

## Evaluating the U.S. Military Contribution in Afghanistan

*Prepared statement by*

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U.S. forces make a variety of contributions in Afghanistan, but the most important of these are political, not military. In military terms, the war is a slowly decaying stalemate. The U.S. presence can slow the rate of decay at the margin, but we cannot reverse it absent a major reinforcement that seems highly unlikely. This means that if the war continues, the Taliban will eventually prevail regardless of plausible variations in the size or nature of the U.S. troop commitment. Afghanistan is not Korea or Germany; even indefinite U.S. support will not preserve our Afghan ally's independence forever. But neither can the Taliban win a stalemated war quickly. Eventually they will prevail if the fighting continues, but this could require years of grinding attrition warfare as long as the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) remain funded and in the field. This gives us an opportunity, and it gives both sides an incentive, to negotiate a compromise settlement in the meantime. For us, this averts eventual defeat; for the Taliban, it averts many more years of costly attrition. Such a settlement will require painful compromise, but it is the only plausible alternative to outright failure and thus U.S. strategy should focus on facilitating successful negotiations. This in turn implies that the most important contribution U.S. forces can make is to help enable successful talks. And the most important way U.S. forces can do this is as a bargaining chip – our forces perform many missions, but it is their presence per se that is now most important. The military capabilities they provide are now secondary to their political role as potential leverage for negotiating a compromise settlement to the war. To maximize that leverage, we should avoid further unilateral drawdowns in the absence of a settlement. We should be prepared to withdraw completely, but only in exchange for an acceptable deal to end the war.

## Stalemate

The Operation Resolute Support command stopped issuing regular updates on ANDSF casualties and the span of Taliban and GIRoA (the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) control in the country in 2018. But violence has clearly risen since then. And the trends in official data prior to the blackout were not favorable. From May 2016 through October 2018, the fraction of Afghan districts controlled by the government fell from 66 to 54 percent; the fraction of the Afghan population living in government-controlled districts fell from 69 to 64 percent over roughly the same interval. The Foundation for the Defense of Democracy has estimated that a wave of Taliban offensives following the beginning of U.S.-Taliban talks in August 2018 then caused a sharper decline in government control to about 35 percent of districts and 48 percent of population by June 2019.

Since then, while violence has continued to rise, the rate of decline in GIRoA control appears to have slowed again after a short-term acceleration that roughly paralleled the beginning of bilateral negotiations, with perhaps 33 percent of districts and 46 percent of the population now remaining in government control. And the decline in government control has not been accompanied by a proportionate increase in Taliban control: most areas where the GIRoA has lost control are now contested, not Taliban controlled.

Nor have the Taliban proven able to sustain command of any major urban area in the country. The Taliban can mount bombings and seize buildings temporarily even in downtown Kabul, and occasional brief sallies can threaten cities such as Konduz. But in no case have they been able to retain control for more than a few hours or days. None of these attacks have catalyzed broader popular uprisings. And few of the attackers have survived to continue sustained operations in city centers afterwards.

Overall, this pattern suggests a slowly decaying long term stalemate that neither side can break militarily at acceptable cost any time soon. The GIRoA clearly cannot: its span of control has been shrinking, not growing, since the U.S. drawdown began in 2011. But neither can the Taliban: the recent slowing of their rate of territorial expansion is suggestive of an inability to sustain indefinitely the casualty rate they suffered in their 2019 offensives, coupled with the increasing difficulty of expanding their influence into more strongly-held districts after taking easier, lower-hanging fruit in 2019.

Of course this could change dramatically if the ANDSF leaves the field. Government casualties have been very high, and U.S. commanders have periodically voiced concern with the morale of government troops and their ability to continue to replace losses with continued recruitment. If losses continue to increase, eventually the institution will break – it would be risky to assume that the ANDSF can sustain itself indefinitely in the face of ongoing heavy casualties and a morale-sapping gradual loss of territory with the associated gradual shrinkage of the population base the ANDSF needs for recruitment. This is not an institution that can continue this way forever.

Yet there are few indications that the stalemate will end soon. So far, the ANDSF is holding together, perhaps aided in this by a weak civilian economy that makes even dangerous military employment attractive to many. And the rate of Taliban expansion, while progressive, has been slow: it is now almost a decade since the U.S. began withdrawing our troops, yet after nine years of continuous warfare the Taliban still control less than 20 percent of the country's population. At this rate, it will be a very long time before they march into Kabul.

