

A dark blue background featuring a white outline map of the world. The country of Afghanistan is highlighted in a solid yellow color. A white rectangular box is centered over the map, containing the title and date.

Afghanistan Study Group Final Report

FEBRUARY 2021



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STUDY
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This report, which was drafted in December 2020 and January 2021, represents the consensus of a bipartisan and independent Study Group with diverse expertise and affiliations. No member may be satisfied with every formulation and argument in isolation. The findings of this report are solely those of the Afghanistan Study Group. They do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Institute of Peace or the senior advisers who contributed their time and expertise to the deliberations of the Group and the content of this report. All members and senior advisers participated in their personal capacity and on a volunteer basis.

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UNITED STATES
INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Making Peace Possible

Afghanistan Study Group Final Report

A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan

FEBRUARY 2021

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Letter from the Co-chairs

We submit this report with a sense of humility gained from confronting over the past nine months a problem of historic complexity, as well as with guarded optimism that we have, for the first time since 2001, an opportunity and framework to achieve a just and durable peace in Afghanistan if we make the hard choices to align our efforts and resources to the current peace process.

This report is provided to, and at the request of, those in Congress who oversee American foreign policy and provide the resources to ensure that our national interests are met.

The Afghanistan Study Group began its Congressionally mandated work in April 2020, just weeks after the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement (the “Doha agreement”) on the conditions for a U.S. troop withdrawal that would end our long military engagement in Afghanistan. This framework for a negotiated peace informed our recommendations, which are based on recognizing the imperative of a negotiated conclusion to this long conflict while safeguarding our long-term interests.

Early in its efforts, the Study Group concluded that the United States continues to have significant interests in Afghanistan. We have an interest in Afghanistan not becoming again a safe haven for terrorists who can threaten us. We have an interest in a stable Afghanistan that is not a threat to its region. And we have an interest in an Afghanistan that respects basic human rights. We do not, however, believe that securing these interests requires a permanent U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

On the contrary, a pathway now exists that can allow the return of our men and women in uniform under conditions that honor the sacrifices that have been made and that protect our interests. While we commend the diplomatic

efforts that have created this pathway, we believe a significant revision of U.S. policy is required to make the most of this opportunity. The main elements of this revision are:

- **An immediate diplomatic effort to extend the current May 2021 withdrawal date** in order to give the peace process sufficient time to produce an acceptable result.
- A recognition that, in addition to conducting counterterrorism operations and supporting the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, **a key objective of the ongoing U.S. military presence is to help create conditions for an acceptable peace agreement.** The February 2020 Doha agreement and the subsequent troop reductions clearly demonstrated that the United States is prepared to withdraw from Afghanistan. It should not, however, simply hand a victory to the Taliban.
- **Continued basic support, with other donors, for the essential institutions of the Afghan state, including security institutions, while continuing to message our Afghan partners that this support is not open-ended and is conditioned on progress in the peace talks.** A key consideration of the Study Group was that while we support the values of the Afghan government and recognize that its collapse could create significant problems for the region and beyond, U.S. decisions about America’s presence in Afghanistan cannot be held hostage to the divisions, ineffectiveness, corruption, and shortsightedness that the Afghan government has too often displayed.
- **Continued support for courageous members of Afghan civil society who have been instrumental in securing essential gains in rights, education, and health and who have been and will continue to be key in supporting a sustained peace.**

- **A reemphasis on diplomacy and negotiation, including a regional diplomatic strategy implemented over the longer term.** There is broad regional support for a U.S. withdrawal that is responsible rather than precipitate and chaotic. Many countries in the region, especially Pakistan, have influence over the Taliban and other participants in the peace process. They should actively use this influence to make the peace process successful because they will ultimately benefit from its success.
- **The harnessing and coordination of international support for a post-agreement Afghan state.** Donors who, with us, have helped rebuild Afghanistan over the past twenty years are willing, based on certain conditions, to also sustain support for a post-agreement Afghan state. These efforts must be unified and coherent.

This report presents a series of detailed recommendations to guide the implementation of the revised strategy. The recommendations are buttressed by an extensive analysis of the drivers of conflict and stability in Afghanistan. The analysis is intended not only to clarify the complexity of the issues and the challenges ahead, but also to explain why we believe it is possible to reach the desired end state.

Nonetheless, the challenges and the possibility of failure also compelled us to propose a set of alternative policy pathways that can form an iterative pathway forward should potential roadblocks impede the primary strategy we recommend. We hope that both the extensive analysis and the alternative pathways will prove useful to decision-makers now and in the future.

This report is submitted at a critical moment. A new administration has taken office at a time when urgent decisions

need to be made about the existing peace process. President Biden in the first weeks of his term will need to make a decision on whether to remove all troops from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, as indicated in the Doha agreement, or insist that conditions also indicated in that agreement are clearly met before withdrawing our troops. There will surely be more important issues of domestic and foreign policy facing the new administration, but few will be more urgent.

Throughout our internal deliberations and our consultations with outside stakeholders, we have been aware of the international community's, and America's, ardent desire to see an end to the long Afghan conflict. Whatever its flaws, the current peace process provides the best framework to bring that about.

We extend our deepest thanks to those who made our work possible. We received numerous briefings from a wide and diverse range of stakeholders. We appreciate the Members of Congress who supported the Group's mandate and study. We are especially grateful to our fellow Group members and senior advisers, who volunteered significant time and expertise. We would also like to thank staff from across the United States Institute of Peace for their tremendous support.

This report is dedicated to the members of our military and the American civilians who have served in Afghanistan, especially those who have been wounded and those who have lost their lives over the last nineteen years. We also remember our allies and partners who worked, fought, and died alongside us, including the Afghans themselves. We bear in mind the sacrifices made by Afghans who continue to suffer immeasurably but for whom peace may at last be within reach.



Kelly A. Ayotte



Joseph F. Dunford Jr.



Nancy Lindborg

Executive Summary

Afghanistan's long conflict has entered a new and potentially final phase: a real opportunity to reach a peaceful resolution exists, but the forces of fragmentation remain strong. The United States can play a key role in determining if this opportunity is taken. A responsible and coherent set of U.S. actions could greatly increase the chances of a peaceful resolution to forty years of conflict; a rash and rushed approach could increase the chances of a breakdown of order in Afghanistan and a worsening of this long and tragic war with negative consequences for the region and heightened threats to the security and interests of the United States and its allies.

The Afghanistan Study Group was established by Congress in December 2019. The legislative mandate (reproduced in annex 1) charged the “Afghanistan Peace Process Study Group” with identifying policy recommendations that “consider the implications of a peace settlement, or the failure to reach a settlement, on U.S. policy, resources, and commitments in Afghanistan.” Americans generally agree that it is time to end this war. It has gone on for two decades at great cost in lives and resources. While U.S. force levels and combat deaths are down dramatically, every life of an American in uniform is precious—and those lives are still at risk and being lost. But withdrawing U.S. troops irresponsibly would likely lead to a new civil war in Afghanistan, inviting the reconstitution of anti-U.S. terrorist groups that could threaten our homeland and providing them with a narrative of victory against the world's most powerful country. Supporting peace negotiations offers the United States the chance to honor U.S. sacrifices, secure core U.S. interests, and show this nation's enemies that they cannot prevail.

The costs of our military presence are significantly reduced due to the reduction of troops from 14,000 to 2,500 in 2020.

Our troops play a supporting role and are far less exposed to danger than they were previously. Their function is to support a peace process rather than prosecute a war. These are important considerations that should not be lost in the debate about our future in Afghanistan.

The Study Group's deliberations took place as the Afghan peace process took shape. The Group's membership was being formed when the United States signed the February 2020 agreement with the Taliban on the conditions for a troop withdrawal. The Study Group's first meeting, in April, was held while the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was resolving the presidential election and naming a negotiating team. Its fifth plenary, in September, took place just after the beginning of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban negotiating teams. This nascent peace process creates an opening for a genuinely new approach in Afghanistan.

The Study Group believes there is an unprecedented opportunity in Afghanistan to fully align our policies, practices, and messaging across diplomatic, military, and assistance efforts toward the overarching goal of achieving a successful peace in Afghanistan. This approach will require a new way of seeing our presence in Afghanistan and acting on our priorities.

This report lays out just such a new approach, one that would be consistent overall with the framework provided by the current peace process, in particular the negotiations now underway between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The United States would maintain the commitments it made in its February 2020 agreement with the Taliban, which includes a commitment to withdraw our forces under specific, acceptable conditions. The Study Group, however, believes that it will be very difficult, and

MAP 1.

Afghanistan



perhaps impossible, for those conditions to be achieved by May 2021, when the agreement states that troops should be withdrawn. Achieving the overall objective of a negotiated stable peace that meets U.S. interests would need to begin with securing an extension of the May deadline. This would create the necessary space in which the Study Group's five recommended main lines of effort could be implemented:

- First, we must refocus our regional diplomacy on securing support for the peace process.
- Second, our civilian and military assistance to the Afghan government must continue to support core state structures, but with conditions derived from the Global Fragility Act that emphasize greater accountability, legitimacy, and inclusion across all lines of assistance and with strong incentives for the government to play a constructive role in the peace process. It is important to emphasize that the objective of aid is not charity but to prevent the sort of state collapse that would be contrary to our interests.

- Third, our military presence in Afghanistan must continue to focus on its counterterrorism function while giving greater emphasis than before to shaping conditions that enhance the prospects of a successful peace process.
- Fourth, the United States, which has long supported Afghan civil society, needs to acknowledge the crucial role that civil society has played in securing critical development gains to date and can play during both the negotiating process and the implementation of an eventual peace agreement.
- Finally, as we enter into this ebbing phase of our involvement in Afghanistan, the United States must not forget that we entered Afghanistan as part of a wider international effort. Our NATO allies in particular have been steadfast in their support and have shared the sacrifice; over a thousand coalition troops have been killed since 2001. Our future in Afghanistan must be decided in consultation with these allies and partners

This approach is not without risks given the volatile and complex situation in Afghanistan. However, the Study Group believes its recommendations present the best opportunity to protect U.S. interests and provide a comprehensive framework for future decision-making as the situation inevitably evolves. This report includes a detailed analysis of the key elements of stability in Afghanistan, as well as a set of future actions that can be taken should it become clear that the recommended pathway will not lead to the intended result.

U.S. National Interests and Afghanistan

The United States continues to have important national interests that will be affected by developments in Afghanistan. The foremost interest is containing the activities of terrorist groups that remain active in Afghanistan and that could threaten the U.S. homeland, principally al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Our ongoing military presence in Afghanistan, working alongside Afghan security forces, has disrupted these groups and prevented them from attacking our homeland. A complete withdrawal of our troops would allow the threat to reemerge. In the long term, the United States must either maintain a counterterrorism force in Afghanistan or be assured that other verifiable mechanisms are in place to ensure that these groups cannot reconstitute.

Our long involvement in Afghanistan has resulted in achievements that are in our interest to preserve. Although Afghanistan's institutions are imperfect, mechanisms have been put in place that allow for social inclusion, representative government, and the consolidation of the rule of law, and these remain the best way in which Afghanistan's diverse communities can coexist within a stable polity. In the ongoing negotiations, the representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban will need to find creative compromises between their different worldviews. It is not within the mandate of the Study Group to judge what these compromises might be, but Afghanistan's stability depends on it having political institutions that are representative, inclusive—including of women and minorities—and based on a legal system that embodies the aspirations of the Afghan people for justice.

Another key U.S. interest pertains to the wider region. A stable Afghanistan would create the potential for regional economic cooperation that could benefit all countries in the region, linking energy-rich Central Asia with energy-deprived South Asia. By the same token, an unstable Afghanistan risks destabilizing the region through the continued trade in illicit drugs, the attraction of extremist ideologies, and the possible exacerbation of the rivalry between India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed powers. The U.S. focus on Afghanistan has impinged on broader geopolitical interests that the United States has in the region. One of the longer-term objectives of the Group's recommendations is to calibrate our commitment in Afghanistan in the context of broader strategic considerations, particularly with regard to China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia.

MAP 2.

Regional Map



Our efforts in Afghanistan have involved a number of friends and allies. Every member of NATO has sent troops or other assets to Afghanistan since 9/11, as have long-standing non-NATO allies. These relationships predated our intervention in Afghanistan, and we will need them after that intervention ends. The continued presence of many allies and partners in Afghanistan relies on the logistical platform that we provide. A unilateral withdrawal that does not involve consultation and agreement with them will undermine our credibility as a partner. We have painfully learned that the globalization of threats requires our constant vigilance and that our broad system of alliances is essential to that vigilance, a deterrent against attacks, and a powerful latent coalition we can call upon when we need to defend ourselves against future threats.

A New Pathway for Peace

This report presents a new way forward that builds on the peace process now underway to carry out a U.S. military exit from the Afghan conflict that secures U.S. interests. The United States has had to work hard to get the two sides to the negotiating table. We have had to make concessions to the Taliban and, above all, to put pressure on our allies in Kabul, whose political vision is much closer to our own and who have made tremendous sacrifices by our side during nearly two decades of war. But these talks have started and, although slow-moving, continue.

The Study Group's new pathway for peace in Afghanistan is based on five main recommendations.

First, **the United States should clarify its end state in Afghanistan.** The end state should be the following:

An independent, democratic, and sovereign Afghan state with the governance, stability, and security forces to prevent al-Qaeda, ISKP, and other terrorist groups from attacking the United States and its allies and to contain other potential challenges to U.S. and allied security and interests, including those

associated with illicit narcotics and mass migration that threaten our allies and Afghanistan's neighbors.

An Afghan state that exercises sovereignty over its borders and internal affairs and governs in terms that reflect the popular will and self-determination of the Afghan citizenry while managing conflict peacefully through accountable civilian institutions. An Afghan state that supports and protects minorities, women's rights, the democratic character of the state, and a free press but that could include Taliban figures.

