

# The Geopolitics of Afghanistan: Future After US Troops Withdrawal

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## ABSTRACT

In April 2021, President Joe Biden has announced that the remaining US troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan by September 11th, 2021. Delaying the May 1st deadline given by the Trump administration. This will create a security vacuum in the region. Experts fear that this decision might result in the breakout of another Civil War. This was the longest-running conflict in US history, the war has cost the US around \$2 trillion and 2400 American troops lost their lives. India's involvement there could be jeopardized. India needs to update its priorities to prepare for this change.

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## 1. A TIMELINE OF THE US'S WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

**November 13, 2001** - The Taliban flee Kabul to Kandahar when a U.S.-led coalition with the Northern Alliance enters the Afghan capital.

**December 5, 2001** - The Bonn Agreement is signed in Bonn, Germany, giving most of the power to key players in the Northern Alliance and strengthening the warlords who ruled between 1992 and 1996.

**December 7, 2001** - Mullah Omar leaves Kandahar and the Taliban regime officially collapses.

**December 13, 2001** - Karzai arrives in Kabul; unlike the Bonn agreement, militias loyal to the warlords also enter the Afghan capital.

**December 22, 2001** - Karzai takes the oath as President of the 29-member Governing Council established under the Bonn Agreement.

**2004 and 2009** - General elections are held and Karzai is elected president for two consecutive terms, which is the limit of the Afghan constitution.

**April 5, 2014** - Deeply flawed election results in the two leading fields, demanding the victory of Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is pursuing a power-sharing agreement in favor of the so-called United Government, as President of Ghani and Abdullah as CEO.

**December 8, 2014** - U.S. and NATO troops formally complete their combat mission, transitioning to a supportive and training role, although President Barack Obama has authorized U.S. forces to conduct operations against Taliban and al-Qaeda targets.

**2015-2018** - The Taliban continue to intensify and organize almost daily attacks on Afghan and American forces; plenty of civilians die in the crossfire. In the East, a member company of the Islamic State Group is established; the Taliban own almost half of the country.

**September 2018** - President Donald Trump appoints veteran Afghan-American diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad as a Taliban negotiator to fulfill his election promise to repatriate U.S. troops.

**2018-2019** - Zalmay is in talks with the Taliban again and again, mainly in the Gulf state of Qatar, where insurgents are maintaining a political office. The Taliban are unwilling to negotiate with the Kabul government.

**September 9, 2019** - After a particularly intense escalation of Taliban attacks, including a Kabul bombing that killed an American soldier, Trump abandons talks with the Taliban.

**September 28, 2019** - Presidential elections are held, but official results have not been known for months.

**November 24, 2019** - Trump visits U.S. troops in Afghanistan on Thanksgiving, declares the Taliban that they want to reach an agreement, and signals that Qatari talks are continuing.

**February 15, 2020** - Washington says the Taliban have agreed on a temporary “reduction in violence” as the first step towards a final peace agreement.

**18 February 2020** - Afghanistan Electoral Commission declares Ghani the official winner of the September elections; his rival, Abdullah, refuses to acknowledge the results, instead of declaring himself as the winner.

**February 29, 2020** - The United States and the Taliban signed an agreement in Doha, Qatar, requiring the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan; the convention also envisages negotiations within Afghanistan on a future political agenda.

## 2. SO WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR AFGHANISTAN AND ITS GOVERNMENT?

The government of President Ashraf Ghani will face a difficult road ahead. Even after the Peace deal was signed in 2020, Taliban attacks have intensified in the country. It is unlikely that the Taliban sign a peace deal with the Afghan government as they believe they can win militarily.

The Taliban have already said that they won't be attending any future talks to decide Afghanistan's future until all foreign troops withdraw from the country, so the Turkey Summit had to be postponed.

US lawmakers fear that women's rights will be deeply compromised under the Taliban ruling. When the Taliban ruled from 1996 to 2001, women were not allowed to go to school, they had to fully cover their body and they were not allowed to go outside without a male companion.