## Why Can't We Do Better?

Though defeat is thus unlikely in the near term, this is still a deeply unsatisfying prognosis for a war in which the United States has invested so much. How can the prospects be so bleak? The Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction reports that we have now spent more than \$80 billion to build an ANDSF that now fields more than 280,000 combatants; how can continued U.S. military support not enable this force to defeat a Taliban insurgency a fraction of its size, or even to hold its own indefinitely?

The problem is not a lack of some critical U.S. enabling capability, or a failure to advise ANDSF forces at a low-enough level of command, or an insufficiency of U.S. funding. More U.S. airstrikes, or more U.S. intelligence cooperation, or advising at the battalion level, or increased pay or equipment for the ANDSF would all surely help; they would all tend to reduce at the margin the pace of decay in Afghan government control. But none will enable a decisive military victory. And none are even likely to reverse the key trend lines.

This is because the underlying problem with the ANDSF is much deeper, and derives ultimately from the structure of the political system in which Afghan forces are embedded. In weakly institutionalized political systems like Afghanistan's, state militaries are often riven with corruption that saps combat motivation, undermines equipment availability, and interferes with the development of technical military expertise. Without a judicial system or legislature that can adjudicate conflict among armed elites, regimes in places like Afghanistan commonly rely on an internal balance of power to create political order and prevent factionalism from spilling over into armed violence between warlord militias. In such settings, the primary purpose of the army and police is not to defend the borders or defeat an insurgency – it is to maintain this internal balance within the political elite. And classically, to do this requires a mixture of cronyism and corruption in the armed forces. Corruption buys the loyalty of the largest armed militia in the country: the army. Cronyism reinforces the armed forces' loyalty by installing as senior commanders not trained technocrats but relatives, co-ethnics, political supporters, or representatives of allied political factions. Together such techniques bind the armed forces to the civilian leadership; just as important, they limit the threat a powerful, technically proficient, politically disinterested army would pose to every other armed body in the country – most of which are in the hands of warlords and other elites. If an army like Afghanistan's really did professionalize by replacing cronies with technocrats, rooting out corruption, and promoting based on merit rather than political alignment, this would pose an existential threat to dozens of warlord militias who now extract resources from society for the benefit of their followers and see this as their due given the strength of their armed following. Even worse, the first wave of new military technocrats would threaten their own corrupt, cronyist superiors in the army itself. In a political system where order is the product of the internal balance of armed power and not judicial or legislative institutions, the very process of reform itself is dangerously destabilizing. And the result is classically a military that is actually very good at its primary purpose – maintaining internal political stability among armed elites – but very poor at what Americans mistakenly suppose is its purpose: defeating an insurgency.

The unsurprising result of this is that U.S. training, advising, and assistance has deeply disappointing effects in the absence of a large-scale U.S. ground combat presence. U.S. equipment and logistical support is commonly redirected into the black market for the financial benefit of officers; training is used as a form of largesse to reward loyalists; U.S. financial aid underwrites ghost soldiers who exist on the payroll but not in the field. There are exceptions: elite ANDSF commando units too small to be a threat to the internal balance of power, for example, can be allowed to professionalize and often perform well in combat. Such units have often taken the lead in defeating Taliban sorties into cities such as Konduz. But

the ANDSF as a whole is not a force that can defeat an entrenched insurgency – and it will not become one with the right U.S. advisers or more air strikes or a bit more U.S. aid. Against an outnumbered insurgency, a quarter-million-strong ANDSF can probably sustain today’s slowly-decaying stalemate for years to come – but we should not expect it to do much more, regardless of the way we configure today’s small U.S. military presence.

### **What Can U.S. Forces Do?**

In this context, what good can U.S. forces do? What do they contribute if they cannot transform the ANDSF into a force that can defeat the Taliban? Their military contribution is not irrelevant even so. But their political, rather than military, role is now what matters most.