An Afghan state that is progressively less reliant on international assistance and is neither a source of regional instability nor a locus of proxy regional competition.

A country where the citizens of Afghanistan, who have suffered so much during forty years of war, have the prospect of year-on-year improvements in their prosperity, security, and well-being.

Second, **the United States should explicitly reinforce the conditionality of final troop withdrawal.** Although accepting these talks as a potential basis for Afghanistan's future, the Study Group is convinced that they will not succeed as long as the United States declares itself willing to withdraw its forces regardless of how much or how little progress is made during the negotiations. According to the Group's reading of the February 2020 agreement with the Taliban, as well as multiple public statements by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, the ultimate withdrawal of American troops is conditional on Taliban actions. Whereas the United States has gone beyond its commitments to withdraw forces to date, the Taliban have fallen short of their commitments: they have failed to fulfill their guarantee that they will not "cooperate with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies" and will "prevent them from recruiting, training, and fundraising and will not host them." The levels of violence they continue to employ against Afghan civilians and security personnel

suggest that they have not yet committed to a negotiated solution. Their escalation of violence in 2020 casts doubt on whether they will come to a workable political compromise with the Afghan government. The Study Group believes that further U.S. troop withdrawals should be conditioned on the Taliban's demonstrated willingness and capacity to contain terrorist groups, on a reduction in the Taliban's violence against the Afghan people, and on real progress toward a compromise political settlement.

Third, **the United States should clarify its commitment to the existing Afghan state apparatus and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).** Support should be based on the donor conditionality agreed to at the 2020 Geneva conference and on the Afghan government's contribution to progress in peace talks with the Taliban. In addition, any future political order should secure the gains made in democratic, political, human, and women's rights, not as an attempt to impose our own values on Afghanistan but because bolstering and respecting rights is essential to securing a lasting peace and reflects the will of the Afghan people.

Fourth, **the United States should conduct an active diplomatic strategy to ensure the success of the peace talks.** The United States occupies an influential position as part party to the talks, part facilitator, and (on occasion) hidden mediator. To speed progress at the talks, the United States should promote the appointment of a third-party mediator (ideally by the United Nations) and engage key countries diplomatically as part of any selection process. If stalemates persist at the talks and a third-party mediator is rejected by the parties, the United States should consider the potential benefits and costs of a more direct U.S. arbitration role.

Fifth, **the Study Group's final recommendation and a major component of its new approach is an overarching regional strategy.** Afghanistan lies in the middle of a region beset with rivalries and low levels of trust. These rivalries have played out during our twenty-year presence—as they did during the two decades of conflict preceding our presence—undermining progress toward achieving stability

in Afghanistan. Since the beginning of the peace process, however, the prospect of a U.S. withdrawal has created a fragile but real regional consensus behind a stable and neutral Afghanistan that is neither a haven for terrorists nor a fiefdom of the Taliban. The United States should adopt a diplomatic strategy that seeks to consolidate this consensus, enlist the countries in the region to use their relationships with Afghan actors to promote a successful negotiation, allow the countries of the region to share more equitably the burdens of supporting and sustaining a peaceful Afghanistan, and anchor the process within an international architecture endorsed by the United Nations Security Council.

These lines of effort are intended to be implemented concurrently. They are designed to avoid what has too often happened in the past in Afghanistan, where multiple, competing goals were implemented with insufficient coordination. Our counterterrorism strategy too often collided with our institution-building strategy, and our provision of assistance often had military rather than humanitarian objectives and promoted conflict rather than won allegiance. The focus on the single objective of a negotiated, sustainable, and acceptable end to the conflict provides a clear benchmark against which our messages, policies, and actions can be coordinated.

Alternative Pathways

The Study Group considered in detail three other, alternative policy pathways. The first was to remain committed to the Afghan state should the negotiations fail or the outcome be deemed unacceptable. In this pathway, the United States would continue to maintain forces in Afghanistan and support the Afghan state through the war, possibly increasing assistance, until the opportunity for meaningful talks, preferably with a strengthened Afghan state, could reemerge. The second was a managed withdrawal from Afghanistan, under which the United States would remove its troops but would not be indifferent to the outcome in Afghanistan. It would seek to use nonmilitary leverage, including regional

diplomacy, to secure as many of its stated goals as possible. This scenario accepts and would accommodate the likely possibility of an eventual Taliban ascendancy. The third scenario was a rapid troop withdrawal irrespective of the conditions on the ground and essentially indifferent to the resulting outcome. None of these scenarios were considered advisable at this point, but all were carefully studied by the Group and could be adopted in the future.

Conclusion

The United States has an opportunity to meet its core objectives in Afghanistan and help create a stable country with economic potential that is at peace with itself and its region, and that can contain threats to the rest of the world. This will continue to be a long and difficult process. However, the initial, most difficult steps toward achieving this outcome have already been taken. The United States reached an agreement with the Taliban that, although not ideal, creates the foundation for negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. These talks, which began in September 2020, have had difficult moments and will require concessions by both sides to maintain momentum.

The extent of the U.S. military involvement in and financial commitment to Afghanistan has fallen dramatically since the end of most combat operations in 2014 and especially following the troop reductions in 2020. U.S. forces are not in a combat role and, as of late January 2021, are at a level lower than in 2003. For the first time, there are more non-U.S. NATO troops in Afghanistan than U.S. troops. The United States is in a position where effective diplomacy, modest continuing aid levels, and strong coordination across civilian and military lines of effort against a clear and unified objective can create the conditions for a responsible exit from Afghanistan that does not endanger our national security. The opportunities presented by this position must be exhausted before more radical alternatives are considered.

Diplomatic strategies are measured in decades, but history is recorded in eras. What is perceived as folly in one generation is often reevaluated as strategic foresight in another—and vice versa. The Study Group believes that its recommendations can achieve an outcome that is beneficial to our interests, to Afghanistan, to the region, and to global stability in a way that honors the commitments and sacrifices that so many Americans have made over the past two decades.

Introduction

The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan has been a defining issue for a generation of American diplomats, military personnel, aid providers, and policymakers. The war has taken the lives of nearly 2,500 U.S. servicemen and service-women, cost a trillion dollars, and occupied the attention of four presidential administrations. The American presence is now much reduced, but the conflict continues. Ongoing political negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban may herald a final phase of the conflict leading to a reduction of violence and a political agreement. The United States requires a new approach to match this new phase. The central objective of that approach must be to align U.S. resources to increase the chances that the negotiations will end the immediate conflict, provide a basis for long-term stability in Afghanistan, and secure America's key interests.

The effort made by the United States and its allies and friends over the past two decades has helped to transform Afghanistan for the better. Achieving this outcome has not been easy. There is no rule book for rebuilding a country like Afghanistan. The United States and its international allies have made mistakes that are well documented. On the Afghan side, corruption and political infighting have consistently undermined our common efforts, as has unhelpful interference by regional players in Afghan domestic politics. The inability of the Afghan state, even with significant international military support, to defeat the Taliban, which reemerged as an insurgency in the mid-2000s, led to the U.S. push for a peace process.

On February 29, 2020, the United States reached an agreement with the Taliban on conditions for a full troop withdrawal. As part of that agreement, U.S. troops were to be reduced from approximately 14,000 to 8,600 by mid-July 2020. While the agreement called for a full troop

withdrawal by May 2021, further reductions beyond 8,600 were intended to be conditions-based. The Trump administration reduced the troop presence to 4,500—further than had been agreed with the Taliban—by the mid-July date, and in January 2021 announced that only 2,500 U.S. troops remained in Afghanistan. But the agreed-upon conditions for a full withdrawal have not yet been met. There is, however, still a possibility that conditions can be met that would allow a *responsible* withdrawal—that is, a withdrawal of most U.S. military forces, leaving behind Afghan state structures supported by a U.S. diplomatic and aid presence that can protect our national interests. This will not happen, however, if U.S. troops are withdrawn without regard for the Taliban's behavior. The presence of U.S. and international troops, along with financial support for the Afghan state, are the key points of leverage to enable a sustainable political compromise.

This report presents a strategy to achieve an acceptable outcome in Afghanistan through the peace negotiations now underway between the Afghan government and the Taliban. An acceptable outcome for the United States is a sovereign, independent, democratic Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbors that is not a threat to international security.

The report begins by defining core U.S. interests in Afghanistan and identifying a set of key judgments that constrain or provide opportunities for U.S. policy. In the subsequent analytical section, it expands on these key judgments and provides a deeper analysis of the threat from Afghanistan; of Afghanistan's internal economic, political, and social dynamics; of the Taliban's objectives; and of the interests of regional stakeholders. This detailed section is not essential to understanding the logic that flows from the definition of interests, through the key judgments, to the final recommendations, but it will be of interest to

those who seek a deeper understanding of the U.S. legacy in Afghanistan—and of the reasons why some ambitions were achieved but others were not.

The report then moves to the Study Group's recommendations. These are introduced with a brief section describing the strategic logic behind the Group's proposals. Five specific recommendations are then presented and explained in detail. These are followed by a description of

several alternative pathways that were considered by the Study Group but ultimately rejected. Nonetheless, these pathways could still prove relevant in the future should the recommended approach fail to achieve the stated objective.

The way forward will be difficult, but it has the virtue of being clearer than ever before. The Study Group hopes that the information and analysis in this report will be a helpful guide along that path, now and in the future.

Interests and Key Judgments

U.S. National Interests and Afghanistan

On the morning of September 11, 2001, over the period of a few hours, Afghanistan went from being one of Washington’s lowest foreign policy priorities to its highest. Less than a month later, U.S. personnel were deployed to Afghanistan to help Afghans topple the Taliban regime. Before the end of December, a U.S.-backed interim government was installed in Kabul and began the task of rebuilding the country’s institutions and infrastructure. A new constitution was adopted in 2004, and the country’s first democratic presidential elections were held later that year. The reemergence of the Taliban in 2006 as an insurgency and an increasingly formidable force, together with an improvement in the security situation in Iraq, led the United States to implement a military and civilian surge in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010. Subsequently, Washington adopted a plan to end combat operations in 2014 and to gradually withdraw all U.S. troops by 2016 (see figure 1 on page 14 for changes in troop levels). As planned, U.S. and NATO-led combat operations largely ended in 2014, but Taliban persistence and the ongoing dependence of Afghan security forces on U.S. and NATO support required maintaining a residual force of around 10,000 U.S. troops and several thousand more from NATO partners. They remained as part of a NATO-led military coalition to train, advise, and assist Afghan security forces. Some additional U.S. forces also remained for counterterrorism operations.

Following the signing in Doha in February 2020 of the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the United States and the Taliban (the “Doha agreement,” reproduced in annex 6), the United States reduced its troop presence to around 4,500 while negotiations—known as the “Afghan Peace Negotiations”—began between the Afghan government and the Taliban. This reduction was greater

than required by the Doha agreement. Further reductions were said to be conditioned on progress on the Afghan Peace Negotiations and provision of counterterrorism guarantees. Nonetheless, the Trump administration continued to significantly reduce the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. On January 15, 2021, the Pentagon announced that U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan had been reduced to 2,500, but that future reductions would be conditions-based.¹

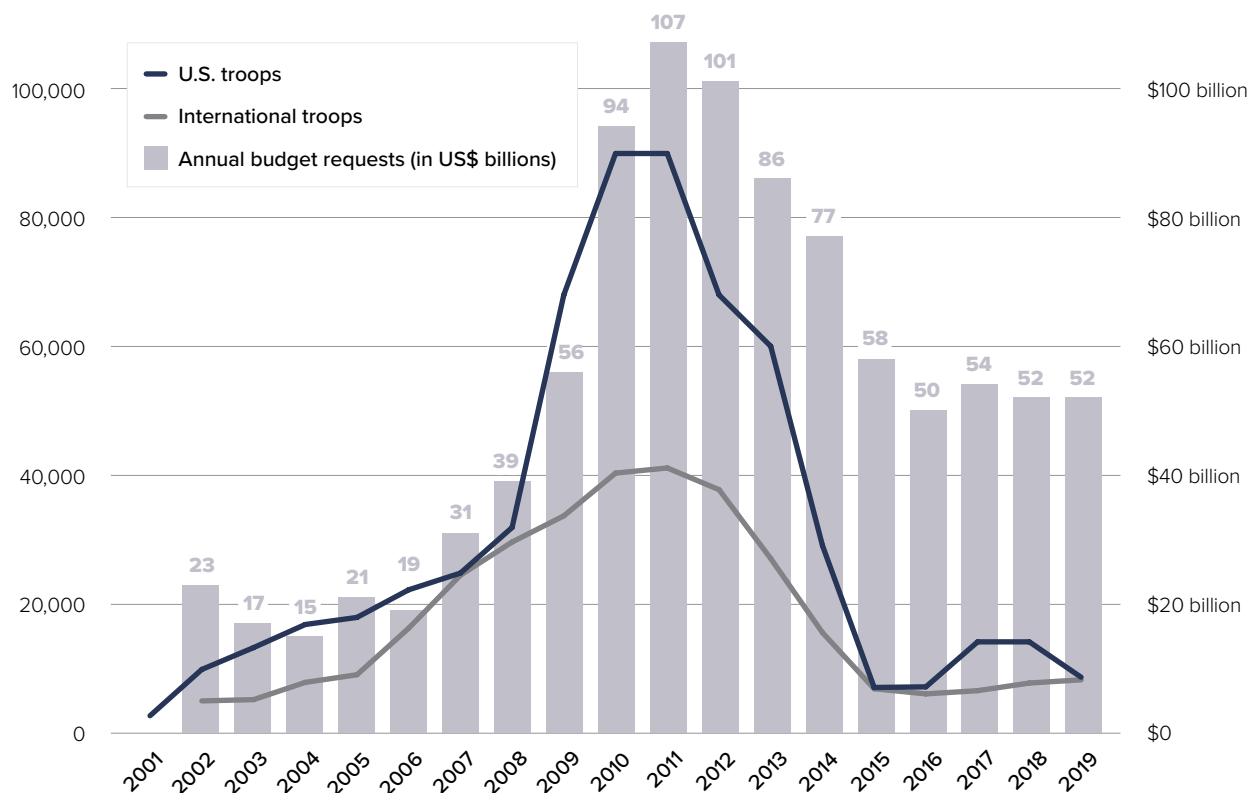
The Study Group’s deliberations took place while these decisions were being made and implemented. Among the first tasks of the Study Group was to identify the core U.S. interests in Afghanistan. The public debate about the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is often simplified into a debate about troop numbers rather than about the national objectives the United States is seeking to achieve, for which the military presence is one of several tools.