Kabul is currently on high alert, security was increased as the city braced for attacks from the Taliban, as the US failed to comply with the 1<sup>st</sup> May deadline of the troop's withdrawal provided by the Trump administration.

Biden said that US would continue to provide assistance to Afghan security forces and civilian programs, including programs for women and girls.

Foreign Secretary Antony Blinken said the Biden administration is working with Congress to provide nearly \$ 300 million in civilian aid to the country.

The international community has poured billions into Afghanistan since the Taliban were removed from power. The benefits for women and girls of access to education and public life have repeatedly been called a great success.

## 3. US - TALIBAN PEACE DEAL (2020)

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha, formally named the Peace agreement of Afghanistan. The provisions of the agreement include the withdrawal of all US and NATO troops from Afghanistan, a Taliban promise to prevent al-Qaeda from operating in Taliban-controlled areas, and talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The United States has agreed to reduce its force from 13,000 to 8,600 initially by July 2020, followed by a full withdrawal within 14 months if the Taliban honor their commitments. The United States has expressed its intention to lift economic sanctions against the Taliban by 27 August 2020. The deal was backed by China, Russia, and Pakistan, although it did not involve the Afghan government.

The resulting intra-Afghan talks were scheduled to begin on March 10, 2020, in Oslo, Norway. The agreement requires the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners by the start of negotiations, in exchange for 1,000 Taliban-held government soldiers. Though initially Ghani refused to release the prisoners since they were not a part of the Qatar talks, they decided to release the prisoners. This was a grave mistake, majority of the fighters have joined back the Taliban.

## 4. SURGE IN INSURGENT ATTACKS

Despite a peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban, attacks on insurgents against Afghan security forces have reportedly increased in the country. In the 45 days following the agreement, the Taliban carried out more than 4,500 attacks in Afghanistan, an increase of more than 70% over the same period last year. More than 900 Afghan security forces were killed during the period, up from about 520 in the same period a year earlier. Meanwhile, because

the number of attacks and airstrikes by the Afghan and U.S. forces air has decreased significantly against the Taliban, the deal reduced Taliban losses to 610 over the period, from about 1,660 in the same period last year. Jonathan Hoffman, a Pentagon spokesman, said that although the Taliban had stopped attacks on U.S-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, the violence was still "unacceptably high" and "not conducive to a diplomatic solution." He added: "We have continued to do defensive attacks to help defend our partners in the area and we will continue to do that."

## 5. REACTION TO BIDEN'S DECISION TO WITHDRAW TROOPS

Lawmakers of both parties have expressed concerns about women's rights, the potential for civil war, and whether Afghanistan would again become a refuge for terrorists.

"I'm concerned that the administration's decision may result in a Taliban offensive that topples the government," said Senator Jim Risch, the committee's top Republican.

Senior Republican Party leader Mitch McConnell criticized the decision saying, "Precipitously withdrawing US forces from Afghanistan is a grave mistake. It is a retreat in the face of an enemy that has not yet been vanquished, an abdication of American leadership".

However, others say the withdrawal would help move Washington on its "9/11 fixation," in which the fight against terrorism remained a key foreign policy goal. Leaving the country would mean that the United States could devote more energy to relations with China and Russia and focus on Biden's domestic policy goals.

Hillary Clinton has warned of 'huge consequences'.

China on Thursday expressed concern about the US decision to withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by September, and said Washington should take into account the legitimate security concerns of countries in the region to prevent "terrorist forces" from taking advantage of the chaos in the war-torn country. Beijing also criticized Washington for linking the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan to focus more on the threats posed by China, saying that the fight against terrorism is in the common interest of all parties, including the two countries.

## 6. WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES?

### A. Russia, China, and Iran

China would have a lot to lose due to the instability in Afghanistan, as this could have an impact on China's economic corridor in Pakistan. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan could stir up unrest in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In contrast, as an ally of Pakistan, it may see itself playing a greater role in Afghanistan.