Militarily, a small U.S. presence can contribute a variety of capabilities, including air strikes, training, advising, surveillance, and counter-terrorist operations. U.S. air strikes, in particular, offer valuable firepower for defending threatened ANDSF troops and protecting American personnel. U.S. training and advising can help improve Afghan proficiency in planning and executing combat missions. U.S. airborne surveillance and other intelligence assets can provide warning of attack and assist Afghan forces in responding. U.S. special forces and air power can kill or capture terrorist leaders, and drive others into hiding in ways that reduce their lethality. These are helpful capabilities, and surely improve the military prognosis at the margin.

But there is only so much that a tiny U.S. presence can accomplish militarily. The United States deployed almost 100,000 troops in Afghanistan in 2011, alongside more than 320,000 Afghan soldiers and police. This massive presence reversed once-negative security trends, but even it could not promptly defeat the Taliban and end the war. The U.S. presence is now less than ten percent of this, and it supports an ANDSF that is also smaller than its 2011 strength. If 100,000 U.S. troops could make only slow progress, then it is hard to imagine how fewer than 10,000 could make a decisive military difference against an insurgency that is probably stronger now than it was then.

Nor is a small U.S. presence likely to catalyze better performance from the ANDSF today than our larger presence could for the ANDSF of 2011. The limiter on ANDSF military effectiveness is not a lack of close air support, or a shortage of American officers to help plan patrol routes or to run rifle ranges on training grounds. The central issue here is the corruption and cronyism that suffuses the ANDSF and which stems from deep, structural features of the Afghan political system and its weak institutions for adjudicating conflict between armed elites. Neither U.S. airstrikes nor a tiny U.S. training and advising force are going to affect this to any meaningful degree. In principle, conditionality in assistance programs can create incentives for reform; conditionality was rare in 2011, but could be made more central to our policy going forward.\* But the incentives conditionality can create are rarely enough to outweigh the domestic pressures on the indigenous officer corps, and for conditionality to transform an institution like the ANDSF would require sticks and carrots far larger than anything plausibly on offer from the United States in today’s environment. The ANDSF is very unlikely to defeat the Taliban, and we have little to no prospect for changing this through training and advising.

The real value of the U.S. presence is instead in its political role. This role has several dimensions. First, it signals to Afghans an ongoing U.S. commitment. Afghan expectations for U.S. engagement are central to

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\* On conditionality in this context, see, esp., Stephen Biddle, Julia MacDonald and Ryan Baker, “Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Utility of Security Force Assistance,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter 2018), pp. 89-142; Biddle, “Policy Implications for the United States,” in David Lake and Eli Berman, eds., *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 264-287.

the country's political stability and its ability to negotiate an acceptable settlement to the war. Many Afghans assume that if the U.S. disengages, the Kabul government will collapse and the Taliban will take over. This is not an unreasonable expectation, whatever one thinks of the military value of the U.S. troops. The lions share of the funds needed to keep the ANDSF in the field come from the U.S. Treasury (the ANDSF operating budget in FY 2013 was twice the GIROA's entire domestic revenue). If the United States withdraws this funding, the ANDSF would collapse and the Taliban then really could overrun the capital quickly. Among the indicators Afghans use to assess this prospect is the U.S. troop presence: reinforcements signal reassurance, whereas withdrawals imply a weakening of U.S. resolve, a diminished prospect for stable funding of Afghan security forces, and a greater risk of a Taliban takeover. Fears of a government collapse undermine both Afghan political stability generally and, in particular, the Afghan government's ability to persuade elites to accept sacrifices in a compromise settlement. Political cooperation among Afghan power brokers is always tenuous – this is why internal balancing is so important for stability in such systems. But cooperation is much harder when all expect an imminent collapse of the state: this gives all an incentive to steal what they can at the expense of the others while they still have the opportunity.\*\* A settlement with the Taliban will require painful compromise, and will take years to negotiate if it is possible at all – if Afghan elites decide that the U.S. is leaving, the resulting incentive for near-term profiteering would hamstring the government's ability to wring cooperation from fractious elites for the sake of a long-term future that would look very uncertain indeed.

Second, the U.S. troop presence plays a similar signaling role for at least some Americans. With American troops on the ground, it is easier for some to justify spending the multiple billions of U.S. dollars needed to keep Afghan troops in the field alongside them. There is no particular military logic that would justify withdrawing ANDSF funding simply because U.S. troops leave Afghanistan; on the contrary, it is vastly cheaper to fund Afghan soldiers than American ones. (In fact, the entire ANDSF can be funded for the cost of maintaining a few thousand U.S. troops in the war zone.) Yet it is likely that a complete withdrawal would signal to at least some American citizens that the war is over and the cause is no longer important enough to warrant American financial sacrifice.