The chief U.S. interests in Afghanistan today are the following:

- *Prevent al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups from attacking the United States or our allies.* On the basis of expert guidance provided to the Study Group, as well as its members’ own analyses, the Group concludes that the threat of a direct attack against the United States or its interests or allies from extremist groups—primarily, al-Qaeda and ISKP—located in Afghanistan is *for now* limited by the military presence of the United States and its allies, which allows the threat to be monitored and, when necessary, disrupted, while also enabling Afghan security forces to continue to put pressure on these groups.
- *Prevent terrorist and other extremist groups from obtaining nuclear weapons or materials.* Numerous smaller groups located in Afghanistan but focused on

FIGURE 1.

Troop Levels and Annual Budget Requests, Fiscal Years 2001–19



Sources: Graph of troop levels redrawn from Sam Gollob and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy* at Brookings (Brookings Institution, August 2020), 6. Bar chart shows funding for the war in Afghanistan as part of overseas contingency operations for the U.S. Department of Defense, based on a table in Kimberly Amadeo, “Afghanistan War Cost, Timeline, and Economic Impact,” *The Balance*, October 20, 2020, www.thebalance.com/cost-of-afghanistan-war-timeline-economic-impact-4122493; most figures drawn from Amy Belasco, “The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations since 9/11,” Congressional Research Service, December 8, 2014, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>; the figure for 2019 is an estimate.

the India-Pakistan rivalry also pose a threat, especially to regional stability. Concerns remain about the possibility of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of a terrorist organization. It is difficult to assess the probability of this happening, but the consequences would be deadly. The possibility of a terrorist nuclear attack on the United States could not be entirely ruled out.

- *Maintain regional stability.* The maintenance of regional stability is a core U.S. interest. The possibility of war between nuclear-armed states represents the greatest concern in the region. Three of Afghanistan’s six immediate neighbors (China, Pakistan, and Iran)

are actual or potential nuclear powers. Two other regional powers, Russia and India, also possess nuclear weapons. An unstable Afghanistan could contribute to the destabilization of the region.

- *Help sustain an Afghan state able to contain or control extremism, illicit narcotics, mass migration, and other potential threats.* An unstable Afghanistan increases the likelihood of Afghanistan reverting to a safe haven for terrorists financed by transnational criminality, especially illegal narcotics. It increases the chances of regional instability sparking larger conflicts. And it could provoke a new refugee crisis that could

destabilize Afghanistan's neighbors, aggravate the current migration crisis on Europe's borders, and undermine U.S. prestige and credibility across the globe.

- *Preserve the hard-won gains of the past two decades in health, education, and political and human rights, particularly as related to the role of women and the protection of minorities.* Long-term stability in Afghanistan can best be achieved and maintained by an inclusive Afghan government that is responsive to the needs of all its diverse communities and respects the rights of all its citizens, including women. Stability also depends on the ability to exercise political rights of participation and expression, the existence of a credible and just rule of law framework, and a functioning economy whose benefits are fairly distributed.
- *Maintain U.S. influence.* Maintaining the credibility of U.S. foreign policy and preserving the integrity of our alliances are American national interests that transcend any country or region. The outcome of the U.S. and NATO missions in Afghanistan will impact the willingness of allies to support our endeavors in the future. How the mission in Afghanistan ends will impact U.S. global leadership and influence. Retaining the confidence of allies is always vital to national security, as is giving adversaries no reason to suspect that America might be weak or irresolute. These are not reasons to stay indefinitely in Afghanistan, but they are important considerations to guide the conditions of our withdrawal.

Key Judgments

In light of these continuing interests, the Study Group then came to a series of judgments on a range of topics that it considered to be essential to understanding the current situation in Afghanistan. These judgments identify conditions and dynamics that either constrain policy options or offer specific opportunities. They are not intended to be comprehensive—a more detailed and comprehensive analytical section follows—but have been selected for their relevance to U.S. policy options at this point in time.

Security

The current threat to the United States from terrorist groups based in Afghanistan is diminished *because* of the efforts of the U.S.-trained and U.S.-supported ANDSF and the continued pressure provided by the U.S. military presence. During its deliberations, the Study Group was advised that a complete U.S. withdrawal without a peace agreement would allow these groups to gradually rebuild their capabilities in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region such that they might be able to attack the U.S. homeland within eighteen to thirty-six months. The Group, relying on its own collective judgments, agreed with this assessment. It also agreed that outside of Afghanistan, there are no practical alternative locations in the region from which to conduct effective U.S. counterterrorism operations against threats from Afghanistan.

The Taliban and al-Qaeda are distinct but not wholly discrete organizations, linked by long-standing alliances and solidarity relationships. The Taliban have committed to not cooperate with al-Qaeda and other groups threatening the security of the United States and its allies, to not host them, and to prevent them from recruiting, training, and fundraising, but has not yet demonstrated that it is able or even willing to do so. The Taliban view ISKP as an enemy and have actively fought against it, but would be challenged to contain it without additional support.

The ANDSF—especially the Air Force and the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF)—is almost entirely dependent on U.S. funding. U.S. support is also essential for logistics, training, and strategic advice. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the capable ASSF and their counterterrorism operations depends on maintaining a close operational, air support, and intelligence partnership between the ASSF and their U.S. counterparts. These dependencies will endure for a long time. The United States provides approximately \$4.8 billion per year to meet Afghanistan's security requirements, and this support cannot be provided without a military oversight presence, even if the United States were to have no combat role. NATO allies and partners also depend on U.S. enabling capabilities to maintain their military presence.

A precipitous U.S. withdrawal is likely to exacerbate the conflict, provoking a wider civil war. Expert consultations indicated that around 4,500 troops are required to secure U.S. interests under current conditions and at an acceptable level of risk. This number allows for training, advising, and assisting Afghan defense forces; supporting allied forces; conducting counterterrorism operations; and securing our embassy—all of which are critical to our interests. Based on this input, there is increased risk to the mission and the force associated with the current confirmed level of 2,500 troops. In conjunction with its initial review of the situation in Afghanistan, the Biden administration will need to determine appropriate troop levels based on its priorities and risk management.

In 2020, for the first time, there were more non-U.S. NATO and allied troops in Afghanistan than U.S. forces.² These allies play an important function but rely on the logistic and security platform provided by the United States. If

the United States stays in Afghanistan, its allies, too, will stay. The lack of consultation and transparency regarding the U.S. position, however, has undermined the coherence and confidence of the international effort in Afghanistan. NATO partners, whose troops in Afghanistan depend on our presence, have been particularly affected by this lack of consultation. A withdrawal that does not involve close consultation with allies will make it unlikely that NATO acts outside of the European theater again.

Stability of the State

Afghanistan is a textbook example of a “fragile state” given its broken social contract, weak institutions, and the disputed legitimacy of its government (see the box “Fragility, Extremism, and Prevention”). The state is dependent for its survival on donor funding. The Afghan state will remain unable to raise sufficient revenues to sustain itself for many years to come, especially if the conflict continues.

Fragility, Extremism, and Prevention

The 2016 Fragility Study Group described fragile states as characterized by “the absence or breakdown of a social contract between people and their government. Fragile states suffer from deficits of institutional capacity and political legitimacy that increase the risk of instability and violent conflict and sap the state of its resilience to disruptive shocks.”^a

Prior to September 11, 2001, U.S. policy recognized that although weak states could create insecurity in their regions, they were likely to affect only remote U.S. interests. But as the 2002 National Security Strategy put it, “The events of September 11, 2001, taught us that weak states like Afghanistan can pose as great a danger to national security as strong states.”^b This realization fueled a sense of urgency to understand, address, and prevent fragility. Along these lines, the 9/11 Commission in its 2004 report called for “a prevention strategy that is as much, or more, political than military.”^c Prevention was also the focus of the recommendations of the 2016 Fragility Study Group report and the 2019 Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States report, which further explored the links between extremism and fragility and pointed to the high costs of ignoring prevention. In 2019, Congress adopted the Global Fragility Act (GFA), enshrining into law the principles of these previous efforts and declaring that it “is the policy of the United States to seek to stabilize conflict-affected areas and prevent violence and fragility globally.” The GFA directed relevant federal agencies to establish a ten-year Global Fragility Strategy.

FRAGILITY, EXTREMISM, AND PREVENTION [CONTINUED]

In December 2020, the State Department released the United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, which “seeks to break the costly cycle of fragility and promote peaceful, self-reliant nations that become U.S. economic and security partners.”^d The strategy defines four guiding goals:

- **Prevention:** The United States will establish and support capabilities to engage in peacebuilding and anticipate and prevent violent conflict before it erupts.
- **Stabilization:** The United States will support inclusive political processes to resolve ongoing violent conflicts, emphasizing meaningful participation of youth, women, and members of faith-based communities and marginalized groups, respect for human rights, and environmental sustainability.
- **Partnerships:** The United States will promote burden-sharing and encourage and work with partners to create conditions for long-term regional stability and foster private sector–led growth.
- **Management:** The United States will maximize U.S. taxpayer dollars and realize more effective outcomes through better prioritization, integration, and focus on efficiency across the U.S. government and with partners.

At the core of a fragility strategy is the prevention of violent conflict and extremism. Although it might seem odd to speak of prevention in the context of a conflict that has endured as long as Afghanistan’s, the future of peace and stability there will depend on breaking the “endless cycle of crisis response” that has characterized much of U.S. policy in fragile states.^e The findings of these previous fragility studies underline crucial lessons learned about the importance of participation, justice, security, legitimate institutions, and economic empowerment. If these lessons can be applied to the ongoing Afghan Peace Negotiations and the implementation of an eventual agreement, then the prospects for a sustainable peace in Afghanistan will be significantly improved.

Notes

- a. Fragility Study Group, “U.S. Leadership and the Challenge of State Fragility,” September 2016, 5, www.usip.org/sites/default/files/US-Leadership-and-the-Challenge-of-State-Fragility.pdf.
- b. The White House, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” September 2002, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2002.pdf>.
- c. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, DC: August 2004), 364, <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>.
- d. U.S. Department of State, “United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability,” 1, www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/us-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability.pdf.
- e. Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States, “Preventing Extremism in Fragile States: A New Approach,” 9, www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/preventing-extremism-in-fragile-states-a-new-approach.pdf.

Corruption, predatory governance, warlordism, and the extremely uneven ability of the government to provide effective justice services and resolve disputes have delegitimized the existing government and created grievances that are exploited by the Taliban to gain support and, at times, legitimacy.

Despite donor dependency and crippling corruption, Afghans and their international partners have built key governing institutions that could form the basis of a minimally effective state if it did not have to contend with a violent insurgency. These include public financial management structures, the health and education ministries, and parts of the security sector. Afghans have consistently demonstrated their desire for political participation through elections that, while flawed, have generally seen high voter turnout (the presidential election in 2019 being an exception).

The United States has been a major provider of developmental and humanitarian assistance and has supported the country's independent civil society, which has developed into a vital advocate for rights as well as an increasingly effective government accountability mechanism.

Regional Context

Regional and broader international diplomatic efforts are necessary to create and maintain the conditions for addressing U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region.

The objectives of such efforts should be to keep U.S. allies and partners engaged; to encourage regional stakeholders to play a constructive role in promoting the success of the Afghan Peace Negotiations; and to lay the foundation for the long-term integration of Afghanistan into the region not only socially, economically, and politically but also, eventually, within a cooperative security architecture.

Most countries in the region are united by the imperative to fight ISKP and al-Qaeda. They are opposed to a complete takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban; do not want to see the establishment of a Taliban-defined "emirate," even in the

context of a political agreement; and are concerned about possible state collapse. Despite an encouraging regional convergence in support of the peace process, however, long-standing differences between countries in the region should not be underestimated.

The Afghan Peace Negotiations

The Afghan Peace Negotiations will likely be a drawn-out process always at risk of breaking down. While the negotiations are underway, the international community must continue to support Afghan state institutions. This support, however, should not be considered a blank check.

Violence levels in Afghanistan are unacceptably high, undermining confidence in the negotiation process. Violence needs to be reduced to create optimal conditions for the negotiations to succeed. One of the four interlinked components of the Doha agreement is a Taliban commitment to a ceasefire. The Taliban contend that the agreement does not specify when a ceasefire should take place and that they will not commit to one until after a political agreement is reached. Nonetheless, the ongoing violence levels undermine confidence in the negotiations and will make an eventual reconciliation effort even more difficult.

The first three months of the negotiations, which began in September 2020, were spent agreeing on rules and procedures to govern the rest of the negotiations. The parties then issued strikingly different agendas for reconvening the talks. However these agendas are reconciled, the parties remain far apart on the nature of Afghanistan's future political order. For the moment, both sides have rejected outside mediation, yet some form of third-party mediation might be required to help them bridge the existing deep divides.

It is the Study Group's belief that if talks do succeed, a limited U.S. military presence with counterterrorism capabilities should be negotiated with whatever government emerges from a peace settlement—including a government that includes the Taliban in some capacity.

