violence Has Spiked in Africa Since the Military Founded Africom, Pentagon Study Finds," *Intercept*, July 29, 2019.
- 12 "President Bush Addresses the 89th Annual National Convention of the American Legion," *The White House*, August 28, 2007.
- 13 Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Origins of America's Jihadists* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

- 14 "America's Longest War: A Visual History of 18 Years in Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, February 29, 2020.
- 15 Jenkins, *Paths to Destruction*.
- 16 H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020).
- 17 Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Unchangeable War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1970).
- 18 "Kenyan National Indicted for Conspiring to Hijack Aircraft on Behalf of the Al Qaeda-Affiliated Terrorist Organization Al Shabaab."
- 19 Robyn Kriel and Paul Cruickshank, "Source: 'Sophisticated' Laptop Bomb on Somali Plane Got Through X-ray Machine," CNN, February 12, 2016.
- 20 "Leon Trotsky > Quotes," Goodreads.
- 21 Brian Michael Jenkins and Bruce R. Butterworth, *Smashing Into Crowds—An Analysis of Vehicle Ramming Attacks* (San Jose, CA: Mineta Transportation Institute, 2019).
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ariel Zambelich and Alyson Hurt, "3 Hours in Orlando: Piecing Together an Attack and Its Aftermath," NPR, June 26, 2016.
- 24 Jenkins, *Paths to Destruction*.
- 25 Eleanor Sullivan Wainstein, *The Cross and Laporte Kidnappings, Montreal, October 1970* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1977).
- 26 David Sterman, *Decision-Making in the Counter ISIS War* (Washington, D.C.: New America, updated 2019).
- 27 Bill Barrow, "Biden promises to end 'forever wars' as president," Associated Press, July 11, 2019.
- 28 Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2020).
- 29 The debate in the Obama administration over strategy in Afghanistan is described in detail in Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2013). See also Kevin Marsh, "Obama's Surge: A Bureaucratic Politics Analysis of the Decision to Order a Troop Surge in the Afghanistan War," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 10:3 (2014).
- 30 Ibid.; Jules Witcover, *Joe Biden: A Life of Trial and Redemption* (New York: William Morrow, 2019).
- 31 "Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan," United Nations Security Council, May 27, 2020. See also Secunder Kermani, "Al-Qaeda Still 'Heavily Embedded' Within Taliban in Afghanistan, UN Official Warns," BBC, October 29, 2020.
- 32 Seth Jones, "Escaping the Graveyard of Empires? U.S. Options in Afghanistan," *Critical Questions*, Center for International and Strategic Studies, January 26, 2021.
- 33 Eric Schmitt, "Obama Issues Order for More Troops in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, November 30, 2009.
- 34 Matt Smith, "President's Afghan drawdown plan called risky, 'unrealistic,'" CNN, December 2, 2009.
- 35 Lolita C. Baldor, "US Central Command General Says Troop Surge in Middle East May Not End Soon," *Military Times*, January 23, 2020; "The Military Balance 2021," International Institute for Strategic Studies, February 25, 2021.
- 36 Dustin Jones, "Trump Administration Wants All U.S. Troops Out of Iraq and Afghanistan by Spring," NPR, November 17, 2020.
- 37 Kyle Rempfer, "US forces pack up in Somalia for elsewhere in east Africa," *Army Times*, December 21, 2020.
- 38 Richard Sisk, "Congress Moves to Block US Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Germany," *Military.com*, December 5, 2020.
- 39 Morgan Chalfont, "Trump knocks 'ridiculous Endless Wars' amid US troop pullout from Syria," Hill, October 7, 2019.
- 40 Eric Schmitt, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Charlie Savage, and Helene Cooper, "Trump Is Said to Be Preparing to Withdraw Troops from Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia," *New York Times*, November 26, 2020.
- 41 Dennis Pluchinsky, *Anti-American Terrorism: From Eisenhower to Trump—A Chronicle of the Threat and Response: Volume I: The Eisenhower Through the Carter Administration* (Singapore: WSPC (Europe), 2020).
- 42 Karen DeYoung, "U.S. proposes interim power-sharing government with Taliban in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2021; David Shepardson and Hamid Shalizi, "U.S. says all options on table for a decision on Afghanistan," Reuters, March 7, 2021; Gibbons-Neff, Zucchino, and Jakes; "Blinken offers plan to bolster Afghan peace process, report indicates," Associated Press, March 7, 2021.
- 43 Shepardson and Shalizi.
- 44 William Ruger, "Why President Biden Must Withdraw From Afghanistan," *New York Times*, February 26, 2021.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 "Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."
- 47 Afghanistan Study Group, *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report: A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, February 3, 2021).
- 48 Jonathan Schroden, "Afghanistan's Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment," *CTC Sentinel* 14:1 (2021).
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Brian Michael Jenkins, *A People's Army for South Vietnam: A Vietnamese Solution* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1971).
- 51 Stephen T. Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, and Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1978).
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Gibbons-Neff and Shah.
- 54 "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America, February 9, 2020."
- 55 Thomas Joscelyn, "The Taliban Is Still the Main Driver of Violence in Afghanistan," *Dispatch*, May 13, 2020.
- 56 *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report*; Julia Macfarlane and Aleem Agha, "Targeted killings threaten Afghanistan's postwar future," ABC News, January 7, 2021.
- 57 Daniel L. Davis, "The threat to our security isn't reducing troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq—it's failing to withdraw them entirely," *Military Times*, November 23, 2020.
- 58 These points are made by Eliot Ackerman in, "The Afghan War is Over, Did Anyone Notice," *New York Times*, December 17, 2020.
- 59 James Dobbins, "Afghanistan: Give Peace a Chance," Hill, February 9, 2021.