The exit of the United States is a full circle for Russia after it suffered its own defeat from the US-backed Mujahideen and exited Afghanistan three decades ago. In recent years, Russia has taken on a peace-building role in Afghanistan. But both the Taliban and the Afghan government have been wary of their efforts. Following the March conference of Russia, the United States, China, and Pakistan, along with Taliban and Afghan envoys, the four directors said in a joint statement they would not support the establishment of an Islamic emirate, leaving the Taliban in anger. Russia's growing ties with Pakistan could become Moscow's post-US role in the Afghan post.

### B. India: time to be careful

New Delhi, which hoped to be part of the Blinken initiative, will be upset about the U.S. exit. India stood on the outer edge of the road to its exit from Afghanistan, culminating in the Doha agreement, reluctantly supporting the "Afghanistan talks" between the Taliban and the Afghan government. When the Biden Administration came in, India was hoping to restore the United States. Blinken's proposal has been given a role by India as it has been recognized as a regional stakeholder, but this proposal seems to have no future. The ISI-backed Haqqani group would play a major role in any Taliban regime. Further concern may be militants focused on India, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohamed, whom the Indian security organization already believes have moved to Afghanistan in large numbers.

India has already invested \$10.8 billion in Afghanistan as of 2012. Currently more than 400 projects are ongoing. Many Indian workers are currently in Afghanistan.

### C. Pakistan: Gains & concerns

This is both a moment of justification and a moment of concern in Islamabad. The Taliban are establishing a security institution in Pakistan. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, they fled to Pakistan, and the Taliban General Council operated from Quetta, Balochistan. Pakistan has persuaded the Taliban to reach an agreement with the Trump administration. For the Pakistani army, which has always seen Afghanistan in "strategic depths" in its perpetual hostility to India, the Taliban's capture of Afghanistan after 20 years, could finally bring a friendly force to Kabul. India, which has excellent ties with the governments of Karzai and Ghana, is being tailored to size. But the withdrawal of the United

States also means that Pakistan must bear the full burden of the chaos that experts predict. Civil war is not ruled out, and with it the influx of refugees into Pakistan again, even as the country struggles with refugees from the first Afghan war. All this at a time when the economy is fluctuating and Pakistan is staying on IMF credit on strict terms. Moreover, the Taliban are not monoliths and have recently shown stripes of independence from Pakistan. It must protect the instability in Afghanistan from crossing borders. Pakistan's eastern front with India is currently quiet, making it a headache less, but still a concern for the Pakistani army.

## 7. TERRORISM IS A MAJOR CONCERN

A major cause for concern among regional powers is the possibility of an increase in terrorism following the withdrawal of American forces. The Soviet-Afghan war required the military training and arming of countless Afghan citizens and foreign volunteers, many of whom eventually became leaders of groups such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda. While their training and tactics began on the battlefields of Afghanistan, they were soon exported to all corners of the world. This practice continued long after the war.

Writing for the New York Times Magazine in 1994, Tim Weiner reported that "in the five years since the Soviets withdrew, tens of thousands of Islamic radicals, outcasts, visionaries and gunmen from some 40 nations have come to Afghanistan to learn the lessons of jihad, the holy war, to train for armed insurrection, to bring the struggle back home "

India will have reason to fear a resurgence of the Taliban in the country. Patil pointed out that Mujahideen spread to Jammu and Kashmir in the 1980s as a historical antecedent to such concerns. He also noted that when the Obama administration first announced its intention to leave Afghanistan in 2014, Taliban- and Pakistan-based terrorist groups saw an opportunity to spread instability in J&K through irregular warfare. This shift from traditional warfare to irregular warfare in many ways justifies Kuniholm's new great game theory.

## 8. SET OF MITIGATION STRATEGIES THAT CAN HELP PROTECT INDIA'S INTERESTS:

- Wider diplomatic engagement: India should consider appointing a special envoy for Afghan reconciliation. The ambassador can ensure that Indian views are expressed at every meeting, develop a broader relationship with the Afghan government and other political actors, and liaise with some Taliban representatives. Yes, India might need to reach out to Afghanistan.
- Ongoing training and investment: India needs to provide more military training to the Afghan security forces and invest in long-term capacity-building programs. It should actively support and invest in the National Security Directorate (for example, by training and sharing intelligence). Finally, given the continuing level of violence and the impact of the coronavirus on the Afghan economy, India needs to expand its development assistance.
- Cooperation with and through others: India should seek to broaden its relations with Iran and Russia, explore opportunities for cooperation (as limited as possible) with China, and find common ground with the United States in the future of Afghanistan. This does not mean forcing competing interests to reconcile; this means investing in a broader diplomatic initiative to explore areas of convergence.