Analytical Assessments

This section, which helped shape this report’s “Interests and Key Judgments” and “Recommendations” sections, represents a general expert consensus on the drivers of conflict and stability in Afghanistan. The sources of this analysis include material written specifically for the Study Group by senior advisers, information gathered during consultations, and research conducted by the Study Group’s Secretariat and the United States Institute of Peace’s Afghanistan team.

This section responds to two stipulations made by the originators of the enabling legislation: that the Study Group’s report be comprehensive in its scope and that it address the legacy of America’s long involvement in Afghanistan.

This assessment highlights successes as well as challenges and unexpected outcomes in a wide range of areas, underscoring the point made earlier in this report that Afghanistan has been fundamentally changed by the U.S. and international intervention. This transformation is especially clear in Afghanistan’s civil society. In many areas, progress is obscured by the ongoing conflict, but the Afghan people will have much to build on if there is peace.

This section begins by examining the status of the peace process, which saw significant progress in 2020. The opportunities presented by the peace process form the basis of the Study Group’s recommendations. The assessment then examines the terrorist threat to U.S. security and interests from Afghanistan, which was the reason for the U.S. intervention two decades ago. Next, the assessment surveys a number of factors that are key to understanding the Afghan political order that we continue to support and underwrite, including its extreme donor dependency, its domestic politics, the evolution of its civil society, and the state of its security forces. The assessment then turns to the Taliban contestation of this political order, examining

the insurgent movement’s structure and objectives. Finally, this section analyzes Afghanistan’s regional environment and the interests of key stakeholders.

Status of the Peace Process

The Trump administration revealed in July 2018 that it had begun direct negotiations with the Taliban on conditions for an eventual withdrawal of American troops. This was in some ways a continuation of U.S. policy in Afghanistan, which had since 2011 sought a peaceful end to the Afghan conflict through a negotiated political agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The talks marked a break with past U.S. policy, however, in that they took place initially without the consent or involvement of the Afghan government.

The talks built on previous contacts between the United States and the Taliban through the unofficial Taliban political office established in Doha, Qatar, in 2013. The Obama administration negotiated the May 2014 release of captured U.S. soldier Bowe Bergdahl in exchange for the release of five Taliban held in Guantánamo through this office. The Obama administration had hoped to expand that negotiation into wider talks about a political settlement that would end the conflict in Afghanistan. The Taliban refused to talk directly with the Afghan government, however, and the United States refused to talk to the Taliban on issues concerning Afghanistan’s political future without the presence of Afghan government representatives.

The 2018 talks focused initially on two issues that directly involved the two parties: counterterrorism and the withdrawal of U.S. troops. The negotiations were initially led by State Department officials; in September 2018, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad was appointed as the

Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation—a newly created position—and took charge of the U.S. negotiating team. Khalilzad stated publicly that an agreement between the United States and the Taliban on the conditions for withdrawal and counterterrorism guarantees would eventually be linked both to agreement on a general ceasefire and to talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government on a future political arrangement. Although these two sets of issues would be negotiated in sequence, Khalilzad assured Afghan counterparts that “nothing was agreed until everything was agreed.”²³ Nonetheless, Kabul felt that it was being sidelined and that its future was being negotiated in its absence.

Despite the “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” assurances, the United States and the Taliban reached an agreement that contained binding commitments that did affect the U.S.-Kabul relationship. Recognizing the imbalance of the Doha agreement, then Secretary of Defense Esper signed the Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States (reproduced in annex 7) in Kabul on the same day—February 29, 2020—that the Doha agreement was signed. In the Doha agreement, the Taliban committed to ensuring that terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, could not recruit, train, or otherwise function in a way that could threaten the United States and its allies in areas controlled by the Taliban. Before the United States signed the agreement, the Taliban had effectively demonstrated their command and control by maintaining a seven-day ceasefire. For its part, in the agreement the United States committed to reducing its forces in Afghanistan from approximately 15,000 troops to 8,600 by July 2020, and to withdraw fully by May 2021, subject to conditions being met. 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. A military-to-military channel was set up in Doha between the United States and the Taliban to monitor compliance. While the Taliban initially appeared to respect the letter of this commitment, levels of violence remained high as

Taliban fighters conducted numerous small-scale attacks against Afghan army units, apparently to maintain the morale and fighting condition of the Taliban fighters in case the peace process failed. The military-to-military channel proved unable to effectively adjudicate claimed instances of violations of the agreement due in particular to the lack of objective information regarding who initiated attacks. The Taliban refusal to include representatives of the Afghan government in the mechanism further limited its effectiveness.

The Doha agreement also called for intra-Afghan negotiations to begin within ten days. To satisfy this provision, the Afghan government had to assemble a negotiating team, a fact that exacerbated President Ashraf Ghani’s sense of being undermined by an agreement that entailed commitments his government had to fulfill even though it had not been involved in negotiating them. Many Afghan interlocutors that the Study Group interviewed noted that the nearly two years of negotiations between the United States and the Taliban had elevated and legitimized the insurgent movement.

Two immediate obstacles prevented talks from beginning in early March as called for in the agreement. The first was an ongoing dispute over the September 2019 presidential election between President Ghani and the runner-up, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, which prevented a Kabul government from naming a negotiating team. The second obstacle was a “confidence-building” provision that Kabul would release 5,000 captured Taliban and that the Taliban would release 1,000 captured Afghan soldiers. The first obstacle was resolved in May, under threats from the United States to cut significant funding to the government unless it concluded the election dispute and named a negotiating team. The second was complicated by the fact that the Taliban insisted on determining *which* prisoners should be released, including a number of detainees who had been responsible for heinous crimes and attacks. Again, the United States had to apply significant pressure, in particular the threat to withdraw financial assistance, before the Afghan government agreed to finalize these releases and send its negotiating team to talks in September hosted by the government of Qatar in Doha.

On September 12, 2020, the two sides met in Doha to begin talks that the parties decided to describe as the “Afghan Peace Negotiations.” The opening ceremony was attended by high-level representatives from some twenty countries, including Secretary of State Pompeo representing the United States. The parties had decided that the actual talks would take place without a third-party mediator; only the two negotiating teams would be in the room. The parties began discussing the rules and procedures that would govern the negotiation over substance. An impasse was quickly reached, in particular on dispute resolution mechanisms and on which documents would be considered as anchoring the talks. On the latter issue, the Taliban insisted that its agreement with the United States should be the sole document—a position the government could not accept because it was not a party to that agreement.

During the summer, violence levels had begun to rise. The Taliban maintained their commitment to not attack international forces and Afghan cities, but they increased their attacks against Afghan security forces’ checkpoints. The United States in a number of cases acted on its prerogative to defend Afghan troops when under attack, and did so with air strikes. Initially, the number of attacks was high, but casualty rates did not significantly increase. In August and September, however, casualty rates rose sharply as fighting intensified. In November, while the media was reporting that the United States was preparing to withdraw troops by the end of the year, the Taliban launched offensives in Helmand, Kandahar, and Uruzgan Provinces—areas where they have significant local influence—briefly holding some districts and encroaching on the suburbs of Kandahar and Lashkar Gah. U.S. airpower, combined in particular with ASSF operations, pushed back the Taliban advance. Afghan government sources acknowledged to the Study Group that weaknesses within the ANDSF, including large numbers of “ghost soldiers” (military personnel who are falsely listed on the rolls and for whom a salary is fraudulently paid, but who do not actually exist), had been manifest in the lackluster fighting.

Other sources suggested that the Taliban were increasingly worried that their commitment to not attack international

troops, combined with their strategy of increasing violence against other Afghan groups, was eroding their nationalist and Islamist credibility. As a result, they were facing problems both of new recruitment and of motivating existing fighters. The Taliban leadership was reportedly also concerned by a series of rulings by religious authorities in Islamic countries in the region that decreed that Taliban violence during the peace process was illegitimate.

Throughout this period, U.S. diplomats had been urging the Taliban to reduce violence as a confidence-building measure to allow the talks to proceed in an atmosphere more conducive to reaching agreement. But they faced an uphill struggle. The Taliban clearly see violence as one of their main means of leverage. Afghan officials informed the Study Group that the Taliban leaders had presented the agreement with the United States to their commanders as a prelude to a military victory once U.S. troops left in May 2021 rather than as the beginning of a peace process that would require compromises. Both the Taliban and the Afghan forces accused each other of starting the violence. The result was an inevitable escalatory spiral. The parties, which had begun meeting as teams face-to-face and then had met only through two smaller contact groups, stopped meeting altogether, passing messages to each other through the Qatari hosts instead. The Afghan government’s negotiating team, made up of representatives of a number of different Afghan political factions that backed the current constitution, remained united, disproving fears that the Taliban would be able to use domestic political differences to undermine the unity of the team by appealing to possibly sympathetic factions.

In late November, reports circulated that the two negotiation teams had reached a breakthrough on rules and procedures. Importantly, the breakthrough appeared to be due to a rare Taliban compromise. Subsequent reports suggested that President Ghani rejected the compromise. This rejection not only stalled the negotiations but also created confusion over who had what powers of control over the negotiation process. According to the agreement between President Ghani and his rival for the presidency, Abdullah Abdullah, that had

been reached in May, the latter as head of the High Council on National Reconciliation would lead the peace process. Adding to the confusion about its authority, the membership of the council's Leadership Committee remained unclear.

In early December, progress resumed. Opposition to the compromise in Kabul was dropped, the two sides began to meet again in Doha, and, on December 5, the Leadership Committee of the High Council for National Reconciliation met for the first time. In mid-December, the two negotiating teams announced agreement on the rules of procedure, presented their lists of priority issues for substantive talks, and agreed to adjourn until January 5, 2021. During the interregnum, targeted assassinations in Kabul killed five civil society activists. The Taliban denied responsibility for these deaths. On January 4, the spokesperson for U.S. forces in Afghanistan called on the Taliban to stop the campaign of unclaimed targeted killings against journalists, civil society activists, and government officials.

As of the publication of this report, the peace process is still alive. The risk of collapse is, however, ever present. The most immediate risk is that if the United States does not implement a full military withdrawal by May 2021, the Taliban will withdraw from the process, at least for a time, claiming that the United States has violated the terms of the Doha agreement—even though the Taliban themselves have not discernibly met their own commitments. There is also a risk that the pressures of the process will weaken and divide the Afghan government, making a common negotiating position impossible to sustain. There is the further risk that neither side negotiates with a view to achieving an agreement, with both sides believing alternatives to a negotiated agreement are superior to a possible agreement: the government believing a failed negotiation will lead to a prolonged U.S. presence, and the Taliban believing failure at the negotiating table will hasten the U.S. departure. All negotiation processes confront these uncertainties. The premium placed on diplomacy by the Study Group's recommendations is both an acknowledgment of these risks and a means of mitigating them.

Evolution of the Terrorist Threat from Afghanistan

Since the 9/11 attacks, the primary U.S. interest in Afghanistan has been to prevent future threats to the homeland. Those attacks were planned in Afghanistan by the extremist anti-American terror group al-Qaeda, which had been welcomed and sheltered by the Taliban regime. The Taliban's refusal to give up al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden led the United States to intervene militarily and topple the regime. The United States now faces a paradox in that the terrorist threat from Afghanistan has been significantly contained due to the U.S. and allied military presence and the pressure it continues to exert on these groups. Some have used the apparent reduction in the threat to justify a complete military withdrawal from Afghanistan. According to experts who briefed the Study Group, however, a precipitous withdrawal could lead to a reconstitution of the terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland within eighteen months to three years.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the Afghanistan-Pakistan region became the epicenter of global jihadi groups, most prominently al-Qaeda, which carried out several deadly attacks against U.S. installations in the 1990s. Limited U.S. attention to the threat these groups posed set the stage for the 9/11 attacks. Although the Taliban regime, which governed most of Afghanistan by 1996, did not have the will, capacity, or interest to attack the United States itself, it did provide al-Qaeda a sanctuary from which to plan its operations. From 2001 onward, U.S. forces in Afghanistan eroded the group's capacity there, and in 2011, bin Laden himself was killed in a U.S. special operation in Pakistan.

Still, South Asia remains a critically important region for anti-American extremist groups due to its symbolic prominence in the jihadi mythology, its remote geography and rugged terrain, and its weak governments. They combine to make it hard to conduct counterterrorism operations there and, therefore, make it attractive to extremist

groups. Currently, there are two major terrorist groups in Afghanistan: ISKP and al-Qaeda. The latter includes members of what some describe as “AQ core”—the direct political heirs of bin Laden—as well as al-Qaeda’s regional affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). There are a myriad of groups that are of lesser importance as a direct threat to the United States but that have the capacity to threaten U.S. interests in the region, notably by promoting instability or aggravating the rivalry between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

Islamic State began as a branch of al-Qaeda in post-2003 Iraq, separated into its own group, and then expanded, capitalizing on the chaos of the Syrian civil war and seizing territory in both Syria and Iraq. It declared its ambition to create a caliphate that would unite Muslims and transcend state boundaries. It has an avowed hostility to the United States and its allies and has carried out or inspired some of the more horrific recent terror attacks in the West. In 2013, U.S. military forces began to recognize the existence of Islamic State-affiliated fighters in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The early membership of ISKP in Afghanistan was largely composed of dissident Afghan Taliban commanders, former members of the Tehrik-e-Taliban, and adherents of Central Asian extremist groups who had formerly been allied with al-Qaeda. In early 2015, Islamic State proclaimed the creation of the “Khorasan Province” of its caliphate in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the years since then, ISKP has attracted thousands of adherents, surged, and then declined under relentless pressure from U.S. and Afghan security forces, and occasionally the Taliban, as well as Pakistani security forces.