The most important political function of the U.S. troop presence, however, is its role in the ongoing negotiations to end the war. A negotiated settlement is the only plausible alternative to eventual defeat, hence an acceptable settlement must be our strategic priority. Successful negotiations, however, require bargaining leverage, and we now have only two chief sources of such leverage remaining: the promise of post-settlement aid, and the foreign troop presence. The Taliban want us out – this has been among their most consistent and oft-expressed aims. In a negotiation where we are radically leverage-poor, troop withdrawal is thus a crucial bargaining chip. This political role as a bargaining chip for negotiation is now the most important contribution U.S. forces make to the war.

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\*\* This dynamic is analogous to the Stag Hunt problem in game theory. In the Stag Hunt game, if each member of a stone age hunting party cooperates and holds their position, they can encircle and kill a stag, enabling the whole village to eat well. If anyone defects, however, and departs to hunt a rabbit on their own, the defector gets a rabbit (less food than a stag but enough to survive) but the others all starve to death when the stag escapes. There are two equilibrium solutions to the game. If all trust the others, then cooperation is in everyone's self interest and the village gets a stag. But if *anyone* distrusts anyone else, *everyone's* best choice is to defect. In today's Afghanistan, a game theorist would expect mutually distrustful warlords to seek the equivalent of assured rabbits in accelerated resource extraction, rather than the equivalent of a risky prospect of a stag in the form of long-term mutual cooperation to create a stable, economically developed Afghanistan in the aftermath of an early U.S. withdrawal. On the Stag Hunt game, see, e.g., Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167-214; Kenneth Oye, "Explaining Cooperation under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies," in Kenneth Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 1-24; Dipali Mukhopadhyay, "The Afghan Stag Hunt," *lawfare*, February 25, 2019 (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/afghan-stag-hunt>).

The bilateral U.S.-Taliban agreement of February 2020 appeared to give away this leverage: the agreement promised a total foreign troop withdrawal by April 2021, in exchange for very little. This agreement has been described by some (including the Afghan government) as a sellout for this reason, and a strong case can be made for this view. But the Taliban did make some, modest, promises in return: they agreed to begin talks with the GIRoA on March 10, 2020, to prevent any of their members or any members of al Qaeda from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States or its allies, and to prevent any anti-American terrorist group from recruiting, training, or fundraising in Afghanistan. It is far from clear that these terms have been met. Talks did not begin on March 10. And many U.S. officials have argued that the Taliban continue to cooperate with al Qaeda. These apparent violations offer potential grounds for withholding the promised U.S. withdrawal, and reestablishing its potential as a source of leverage for the ongoing talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

It is in our interest to claw back as much of this leverage as possible. But this requires not just an interpretation of the February agreement to permit this. It also requires that the U.S. avoid any further promises of troop withdrawals until and unless we receive compensating compromises from the Taliban in the ongoing talks – whether the actual, concrete military capabilities these troops provide are militarily important or not.

### **Is a Settlement Possible?**

But is an acceptable settlement possible anyway? Many think not. And if not, then it merely wastes money and lives to keep several thousand troops in a war zone just to pursue fruitless talks. Certainly there are many barriers to a successful negotiation here, and reasonable people could certainly argue that the prospects are too dim to warrant the investment. To date, the talks have made very little progress, and this lack of movement is an important argument against further sacrifice.

Yet there are also reasons to think the prospects may not yet be hopeless. And the scale of continued sacrifice needed to take a chance on a possible settlement is now so much smaller than those the United States invested at the war's peak that a case can still be made for taking the chance.

This is because a rational Taliban leadership has incentives to negotiate a settlement even if they can eventually win the war without a deal. Winning a long war is expensive even for the winner. If current trends continue, a fight to the finish on the battlefield could take another decade or more to conclude. While the Taliban would probably emerge the victor in the end, this would only be after many more years of grinding attrition warfare that imposes heavy costs on them as well as the government, that further impoverishes the country they would inherit, and that increases the odds of predation by regional neighbors who would have growing incentives to intervene in the war to protect their own interests. A near term settlement would avert all of these costs, and this is surely worth something to the Taliban. That opens the possibility of a bargaining space wherein mutual compromise could leave both the Taliban, and the government, better off than if the Taliban fights this out to a finish instead.