## 9. WHY DID THE US FAIL IN AFGHANISTAN?

When the United States marched in with its allies in 2001, it hoped to crush Islamic extremists such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban and instill democratic ideals in the country. Two decades later, after the deaths of 2,400 U.S. troops, the Taliban remain so strong that they may eventually rule Afghanistan. The American occupation essentially failed. What's more surprising, though, is that anyone thought it might end differently. The bad-starred Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the British before proving how difficult it was to maintain control over a wild area in the Hindu Kush region, had alienated part of the population. Americans, like the Russians in front of them, often did just that. This was in part due to the fact that clumsy military operations sometimes killed civilians. Also, because Western politicians and troops have often despised Islam, they view it as a monolithic, extreme phenomenon. It is not. While there are hard versions of Islam in Central Asia, there are also traditions of progressive and inclusive Islamic thinking, such as those that focus on the teachings of the Persian intellectual Rumi. Too bad it doesn't get more attention in the watching world. Another problem is the nation-state. Westerners tend to assume that "government" should be equated with "nation". However, the history of Afghanistan, like much of Central Asia, is a moving mosaic of city-states and overlapping tribal allegiances. "Nation-state" is not a strong concept there, and it is a deep mistake for the invading forces to assume that if they control the capital, Kabul, and the (supposedly) national government, they control the entire country. Both the Americans and the Russians learned this at their own expense.

When the Americans finally leave an estimated 7,000 Allied troops, will the war end? I strongly doubt it.

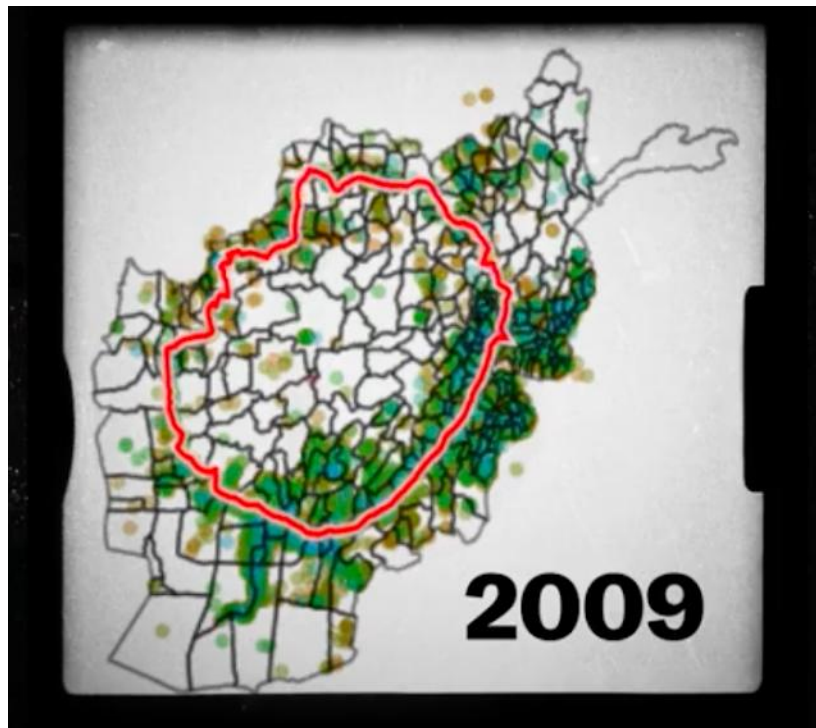
Afghanistan is a troubling source of drugs and weapons and a potentially important energy transfer point that is difficult for regional authorities to ignore. I hope the Americans make an effort to protect the factions that support them. The history of the Soviet invasion and withdrawal shows that the regime change provoked bloody retaliation. Americans have a moral duty to protect those who have ever helped them or supported their values, with asylum as needed. Many CIA agents will be left behind as advisers to the Afghan government.