In 2020, ISKP attempted to rebuild. It has launched high-casualty, opportunistic attacks targeting civilians, particularly in Kabul. These attacks maintain its credibility as an undefeated force and bolster its recruitment efforts. ISKP is dedicated to establishing a Khorasan Province that can provide a secure platform for the Islamic State as it builds a global caliphate. There is no reason to doubt that ISKP would launch attacks on the West if it were able

to do so. For now, its capacity is constrained by pressure applied by U.S. forces, the ANDSF, and, in some areas, the Taliban. A reduction of this pressure would likely lead to ISKP capturing additional territory, intensifying the threat it poses to the Afghan government, and increasing its capacity to conduct other operations, including attacks outside Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda has never given up on Afghanistan despite enormous U.S. pressure and ample opportunity to focus on other theaters. It still pledges fealty to the Taliban, and according to the eleventh UN report by the Taliban sanctions monitoring team, presented to the Security Council in May 2020, “Relations between the Taliban, especially the Haqqani Network, and Al Qaida remain close, based on friendship, a history of shared struggle, ideological sympathy and intermarriage. The Taliban regularly consulted with Al Qaida during negotiations with the United States and offered guarantees that it would honour their historical ties.”⁴ This persistent linkage explains, in part, why the Taliban resisted the U.S. demand that they renounce and sever their ties with al-Qaeda, and instead committed only to ensuring that al-Qaeda is no longer a threat to the interests of the United States and its allies in areas controlled by the Taliban.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, announced the creation of AQIS, a franchise whose ideology and goals are closely aligned with those of the core leadership. A designated foreign terrorist organization, AQIS’s threat to the U.S. homeland is minimal and its threat to U.S. interests in the region is low. Still, as a cellular organization, al-Qaeda depends on trusted human networks to recruit, sustain, and develop its forces. Its oldest, deepest human network is in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It has kept its senior leaders in that region throughout two decades of U.S. engagement and pressure. Bin Laden emphasized the value of safe haven in Afghanistan in letters found in his final hideout in Abbottabad.

Beyond al-Qaeda and ISKP, two groups are of particular interest in South Asia today, among the several dozen

said to be operating in the theater: Tehrik-e-Taliban (also known as the “Pakistani Taliban”) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (which also has a presence in Pakistan). Both have demonstrated the capacity to act as major threats to the region. Neither is focused on direct attacks on the United States. But any group that could increase the likelihood of nuclear conflict or the dispersal of nuclear materials and weapons in South Asia, especially to nonstate groups, could severely threaten regional stability, U.S. allies and interests, and even American territory.

It is beyond the scope of this report to assess the relative threats of jihadi groups based in Afghanistan and those that have emerged elsewhere. The Study Group recognizes that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan has contributed to a diminished terrorist threat to the homeland from Afghanistan. But there is no question that there has been a significant evolution in the global terrorist threat, which will have to be countered by a global strategy that will need to take Afghanistan into account. For the reasons described above, Afghanistan remains symbolically and geographically an attractive space for jihadi groups that aspire to attack the United States, its allies, its interests, and the international order it has done so much to create.

Afghanistan’s Economic Dependency

Afghanistan has been dependent on external subsidies for most of the past two centuries. Even after the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the Afghan state was able to survive with ongoing material support from the Soviet Union. It was only when those subsidies were withdrawn in 1992 that the state collapsed, leading to a decade of civil war and Taliban rule. In the post-2001 period, when the international community pledged to rebuild Afghanistan, the pattern of donor dependence returned and intensified. Two decades later—as shown in the box “Aid, Budget, and Public Expenditures” (pages 25–26)—the government and security sector remain heavily dependent on funding from the international community.

Over time, Afghanistan can reduce its dependence on donor support, especially if it gains stability through a political agreement, if security costs are reduced, and if the potential for economic productivity is realized. But any economic turnaround will not be achieved swiftly. The negotiation process itself will likely take many months, and possibly longer, and the sorts of investments that might eventually make Afghanistan self-sufficient are unlikely to produce significant revenues for many more years. Any scenario in which the state collapses, as it did in 1992, will make it considerably more difficult for the United States to ensure its fundamental national security interests, let alone any of its other interests in Afghanistan.

The unpredictable and often uncoordinated nature of most foreign aid to Afghanistan helps explain the lack of progress toward self-sustainability. Short-termism pervaded much of the international community’s activities in Afghanistan, including its approach to aid. Bureaucratic pressure to spend led to investments made with insufficient knowledge, often bypassing government structures with limited regard to sustainability and capacity building. Donor, not Afghan, priorities set the agenda, worsening relations between donors and the Afghan government and between the Afghan government and its people. Corruption by Afghan government actors only deepened distrust between donors and the government and encouraged donors to spend money through third parties rather than through the government. The government has complained about not being able to have more control over funding in Afghanistan, claiming that donors are undermining the state’s ability to set and implement its own priorities, but has done little to address the corruption problem that often drives these decisions.

One of the positive legacies of the past twenty years has been the development of a well-regarded public financial management system, with strong support from the U.S. Treasury Department. The Ministry of Finance in particular has proved itself to be highly competent and reliable. This has allowed the government to increase its own revenues. In 2018, the Afghan government raised \$2.2 billion of its own

revenues, 11.3 percent of GDP, less than three percentage points below the average for other low-income countries.⁵ (As discussed below, this progress will be reversed due to the economic effects of COVID-19).

In the past two years, this system has begun to erode as these institutions, especially the Ministry of Finance and the Afghan central bank, have become increasingly politicized. The government has had a long-standing preference for donor aid to be provided to it directly, notably through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, which is overseen by the World Bank and has a reputation for integrity. This preference, however, is less likely to be satisfied if key institutions such as the finance ministry and the central bank are seen to be losing their independence and capacity.

Some donors have acceded to this government preference. The arguments for aid provided directly to the Afghan government include greater cost efficiency, enhanced economic multiplier effects, better alignment of donor contributions with core government priorities, and reinforced government systems (when properly supervised).⁶ On the other hand, especially if Afghanistan's public financial management systems continue to lose their independence and capacity, donor assistance will be more likely to go through third parties. Many donors prefer this approach as it allows them to maintain greater control over their funds and support sectors that are valuable but might not be supported by the government (civil society in particular). In many countries, the legislatures that authorize funding also have a strong preference for this sort of assistance.

Aid, Budget, and Public Expenditures

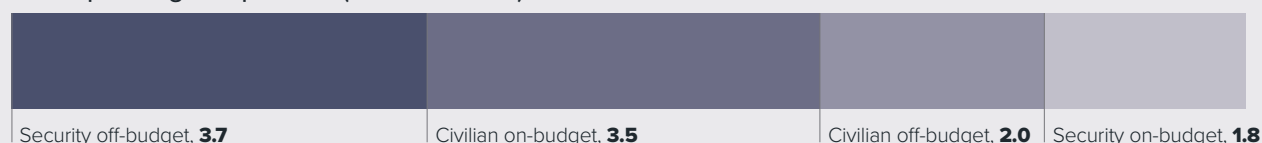
Afghanistan is extraordinarily dependent on aid, which in total exceeds \$8 billion per year, equivalent to over 40 percent of GDP. Assistance is provided through different channels. The different types of aid and public expenditures are defined below (and are quantified in the bar charts, based on available data for 2018):

- **Total public expenditure** is roughly evenly divided between total spending through the **Afghan government budget** and **off-budget spending funded by donor aid** that is separately executed (by donors and their contractors) and does not appear in the national budget.
- Total public expenditures are also more or less evenly divided between **security spending** (normally defined as including defense, police, intelligence, and associated government oversight agencies) and **civilian expenditures** (all the rest). Although civilian expenditures are considerably higher as a share of GDP than in most other countries, security expenditures are the real outlier—some ten times higher as a share of GDP than in the average low-income country.
- Within budget expenditures, roughly two-thirds consists of **recurrent spending** (wages and salaries, nonwage operations and maintenance, transfers, some nondevelopment-related capital expenditures, and other current costs such as debt service) and one-third is made up of **development expenditures** (public investment projects and development programs).⁹
- Development expenditures in turn are divided roughly 40/60 between the so-called **discretionary development budget** (which consists of funds that the Afghan government itself can freely allocate across projects and programs of its choosing) and the **nondiscretionary development budget** (consisting of funds earmarked for specific donor-funded projects and programs).

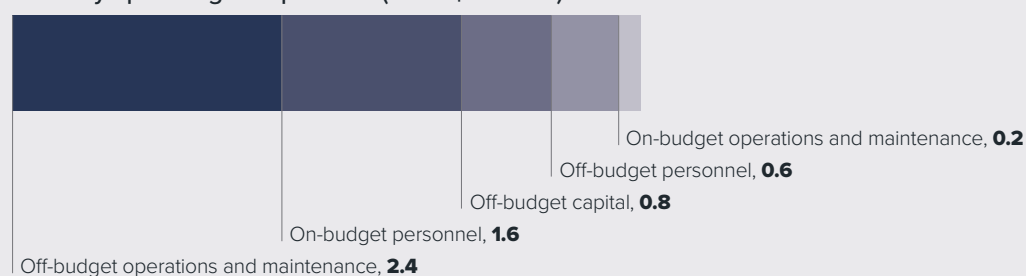
AID, BUDGET, AND PUBLIC EXPENDITURES [CONTINUED]

- On the funding side, **Afghan government revenue** (customs duties and fees, other taxes, and nontax revenue) accounts for less than a quarter of total resources; **on-budget grants** for around a quarter; and **off-budget grants** (dominated by security assistance) for over half. On-budget civilian aid includes discretionary grants (which help fund the recurrent budget and discretionary development budget) and nondiscretionary grants earmarked for specific projects and programs.

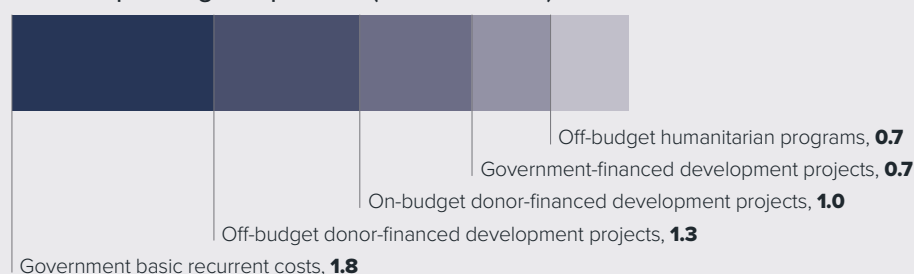
Total spending composition (in US\$ billions)



Security spending composition (in US\$ billions)



Civilian spending composition (in US\$ billions)



Note

- a. Some development projects include expenditures that are recurrent in nature. A notable example is the donor-funded national basic public health program, which pays substantial amounts for health workers' salaries. It should also be noted that there are essentially no on-budget security development expenditures (these costs, such as weapons, ammunition, and base construction, are covered by off-budget funding).

Data source: World Bank, "Program Document for a Proposed IDA Grant," 2020 Incentive Program Development Policy Grant (P172211), April 8, 2020, 11–12, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/426691589162512431/pdf/Afghanistan-2020-Incentive-Program-Development-Policy-Grant-Project.pdf>. US\$ figures derived by multiplying GDP shares by GDP (US\$ 19.5 billion); total public expenditure figure as a percentage of GDP adjusted to correct for an adding-up error in the source table. Civilian nondiscretionary on-budget grants set equal to nondiscretionary development expenditure, and civilian discretionary grants derived as a residual.

Long-standing donor frustrations with the worsening corruption problem in Afghanistan have led to multiple attempts to condition assistance. Some of these are encapsulated in the Afghanistan Partnership Framework that was agreed upon by the Afghan government and donors in November 2020.⁷ This is a complex issue that will need to be revisited. It will become more complicated given the U.S. government's attempts to hold the Afghan government more accountable for its management of aid while also making clear its support for the government as it negotiates with the Taliban. Afghanistan's aid dependence has also made it exceedingly vulnerable to aid-induced economic shocks, including the significant drawdown of international troops in 2014. In 2016, the international community committed to supporting the Afghan state for an additional four-year period, although at reduced amounts. This provided a necessary degree of predictability and prevented a further worsening of the economy. Despite low levels of growth and high unemployment, Afghanistan weathered the 2014 shock and did not collapse. Because most of the 2014 drop in aid did not greatly affect foreign support for core state expenses, the state was able to weather the fiscal shock even as poverty worsened and the economy remained vulnerable to political uncertainty.

The effects of COVID-19 on an already poor and vulnerable population means that poverty rates have risen from 55 percent in 2017 (see figure 2 on page 28) to as high as 72 percent today.⁸ At the same time, net domestic revenues are expected to fall by about 20 percent in 2020. These effects, which deepen Afghanistan's dependence on donors, will be difficult to reverse, especially if the conflict continues.

In time, Afghan revenues may be boosted by earnings from mineral extraction or access to concessional lending, but these are unlikely to be major factors in the next five years. "Nontraditional" donors in the Afghanistan context include China, Iran, India, Pakistan, and the Gulf States. None has shown an inclination to make significant additional contributions; if they were to do so, those additional funds would likely come in the form of support for pet projects rather than support to the state and national budget. This means

that Afghanistan will continue to rely for some time on its current donors. Still, the regional diplomatic strategy that the Study Group recommends can and should be linked to short- and long-term development planning, including seeking additional support from countries in the region that have so far not been significant providers of aid.