Another decade of war also exposes the Taliban leadership to another decade of U.S. counter-leadership targeting. These strikes have complex pros and cons, but one clear upside is that they reduce the benefits of protraction for the Taliban: with every passing year, every Taliban leader incurs some risk of being killed in a U.S. drone strike or SOF raid. These strikes have a track record of killing multiple senior leaders in the Taliban and al Qaeda, including not just bin Laden but also Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who led the Taliban from July 2015 until May 2016 when he was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan. An earlier end to the war ends this ongoing threat of death in similar attacks.

Another decade of war also means another decade of exile for the Taliban leadership. Afghans are famously nationalist, and Afghan-Pakistani rivalry is old and deep – yet the Taliban leadership has mostly been living as expatriates in Pakistan for almost 20 years now. They have been raising children in Pakistan, and living under surveillance by Pakistani intelligence, perhaps with Pakistani restrictions on their movements and activities. This surely grates on them, and they presumably want to go home.

And simply the fact that the Taliban are now negotiating with hated Westerners and a government their allies see as illegitimate poses risks to them in continued protracted warfare. Negotiations in civil warfare pose important political risks to insurgents – schism and factional conflict are common when splinter groups reject talks. The Taliban now face violent opposition from the Islamic State, which opposes negotiation. Progress in negotiation leading to settlement would allow the Taliban to make quiet common cause with the government and even the United States against this rival; by contrast, another decade of chronic warfare while fruitless talks drag on would expose the Taliban to a potentially growing threat from groups even more extreme than themselves, who view the Taliban as sellouts simply by virtue of Taliban participation in the talks.

None of this means the Taliban will accept whatever terms we offer – they are certainly not going to sign a surrender instrument in Doha. We will have to offer important concessions to get a deal. But it may be possible to get a deal in which both sides compromise to at least some degree. The cost to the Taliban of fighting the war out to a finish means there may be some set of terms they would prefer to continued fighting as a way of ending the war sooner. And this makes it potentially worthwhile for the United States to incur some degree of sacrifice – and especially, to consider leaving the remaining U.S. troops in place – as a means of moving those terms in our favor and reaching an acceptable settlement.

## **Where From Here?**

This analysis suggests two key implications for the future of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

First, we should avoid any further unilateral troop withdrawals. If we want a negotiated settlement on acceptable terms then we will need to husband our limited leverage carefully. The U.S. troop presence is a major fraction of that leverage, hence it should be used strategically as a tool to further our negotiating aims. Unrequited unilateral withdrawals both reduce the value of the remaining presence as a negotiating incentive and encourage the Taliban to withhold further concessions and wait to see whether we will simply give them for free the rest of what they want. We should make it clear that any further drawdowns will require verifiable Taliban concessions.

The February bilateral agreement constrains our freedom of action on this, but some maneuver room remains and we should try to use it. We cannot simply ignore our February commitment, mistaken though it was. If we lose our credibility as a negotiating partner then our ability to facilitate a Taliban-GIRoA deal will be undermined, hence we must demonstrate that we bargain in good faith. But Taliban failure to observe the February terms opens some space for renegotiation, and we should take advantage of this to press for as much real progress as possible in the Taliban-GIRoA talks before we withdraw any more troops.

Second, we should be prepared to withdraw the entire U.S. presence – including all U.S. counterterrorism forces in the country – if the Taliban does make meaningful concessions toward a final settlement of the war in exchange. The U.S. presence is not an end in itself, and its preservation in perpetuity is not a vital U.S. national security interest. A negotiated end to the war would remove the military rationale for much of today's presence (though we should offer to maintain a training mission if a post-settlement Afghan

government requests this as a means of protecting the national borders). The counterterrorism (CT) mission would remain, but it is more important to end the war than to retain a handful of small CT bases in Afghanistan. Defeat in the war would create a far larger terrorism threat to the United States and our allies than a total withdrawal in the context of a negotiated settlement of the war. We should be willing to accept the latter to avert the former.