### 10. HOW DID THE US FAILED TO REBUILD AFGHANISTAN? (THE RING ROAD)

The ring road is the longest road in Afghanistan. It was a cornerstone of Afghanistan's reconstruction strategy after the 2001 invasion. It lies between the capital, Kabul, and the second-largest city, Kandahar. It cost more than \$ 200 million to build and hundreds of people lost their lives to protect it. Despite so much investment, the Kabul-Kandahar highway is broken today. A 2016 inspection report found the road is beyond repairable and needs reconstruction.

To understand that such a significant and costly journey can fall apart, we need to know where did the US went wrong in Afghanistan?

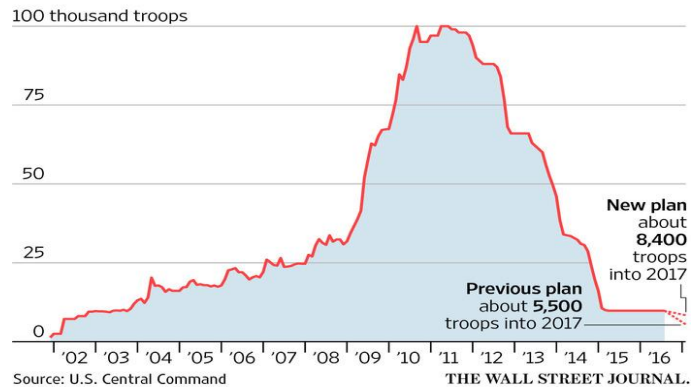
Just a few weeks after 9/11, the United States attacked Afghanistan, where Al Qaeda had planned the attacks. The Taliban were granted refuge, who at the time controlled the Afghan government. Both groups were expelled from Kabul in months, so the U.S. strategy soon turned from fighting to stabilizing and rebuilding the country. But Afghanistan is difficult to control and rebuild. Mountainous, and mostly rural. The population is divided among several ethnic groups and local communities often operate autonomously. To make matters worse, in 2002 there were only 50 kilometers of paved road, which meant that most of these communities were isolated. The United States has decided to change this by rebuilding this ring, which the Soviet Union built-in part in the 1960s but was devastated by war for decades. Beginning with the section between Kabul and Kandahar, the United States and several other countries have committed \$ 1.5 billion for the Ring Road. It would run in a 3,200-kilometer loop, connecting the 4 largest cities in Afghanistan - essentially connecting these communities. And it showed promise: trade moved in more places, and medical services came to more people. This gave more legitimacy to the new Kabul government around the country. The tour also made it possible for the United States and NATO soldiers to send troops and supplies to the country faster to keep the Taliban under control. But the US without finishing the work. In 2003, the US-occupied Iraq. And Afghanistan is the second priority. Funding, reconstruction, resources, and experienced leadership, including generals and diplomats, were all diverted to the Iraq war. The tour was far from complete, yet a few years later, reconstruction aid was reduced by \$ 1.2 billion. The U.S. occupation of Iraq allowed the Taliban to return and was seized.



If we look at Taliban activity (green zone) in the region between 2004 and 2009, it can be seen. Draw a line and see where these activities are concentrated. Ammunition was set up, roadside bombs were set, hostages were dropped, American soldiers and road construction personnel were killed. By 2008, the Taliban had taken back significant areas, especially in the south and east, along Kabul to the Kandahar highway. Afghanistan was in complete rebellion.

### Slower Exit

The White House announced it will keep about 3,000 more troops in Afghanistan than planned through January.