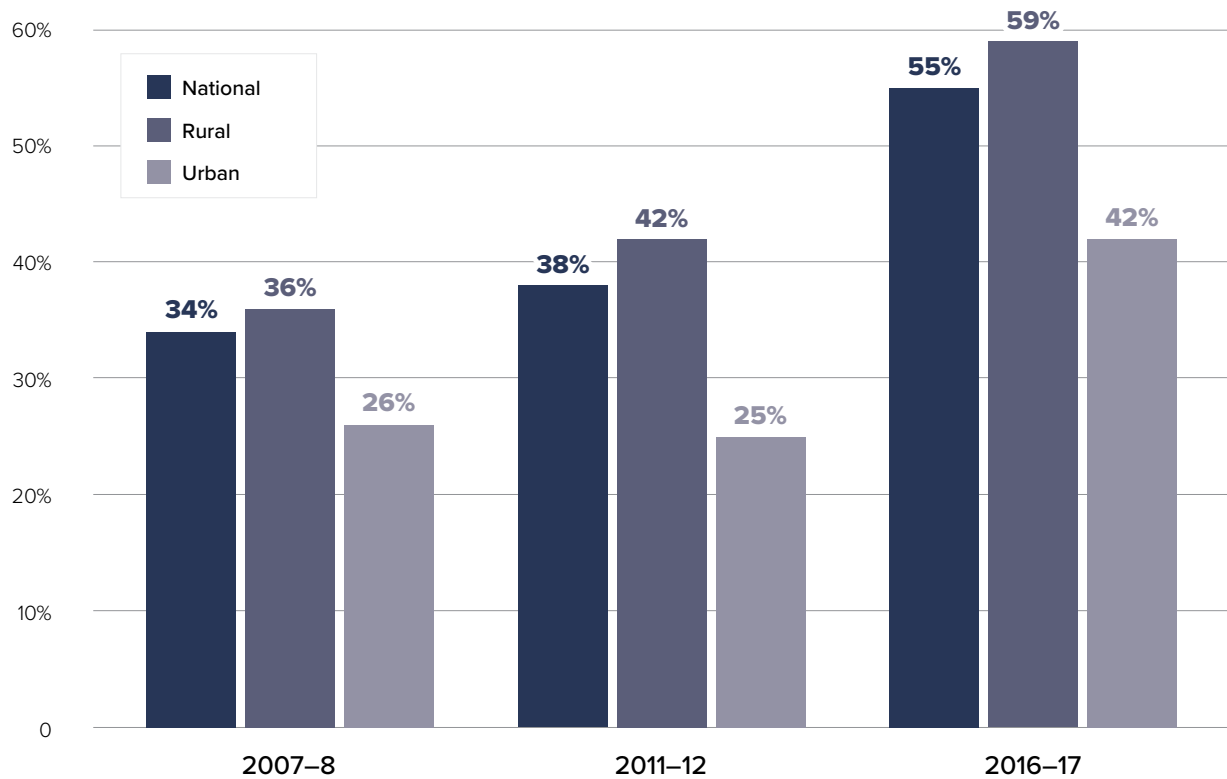
Europe has a strong interest in political stability in Afghanistan, given its exposure to jihadist networks, particularly Islamic State, as well as narcotics flows and domestic political concerns about migration. Continuing assistance from the European Union and its members, which is almost double U.S. contributions in the civilian sphere, can be expected given the multiyear commitments made at the Geneva donors meeting that convened sixty-six countries and thirty-two international organizations in November 2020. The United States and a number of other donors, however, made single-year commitments, conditioning post-2021 funding decisions on progress in the peace negotiations and on responsible stewardship of 2021 funding.⁹ At Geneva, the United States pledged \$300 million and made another \$300 million available contingent on progress in the peace process; this was a relatively modest commitment and compares with disbursements of over \$900 million in 2018 (which represented about a quarter of disbursements by all donors in the civilian sphere that year).

In the event of an agreement between the Afghan parties to the conflict, a "peace dividend" in the form of additional aid may incentivize them to uphold their commitments to move forward together. The creation of an appropriate package would benefit from early planning and coordination across the relevant range of U.S. government agencies, along with other donor countries and organizations.

In the longer term, Afghanistan has three areas of real potential for future economic growth: agriculture, minerals, and transit trade. At present, as described in the box "The Opiate Economy" (see page 29), agriculture is dominated, in terms of economic value, by poppy cultivation. Many efforts have been made to promote high-value crops that could provide an alternative to poppy cultivation, to extend

FIGURE 2.

Afghan Poverty Rates, 2007–8, 2011–12, and 2016–17



Sources: Redrawn from Sam Gollob and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy at Brookings* (Brookings Institution, August 2020), 27. The Brookings report uses data from the Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey, a joint survey by the European Union and Afghanistan’s Central Statistics Organization; see https://cso-of-afghanistan.shinyapps.io/ALCS_Dashboard.

credit to rural households, and to develop infrastructure. For the most part, these have proved unsustainable or insufficient. Significant agricultural growth is possible but will require major donor investments in irrigation and more effective water management. Extractives, although they hold much promise over time, will not bring substantial revenues in the short term. Most major projects have a five-to-ten-year lead time and will require dramatic improvements in security and a more investor-friendly regulatory environment. The same is true for any transformative efforts on transit-trade development.

In the past two decades, several large businesses have emerged in Afghanistan, fueled by the huge aid inflows. But a poor

regulatory framework, weak rule of law, and lack of vision for the contributions of the private sector have prevented business leaders from making more substantive and productive investments. The ongoing lack of security was probably the dominant factor in the lack of private sector investment. Nonetheless, tens of billions of dollars in private capital are held by Afghans outside of the country. Despite the distortions and misaligned incentives that characterize economies wracked by instability and violence, more could have been done to mobilize private sector activities that provide employment, create a multiplier effect, and reduce the dependence on donors. In the medium to long term, a well-governed Afghan state can be expected to pursue growth strategies that will develop all of the above-mentioned opportunities.

The Opiate Economy

Afghanistan remains the world's largest supplier of illegal opiates. Opium is one of the few reliable cash crops that Afghan farmers can grow. As a nonperishable, low-weight, high-value substance, it is also a store of value, making it particularly attractive during times of uncertainty. The crop generates between \$1.5 billion and \$3 billion per year at farm gate, depending on the market price, climate, yields, crop diseases, and other factors. In the past two decades, it has always been the country's leading cash-generating activity. In 2017, poppy cultivation provided up to 590,000 full-time-equivalent jobs—more than the number of people employed by the ANDSF.^a The estimated value of the opiate economy exceeded Afghanistan's officially recorded licit exports of goods and services. Local powerbrokers and national political actors benefit greatly from this economy.

Currently, Afghanistan accounts for only about 15 percent of heroin trafficked in the United States, but it represents a significantly larger percentage in Europe and contributes to the global problem of transnational criminal networks.

Poppy cultivation has generated both positive and negative effects for the Afghan population. As a generator of cash for the rural population, it has allowed for investments in agriculture that have had a transformative effect on parts of the rural environment. Solar panels and electric pumps have increased the amount of cultivated land. The illicit returns, however, have also contributed to the huge government corruption that has undermined statebuilding in Afghanistan. Drug revenue also finances the Taliban. Yet another negative consequence of poppy cultivation is the growing problem of drug addiction among Afghanistan's already vulnerable population.

The attractiveness of the crop to Afghan farmers and the immense demand for heroin in the rest of the world have confounded the many efforts to address this problem, including eradication, interdiction, alternative crops, financial incentives given to governors who are able to demonstrate reduced poppy cultivation in their provinces, and bombing by U.S. air assets of mobile heroin refineries.

If a peace agreement is reached, a way will need to be found to restore the rule of law and reduce illicit opium production without inflicting devastating economic hardship on a population that, for historic reasons, has grown to depend on this underground economy.

Note

a. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Counternarcotics: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Arlington, VA: June 2018), 5, www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-18-52-LL.pdf.

The future willingness of the international community to sustain the Afghan state will depend on the nature of the state they are being asked to financially sustain. Should the government collapse or should the negotiations with the Taliban lead to a political order that donors cannot support, the levels of aid seen over the past two decades will fall dramatically. Residual funding would most likely be focused on humanitarian assistance, and the positive effects from past investments in institution building would for the most part disappear, with dire economic and social consequences. Donor funding is the essential glue that holds the current Afghan state together, and any abrupt, unplanned aid reductions would result in even higher levels of poverty and immiserations—as well as a loss of the considerable gains in public health and education made over the past twenty years. On the more positive side, smarter, better-targeted U.S. assistance can make a major contribution to both reaching and sustaining a satisfactory peace agreement and can bolster Afghanistan’s ability to withstand future shocks.

Politics and the State

By becoming the Afghan state’s lifeline, the international community has paradoxically undermined its objective of enabling an effective social compact between the government and its citizens. Instead, as every Afghan presidential election since 2004 has shown, the international community, and the United States in particular, have become major, albeit often ineffective, local political actors. This is not to belittle the significant efforts by Afghans and the international community to build state institutions and create democratic accountability. Much progress has been made, particularly when one considers the conditions in 2001 and the fact that post-conflict statebuilding takes time under the best of circumstances.

While many Americans associate Afghanistan with ungovernability and tribalism, the country has a long history of sovereign nation statehood and, indeed, of constitutional rule (see the box “Afghanistan’s Democratic

Legacy” on page 31). The country’s politics—contentious as they have been—have never involved an effort by any group or region to secede. For all of its diversity, there is a strong sense of “Afghan” identity; even the Taliban attempt to frame their movement in inclusive and nationalistic terms. The violence of the past four decades and the vulnerabilities of the current order should not obscure the country’s political history of institutionalized checks and balances, rights protection, and political participation. Since the 1920s, regimes in Kabul have maintained, revised, and reinvented a constitutional model of governance while emphasizing the Islamic character of the state. In that sense, the restoration of a republican form of government in 2001 after the Taliban’s totalitarian emirate meant a return to a number of the institutional designs and habits of Afghanistan’s political past rather than the imposition of a foreign model of rule.

The 2004 constitution established a framework for the exercise of power and a foundation for political legitimacy. It laid out the government’s institutional architecture, jurisprudential basis, and the set of rights and responsibilities associated with citizenship. It attempted to redefine Afghan citizenship and to create a link between participation, representation, legitimacy, and stability. Women’s equality was enshrined, while ethnic minorities, many of which had been marginalized in national politics until then, received recognition. The state declared its membership in the international community from which it had been largely removed during the dark periods of civil war and Taliban rule. The constitution allowed for the political accommodation of the country’s elites, who might otherwise have remained on the battlefield.

However, the new governing architecture also enabled an elite orientation toward self-aggrandizement, parochialism, and brinkmanship that has had deleterious effects on the work of key institutions and sectors to this day. Many Afghans and international observers hoped that constitutional rules and norms would gradually transform the behavior of these actors. Instead, the large amounts of

Afghanistan's Democratic Legacy

Many Americans may not associate Afghanistan with a long tradition of participatory politics and robust civic engagement, but the state-society relationship has consistently been marked by both. For centuries, local, tribal, and religious councils and assemblies have convened to enable popular participation and the social legitimation of governing regimes and their policies. *Loya jirgas*, or grand assemblies, are seen as the highest expression of national sovereignty and derive their legitimacy from local perceptions of their inclusiveness.

Never colonized, Afghanistan placed constraints on its monarchy starting in 1923, in one of the Islamic world's earliest written constitutions. The 1964 constitution established an elected parliament as part of the monarchy's deliberate attempt to democratize. Seen through this historical lens, the current democratic republic is not a Western imposition, as the Taliban and some Western observers claim, but rather a natural evolution of Afghanistan's political history. Since 2001, Afghanistan's elected parliament and provincial councils have also ensured that government institutions recognize, at least in part, the will of the people they govern.

The Afghans who met to devise a new political order in Bonn in 2001, backed by the international community, opted for a democratic system, calculating that inclusive governance would prove more stable than prior decades of communist, warlord, and theocratic rule. The need to hold elections had been a consistent feature of Afghan proposals to end their civil war in the 1990s. Today, the country's democratic institutions and processes remain fragile and fraught, but the norms of political participation, rights protection, spirited debate, and free media are robust and have created new spaces for women, minorities, and young people to thrive to an unprecedented degree.

The flaws in Afghanistan's elections must be acknowledged. Corruption, fraud, and mismanagement have undermined people's confidence in electoral institutions. Yet, although recent elections have provoked political crises, none escalated into a violent clash. Elite accommodations were achieved in all cases, and, with U.S. diplomatic intervention, the country witnessed the first democratic and constitutional transition of power in 2014.

An end to the insurgency would, in and of itself, enhance Afghanistan's democracy. Insecurity has been a major abettor of fraud, so improving security would make elections fairer. Furthermore, although the Taliban have expressed skepticism toward democracy, any peace agreement should seek to retain it, not least because 72.5 percent of Afghans recently surveyed want to keep the current system.^a

A government that has the consent of a majority of a country's people is more likely to be a stable security partner for the United States than is an autocratic government. In that sense, a sustained U.S. political and diplomatic commitment to the democratic dividends gained over the last seventeen years is likely to pay off. Many compromises will need to be made at the negotiating table, but Afghanistan's democratic system should not be one of them.

Note

a. Organization for Social Research and Analysis, "Survey of the Afghan People on the Intra-Afghan Peace Negotiations," August 2020, 25, www.osra.af/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/peacetalks_report.pdf.

donor money created a different set of incentives. State institutions served as sources of individual patronage rather than a means of advancing Afghanistan's national interests. For this reason, building the rule of law was initially seen as a central component of the process of developing good governance but, after hundreds of millions of dollars of investment, legal institutions have enabled corruption rather than fostered justice. Elections proved perhaps the most disappointing area of all, becoming arenas for elite negotiation besmirched by accusations of fraud. High-level U.S. intervention enabled the peaceful resolution of electoral crises, as the Americans put potential spoilers on notice about the consequences of escalation, but without these efforts, peaceful transfers of power through the ballot box were far from assured.

The government's struggle to control the country is particularly striking given that it has one of the world's most centralized constitutions. This institutional design, dating back to the nineteenth century, was intended for a state with very limited functions. While substantial devolution of power could create new risks of political fracture, greater influence on the part of provincial- and district-level authorities could also encourage more representative and responsive local governance and would better reflect actual patterns of power. But the 2004 constitution, a landmark document in many ways, has not operated as the kind of living document required to respond to the transformative and turbulent developments of the past seventeen years. Instead, its rigid structure maintains the persistent polarization of elites, a steady rhythm of political crises, and the threat of violence from inside the republic, particularly around each electoral cycle. This perpetual tension means that, despite widespread elite commitment to the republic's preservation, the government consists of brittle coalitions that are less robust than they should be in the face of a raging insurgency.

Currently, the most consequential political process for Afghanistan is the ongoing negotiation between the Taliban and the government's representatives in Qatar.

Their challenge will be to agree on a state structure where differences can be resolved without violence and, ultimately, whereby the state can sustain itself. Meanwhile, the desire among Afghans for participatory governance is self-evident. In election after election since 2004, millions have, at mortal risk, cast their ballots. Those disappointed with the outcome joined choruses of popular discontent, expressions of dissent that reflect the best of the country's contentious politics and serve as a tangible, if modest, check on the impulse of leaders inclined to confuse preservation of their own power with a commitment to defending the state. As importantly, Afghans have deeply held traditions of popular consultation, conflict management, and political legitimation that existed long before electoral politics became the norm. Customary practices and the social organizations associated with them may well be part of a credible governing formula in Afghanistan. Processes and institutions that are locally anchored and sustainably maintained will be most likely to succeed as the country enters this new chapter of statebuilding.

As it draws down its military presence and reduces the size of its aid footprint, the United States remains a significant actor within this complex Afghan political landscape. That said, even when it deployed higher levels of aid and troops, the United States was generally unable to shape political developments as much as it would have liked. This is due partly to Washington's competing global priorities, but also to the sheer complexity of this political ecosystem. Any U.S. decisions to withdraw troops or funding will similarly have far-reaching, albeit unpredictable, effects. Ultimately, the Study Group concludes that while the particulars of the state's future are for Afghans to decide, long-term U.S. national security interests are directly linked to the stability of the Afghan state and—as the box “Putting People First” (on page 33) explains—to recognizing and responding to the needs of the Afghan people. An ongoing U.S. commitment to Afghanistan's constitutional order and the gains made therein can set the stage for a right-sized relationship between two sovereign states that share key interests and values.

Putting People First

Any future ability to achieve U.S. goals in Afghanistan will depend on the support of the Afghan people. That support will require a better understanding of their needs and aspirations. Afghan state-society relations have long been marked by a healthy give-and-take between the people and their government, one often mediated by informal civic institutions. Norms of representative governance and popular participation have strengthened since 2001, as citizens have risked their lives repeatedly to cast ballots and, more generally, to engage in free and lively debate about their country's political future. These positive civic energies must be harnessed.

Popular expectations about governance have grown with respect to service delivery in urban and rural areas. The prolonged international presence and the accompanying assistance brought some much-needed relief across the country after decades of war, deprivation, and displacement. In turn, the Afghan people have come to expect their basic needs to be met with respect to security, health care, livelihood support, education, and justice. Unfortunately, foreign support, although valuable in many ways, also entrenched Afghanistan's donor dependence, curtailing the emergence of a sustainable social contract between the people and their government. The absence of such a contract contributes to the fragility that makes Afghanistan vulnerable to political instability and violence. An approach that ignores the relationship between state institutions and citizens risks deepening this breach.

As the United States and its allies prepare to reduce their footprint in Afghanistan, the Afghan government must be encouraged to operationalize a people-first principle that creates an inclusive, accountable social contract. Tools are now available to better anticipate the needs and hopes of the population and to factor them into the formulation of policies and projects. Reliable surveys, a growing network of capable local researchers, a vibrant media, and robust civil society organizations in Kabul and the provinces can work in the service of including previously unheard voices.

The development of a robust civil society, which is one of the brightest legacies of Western intervention, provides the means for ordinary Afghans to have an unprecedented national conversation about who they are as a society, what sort of state they desire, and what solutions might exist for their most pressing problems. Having experienced elite monarchical politics, communist authoritarianism, totalitarian theocracy, and civil war, they know that none of these conditions allowed for genuine dialogue and participation. If the parties to the conflict and their international supporters can demonstrate a credible commitment to resolving their disputes peacefully, there may finally be an opportunity to create a genuinely inclusive social contract.

Civil Society, Rights, and Social Gains

Afghan civil society, defined as the range of formal and informal organizations that reflect community interests and deliver some essential services, has emerged since 2001 as an important engine of social and political development. Following the 2001 Bonn agreement that created the foundation for the current constitutional order, the civil society sector began to see the proliferation of organizations focused on advocacy—in particular, the promotion of human rights and women’s rights—anticorruption, and public sector accountability.

Reflective of the country’s diversity, civil society is not monolithic in its composition or views. There are important dividing lines—between urban and rural, progressive and traditional, old and young—but these distinctions are far from categorical or static. And although the international donor community has played a significant role in spurring and supporting some of these organizations since 2001, many exist at the grassroots level as voluntary and often self-sustaining entities that represent real constituencies across the country.

More generally, Afghanistan has a rich history of civic engagement, social activism, community governance, and self-help. From its inception in the late nineteenth century, the modern Afghan state has had to contend with and earn support from nonstate actors with tribal, religious, cultural, and localized forms of influence. These actors and organizations are little touched by Western aid programs but may be the most influential of all. In rural areas, along with more formal nongovernmental organizations, there are professional guilds, youth groups, literary societies, and other types of civic groups. To this day, Afghan political leaders recognize the import of acknowledging these social forces, which will have significant influence over any attempt at achieving lasting peace and stability.

Women’s organizations are formidable advocates for the protection of women’s rights and for greater political and economic inclusion, even as they reflect the diversity of those they represent. The promotion of equality for Afghan women

quickly emerged as a major goal of the international community after 2001. But, as is often the case with foreign military intervention, the rights agenda was just one among many goals being pursued, some of which sometimes superseded, even jeopardized, efforts to secure women’s rights. Still, Afghan women have achieved a great deal since the fall of the Taliban government even as insecurity, underdevelopment, and patriarchal norms continue to limit their rights and opportunities in much of the country. These achievements are remarkable given that, under the Taliban, there were no female judges, prosecutors, or defense attorneys; no women in the media or security forces; no girls or female teachers in formal schools; and only a few female health-care providers.

Through Afghan determination and donor support—especially American—female enrollment in public schools rose from zero in 2001 to over 3 million in 2010. As of 2019, millions of women had voted, and 89 of parliament’s 352 members were women. Women held 13 seats as ministers and deputy ministers and 4 served as ambassadors. Eight women served as deputy governors, mayors, and deputy mayors, including 2 as district governors. Schools and universities employed nearly 80,000 women instructors,¹⁰ including over 2,000 university professors.¹¹ More than 6,000 women served as judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and police and army personnel. Government data counted over 8,500 women among the country’s health professionals.¹² Female journalists numbered more than 1,000; and nearly 1,500 women entrepreneurs had invested a total of \$77.5 million in their businesses. Life expectancy for women rose from 45.5 years in 2001 to 54.4 years in 2019, and the literacy rate climbed from 13 percent in 2000 to 30 percent in 2018.¹³ What is critical about education, as one civil society representative told the Study Group, is that it cannot be taken away once acquired. There is nonetheless a realistic and widespread fear that women will be marginalized in the public space should the Taliban return.

These striking developments reflect a broader trend in Afghanistan: the elevation of human rights protection since 2001. Afghanistan’s constitution enumerates a number

of rights in accordance with international standards, and Afghanistan has signed on to several international human rights instruments. Advocates have done the hard work of introducing norms and practices that have brought rights protection into the mainstream conversation. There is, however, a significant gap between these aspirations and the reality on the ground for many. Persistent threats to human welfare and dignity include insurgent violence against civilians, extrajudicial killings and other abuses by security forces, child soldier recruitment, and violence against women and other marginalized communities. Ultimately, the conditions of war have made genuine and universal rights protection an unachievable ambition. In this sense, the ongoing conflict remains one of the main impediments to the exercise of the most basic of human rights. Ending the conflict is a precondition for the exercise of these rights, and maintaining their legal status in whatever political arrangement emerges from the peace negotiations should be a high priority. So, too, should be meaningful engagement on the part of all parties to the conflict with those millions of ordinary Afghans who have long suffered: genuine and lasting peace requires an acknowledgment by all involved of their pain and loss.

Among those most transformed for the better by Western intervention are young Afghans, an important demographic given that just over 62 percent of Afghans are below the age of twenty-four.¹⁴ They have benefited from the burgeoning education sector, which many have accessed as part of a larger process of urbanization. In 2003, Afghanistan had only 30,000 university students; in 2018, the country had 386,778, of whom 100,468 were women.¹⁵ One of the achievements in which Americans can take particular pride is the establishment of the American University of Afghanistan, the country's flagship university. Chartered in 2004, the university emerged as a beacon for higher learning. Students, faculty, and staff responded with tremendous resilience in the face of a devastating attack in 2016, and today the university boasts an impressive faculty that includes some of Afghanistan's brightest scholars, as well as a student body made up of young Afghans from all thirty-four provinces pursuing undergraduate and graduate studies.

The Afghan media, among the most open in the region, provides a space in which these debates and conversations can be conducted. This achievement, enabled by the explosive advancement of telecommunications, is striking given that Afghanistan had almost no media under the Taliban. With encouragement from donors, USAID in particular, Afghanistan's post-2001 media broke from earlier models, in which most media was state owned, and embraced a private sector model. Afghanistan now has several independent television stations, numerous radio stations, and many newspapers.

Afghans, particularly young people, have also become avid users of social media with the proliferation of cell phones and the introduction of 3G internet services. Afghan youth are active on blogs, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, and social media is their primary source of information. These developments have dramatically altered modern Afghanistan, shrinking the gap between those living in different parts of the country and inextricably linking large swathes of the population to the rest of the world.

The future of these rights and freedoms are of major concern as Afghans who appreciate them wonder if the Taliban have evolved in their views. The alarming spike in targeted assassinations at the end of 2020 against young Afghan journalists, civil servants, and activists is disheartening but not surprising. Their work exemplifies precisely the kind of progress that threatens the Taliban's agenda. According to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, 15 journalists, 14 tribal elders, 20 religious scholars, 31 civilian government staff (including prosecutors and judges), 10 civil society activists, and 7 teachers were killed in targeted attacks in 2020. Shaharзад Akbar, the head of the commission, described these killings to the Study Group as "a systematic massacre of the educated and the independent voices with long-term implications for Afghanistan and no end in sight."

Despite this recent, tragic trend, Afghanistan has profoundly changed over the past two decades. Connected to one another

and to the rest of the world in unprecedented ways, Afghans have embraced electoral politics, however problematic, as an extension of their own long-held traditions of self-government and consultation. Afghan women have emerged as a confident and vocal constituency, participating in and enriching national life in ways that were difficult to imagine two decades ago. Afghan civil society actors are increasingly using their voices to expose corruption and demand greater accountability of government officials. The United States and its international partners have been clear about the high importance they place on these achievements and their preservation. Ultimately, however, Afghans themselves must continue to use the openness that they helped create to insist on the preservation of these gains.

The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces

One of the fundamental features of statehood is the capacity to monopolize the legitimate use of force. Despite extraordinary U.S. investment in the Afghan security sector, the Afghan government remains far from able to lay claim to this capacity. The aid dependency that characterizes Afghan civilian government is even more pronounced in its security sector. The integrity of the ANDSF is essential for the maintenance of the state, and U.S. support has been essential for the maintenance of the ANDSF. Despite the formal transition of security responsibility to the Afghan government in 2013 and the end of most U.S. combat operations in 2014, the ANDSF continues to remain highly dependent on U.S. support, which provides 80 percent of all public security expenditures in Afghanistan—and 85 percent of all donor support for security.¹⁶ Payment of Afghan National Army (ANA) salaries depends largely on the United States. In addition to these expenditures, the United States provides logistics support, procurement expertise, and policy advice to the Ministry of Defense.

Progress has consistently been made, as the biannual U.S. Department of Defense reports to Congress on security and stability in Afghanistan describe, but it has continually

fallen short of expectations. The ongoing lack of capacity and inefficiency of the ANDSF limit its strategic options against the Taliban. As a result, the ANDSF is generally on the defensive against the Taliban and unable to provide security for much of the population. Nonetheless, population surveys, including the Asia Foundation's 2019 *Survey of the Afghan People*, consistently show that the ANA in particular is one of the most trusted institutions in Afghanistan.¹⁷ Despite ongoing problems, the ANDSF could still be a defining feature of the U.S. military legacy in Afghanistan. The security forces have managed to maintain sufficient cohesion and determination to continue fighting the Taliban after the end of the U.S. and NATO combat mission. The ANDSF now carries the bulk of the fighting burden against the Taliban and continues to pay a high cost in casualties.

From 2002 to 2014, the United States took the lead in building, training, equipping, and financing Afghanistan's national army and ancillary forces, as well as, later on, various militias. In 2006, the United States assumed responsibility for training most of the Afghan National Police (ANP). Germany, and later the European Union, have maintained a training program for some officers, and multiple donors continue to provide some financing for police salaries and nonlethal equipment through the United Nations–run Law and Order Trust Fund, but the bulk of support has remained American. The persistent insurgency led to a strategy where the United States opted to “militarize the police as a localized defense force” rather than encourage a law enforcement organization.¹⁸ Special police units, such as the Afghan National Civil Order Police and the Border Police, proved themselves able to operate effectively, but, as a whole, the policing sector—formal units and informal militia—remains plagued by corruption and abuse of authority.

Up until the June 2013 transition to Afghan leadership, U.S. forces partnered with ANA units in combating the Taliban insurgency. In 2008, the United States also began to create the Afghan Air Force. As the years went by, it authorized an ever-growing fighting force in response to the insurgency's

expansion. The accelerated development and rush to expand the rank-and-file numbers in both the army and the police overshadowed the need for professional growth and institutional capacity building, especially at the ministerial level. When the Obama administration announced in 2011 its intention to transition security responsibilities to the ANDSF in 2014, the U.S. military had to ramp up its training mission to prepare the ANDSF as much as possible to assume its new responsibility and intensify its fight against the Taliban to create conditions that would allow for a U.S. withdrawal.