In 2009, President Barack Obama decided to start the war in Afghanistan again. He sent thousands of soldiers to the so-called The Surge. Total 100 thousand troops were stationed in Afghanistan. Though the United States and NATO did make some progress in the South, it quickly became clear that the Taliban would not be easily defeated. The more troops were deployed to Afghanistan, the more the Taliban launched attacks. After the military struggled to clear the area, it became almost impossible to rebuild the roads as the Taliban continued to attack road personnel. The deteriorating security environment has made this the most dangerous project our company has attempted. 21 killed. 51 injured. And 4 are missing.

This forced construction companies to take on safety, which caused the budget to skyrocket. Like the road from Khost to Pakitia, which cost almost \$ 5 million per mile, mainly for safety. But 18 months later, times up. President Obama has announced he will begin bringing the troops back. "After this initial downsizing, our troops will continue to return home at a steady pace while Afghan security forces take the lead. Our mission will change from combat to support." As U.S. troops withdrew, they left behind oversight of infrastructure projects, including roads in 2012, US aid reduced funding for road construction. And even after the United States and partner countries spent \$ 3 billion on it, the road was never completed. Road construction and maintenance have become the responsibility of the Afghan government, which has been crippled by corruption. Experts estimate that billions of dollars have been lost due to corruption in Afghanistan. In 2015, there were only about 11,000 U.S. soldiers in the country, mostly in major cities. The Taliban swept-back Afghanistan and it was stronger than ever. According to a 2016 audit, the United States has no plans to give Afghanistan a third chance to rebuild. In 2017, President Trump sent more soldiers but made it very clear: "We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists." As the situation continues to deteriorate, it no longer symbolizes U.S. efforts to rebuild Afghanistan.

### CONCLUSION

#### Is Peace possible in Afghanistan?

The future of Afghanistan not seems to be good, it doesn't seem that the Taliban will reach to an agreement with the Afghanistan government. And during this situation, the US troops withdrawal could lead to a catastrophe. Afghanistan could again become a safe heaven for the terrorists. The Taliban are now stronger than ever and now after the troops withdrawal, Afghanistan may go back in time which means another civil war could breakout.

But even after all this is peace possible in Afghanistan? Well, it is not impossible to achieve peace in Afghanistan. It is rich with natural resources like lithium, cobalt, gold, natural gas and all other kind of natural deposits. Development would mean jobs for people and revenue for those involved. A steady flow of money would certainly ease the conflict. A number of ongoing international projects are also underway, such as the TAPI pipeline, which supplies natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, strengthens regional peace through cooperation and generates billions of dollars in royalties to Afghans and neighboring countries. The \$ 10 billion project will not only provide gas, but enhance regional peace and stability by linking the economic and energy interests of the countries concerned.

For starters, a third-party mediator like the UN is key. In addition, the Taliban must agree to a ceasefire and integrate into the political system. Reports show that this is actually on the table.

Human rights cannot be ignored, especially with regard to women. Even here, despite some predictions from the press, the Taliban have made changes, especially with regard to women's rights. Knowing that they cannot simply abolish the

freedoms that women have acquired since 2001 in areas controlled by the country's government, the Taliban's position has eased women's participation in the public sector, such as access to education, employment and participation in social life. Such changes must give hope to the potential future of human rights in the country, they must not be despised for failing to create the perfect world immediately. Nevertheless, the element of lasting peace lies in economic issues.

The question is how to develop infrastructure and promote mining in a way that would benefit the Afghan people by providing employment and resources for critical public services such as education.

For a corrupt country like Afghanistan, it is the top 12 in the world. That is why economic agreements should be an integral part of peace negotiations, including the offering of fees to the provinces, the promotion of international control to ensure transparency, and the goal of infrastructure spending on schools and hospitals. This money would help prevent young men from choosing the path of war and rebuilding their country instead. It would therefore be more difficult for local Taliban leaders to recruit people who want to dedicate their time to their work, family and school. Taliban leaders can also benefit by engaging in these businesses and wanting to manage resources and provide services to their future constituents. The international community and the majority of the Afghan people agree that war is not the answer. Peace is inevitable, beneficial to most and ultimately possible. The enlightened self-interest of various stakeholders can lead to sustainable peace for a person who deserves much more and does not deserve it at all.

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