Even as insecurity remained a constant problem, the United States began transitioning to an “advise, train, and assist” role that would begin in 2014, ending its combat role. This transition, which involved a significant withdrawal of U.S. and allied troops, revealed the vulnerabilities of the ANDSF, which remained dependent on U.S. support for a number of critical functions. Many questioned whether the transition could succeed. In the summer of 2015, the 215th Corps of the ANA based in Helmand completely collapsed. This was the most propitious moment for the Taliban to attempt to overthrow the government, but divisions within the movement over the succession to Mullah Omar, combined with a peace initiative by President Ghani, reduced the impact of the Taliban’s spring offensive. This perhaps provided sufficient space for the transition to succeed to the extent that it did. Still, according to the Department of Defense, as of today, the ANA can complete independently only about half of its required maintenance work, and the U.S. government continues to pay the salaries of the entire force.

The ANA has made progress in evolving from a light infantry force to a more complete force with both fighting units and enabling capabilities such as training and logistics, even if these capabilities are not yet self-sufficient. Ongoing capacity gaps are reflected in the ANA’s limited strategic options. Although the ANDSF maintains control of Kabul, the provincial capitals, and much of the main road network, its strategy beyond these areas has been one of maintaining a large number of ill-defended checkpoints to cover as much territory as possible. An exception to this

low-capacity, non-offensive disposition has been the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF), which was created in 2006 and whose units have a close relationship with U.S. Special Operations forces. The United States has ensured that high recruitment standards for the ASSF have been maintained, avoiding the corruption in selection and promotion that has plagued much of the regular force. According to the June 2020 Department of Defense report to Congress, during the first half of 2020, “ASSF operations effectively sustained military pressure on the Taliban, thwarted ISIS territorial expansion, and mitigated the threat from high profile attack (HPA) networks.”¹⁹

The eventual sustainability and autonomous functioning of the ANDSF will depend on greater institutional capacity within the governing institutions—in particular, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior, and the National Directorate for Security. This is the bureaucratic level at which strategy is shaped and crucial maintenance functions such as budgeting, human resource management, and procurement and logistics are delivered. Since 2006, capacity building for these institutions has been led by the Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan, but those efforts have often been neglected in order to focus on combat-related requirements.

The future of the ANDSF presents numerous dilemmas both in the event of a peace agreement and in its absence. In the latter case, the dilemmas will continue largely as described above: how to improve the capacity of the security forces and reduce their dependence on U.S. support, especially with a significantly reduced U.S. presence. The additional challenge of retaining morale and cohesion during an ongoing negotiation with the Taliban will be even more demanding if a sense of U.S. abandonment becomes entrenched. Should a peace agreement be reached, there will be the immediate question of whether and how to integrate Taliban forces into the ANDSF. More importantly, there is the longer-term issue of reconfiguring the security forces. Currently, both the police and ANA have been configured to fight an internal insurgency. The ANA is larger

than it needs to be to protect the country, and the police has been militarized in a way that makes it largely unfit for law enforcement, especially in rural areas. Short- and long-term opportunities will exist to channel U.S. support using some of the same principles and practices of conditionality described earlier with respect to civilian aid. Taking advantage of these opportunities will increase the likelihood that the Afghan security sector will evolve toward a sustainable, merit-based, law-abiding set of state institutions.

The Taliban: Organization and Objectives

The Taliban movement is the main actor in the insurgency against the Afghan state. It began as a network of religious leaders, scholars, and students that emerged in southern Afghanistan in 1994 in reaction to the fragmented and predatory mujahedin groups that had successfully resisted the Soviet occupation but then dragged the country into civil war. By 1996, the Taliban had defeated or co-opted most of these groups and had taken the capital, Kabul, and most of the country. The group established an “emirate” in which it held a centralized monopoly on power, with Mullah Omar as its leader. The emirate ruled harshly based on its extremist interpretation of Islamic law. The new government gave shelter to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who authorized the planning and execution of several attacks on U.S. targets, culminating in the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. homeland. The United States and its allies responded swiftly and toppled the Taliban regime in a matter of months.

Remnants of the Taliban either faded into the countryside or began to regroup in the border areas of Pakistan. As the United States and the international community supported the establishment of a democratic constitutional order in Afghanistan in 2002, the Taliban, excluded from all political processes after their defeat, reconstituted themselves as a fighting force in resistance to what they described as the international “occupation” of Afghanistan. Fighting fronts organized, variously motivated by resentment toward the often-rapacious rule of local leaders appointed by Kabul,

by ideological opposition to the U.S. military presence, and by long-standing tribal rivalries that played out anew on the modern political map. By 2006, Mullah Omar had organized these fronts into a more consolidated movement. By the time of his death in 2013, the Taliban had proven themselves to be a resilient insurgency, capable of replenishing their ranks, holding increasing territory, and providing or co-opting basic governing services. As described above in the section “Status of the Peace Process” (pages 19–22), as the war continued, the United States eventually shifted to a policy of seeking a political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

One component of the Taliban movement is the Haqqani network, notorious for its ability to organize asymmetric attacks in urban areas that have killed hundreds of civilians, including foreigners. The Taliban have taken active measures, sometimes with tacit U.S. support, against the Islamic State, driving it out of northwest Afghanistan and significantly circumscribing its mobility in the east. The Taliban are distinct from al-Qaeda and its affiliates and do not support its global jihadi agenda, but retain close ties to the group and have refused to disavow it. Differing opinions exist as to whether the Taliban are monolithic, fragmented, or susceptible to fragmentation. Despite the current negotiations in Doha, there are clearly some Taliban commanders who favor securing a military victory rather than a negotiated settlement. The group has not escaped leadership crises or power struggles at the highest level, but these have not undermined its core goals or created fatal fissures. Despite internal disagreements, the Taliban remain the most coherent and disciplined political-military group in Afghanistan.

The objectives for which the Taliban are fighting have been partly revealed through official and unofficial statements over the years. The group’s contact with the outside world has been conducted, since the opening of their political office in Doha, through a team that has, until recently, remained largely unchanged. Nevertheless, what the Taliban truly want politically is difficult to ascertain because of their complex and obscure decision-making as well as what appears to

be a deliberate discipline of discretion. Still, most Taliban-watchers appear to agree that the group shares a number of general objectives. The foremost Taliban objective is to end what they view as the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan. The number one demand of the Taliban in their negotiations with the United States, and indeed a precondition for beginning these negotiations, was the complete withdrawal of all U.S. and foreign forces, including contractors. Although the Taliban are extremely unlikely to accept a counterterrorism platform, there is some ambiguity in this position, in that the group may be open to the possibility that a post-agreement government could legitimately agree to such an international presence, but only after total withdrawal ahead of the formation of that government.

The Taliban seek to replace the current Afghan government, which they see as the illegitimate, imposed creation of the Western-dominated Bonn process, implemented without the Taliban's participation and while they were a target of U.S. forces. The group has not presented a specific alternative. For years, the Taliban insisted on the establishment of an emirate, a regime run by a single leader chosen on the basis of his Islamic credentials with strict implementation of Islamic law as interpreted by associated religious scholars. Since 2018, the Taliban have softened this position in public. While still demanding the removal of the current government and the establishment of a new constitution, the group often refers to an "Islamic foundation" for the state that does not involve a Taliban monopoly on power. This Islamic foundation may countenance greater flexibility on education, health, women's rights, and human rights than was the case in the 1990s, but it would likely entail some restrictions on these rights.

The Taliban recognize the need for international political, military, and economic support and embrace diplomatic outreach. The group does not want to return to its international pariah status of the 1990s. As one interlocutor told the Study Group, the Taliban do not want to be "the North Korea of Central Asia." Importantly, they have always had a nationalist sensibility, with rhetoric espousing

the independence and sovereignty of Afghanistan. This sensibility guides both their insistence on troop withdrawal and their desire for broad international recognition. The Taliban resent accusations that they are Pakistan's puppet and have attempted to diversify their international support, even as it is clear that the Pakistani military and intelligence apparatus maintains great influence over the group and that the sanctuaries Pakistan provides are essential to the viability of the insurgency. The group claims to welcome future U.S. and OECD economic assistance, but how much of its doctrinaire positions the group is willing to give up for U.S. and Western aid is clouded in uncertainty.

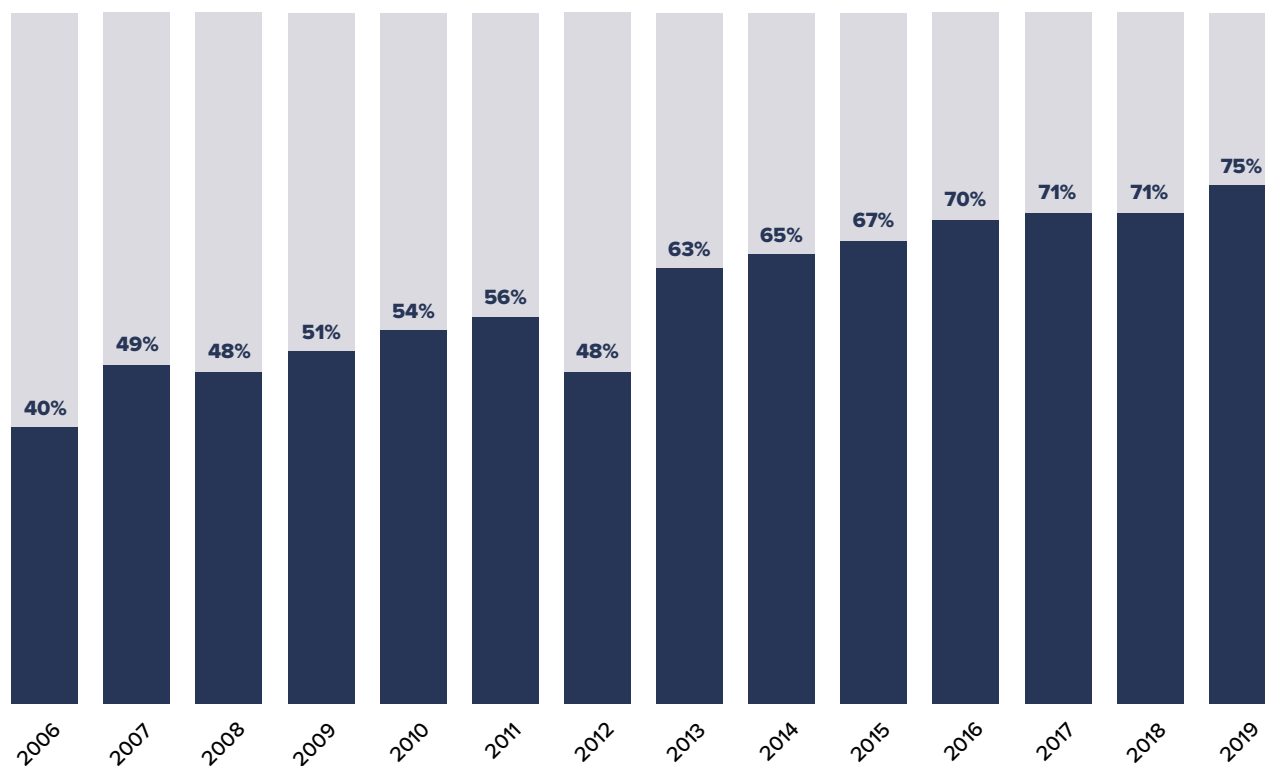
The Taliban are not an international terrorist organization, and there is no evidence that they have any intention to attack the United States. In the 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, the Taliban explicitly promised to neither host nor allow al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups to support, recruit, train, or fundraise in Afghanistan or to attack other countries from Afghan soil. The Taliban do, however, accept assistance from al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. It remains to be seen how rigorously the Taliban will clamp down on the presence of these organizations and their activities on Afghan territory. From late 2020, the steady rhythm of terror attacks in Kabul and across the country suggests a disinclination or inability on the group's part to restrain the use of terror, either by its own members or by others.

The reasons for the Taliban's resilience are complex, varied, and often intensely local. Many Afghans may share the general goals of an end to the foreign troop presence and the installation of an Islamic government but may also want to preserve elements of their democratic system and access to international aid. The Taliban almost certainly overestimate the size and commitment of the constituency they claim to represent. On the one hand, this creates leverage for an internationally supported Afghan government to move the Taliban from their harsher positions. On the other hand, the Taliban may simply disregard this unpopularity and continue to use violence to impose their dogmatism upon the Afghan people.

FIGURE 3.

Fear for Personal Safety, 2006–19

Percentage responding “always,” “often,” or “sometimes” to the question “How often do you fear for your own personal safety or security or for that of your family these days?”



Source: Based on graph in Sam Gollob and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy* at Brookings (Brookings Institution, August 2020), 39.

For the moment, however, the Taliban have committed to the negotiation process. They have shown themselves to be stubborn at the negotiation table while increasing violence on the battlefield. They have signaled to the international community a willingness to negotiate, but there are indications that the Taliban leadership continues to portray the Doha agreement to its commanders and fighters as the prelude to a military victory rather than an opportunity for a genuine negotiation. The Taliban have over the years shown more unity and cohesiveness than many experts expected. The movement may be challenged to maintain this cohesiveness when the trade-offs inevitable in a peace agreement become clearer.

Regional Stakeholders and Dynamics

Afghanistan is a landlocked territory thousands of miles away from the United States, but also a state at the center of a region marked by crucial U.S. interests. An analysis of the main regional stakeholders reveals their complex interactions in Afghanistan and highlights the imperative to encourage regional cooperation that can enable the protection of U.S. interests.

Pakistan has always played an essential role in U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. Although a nominal ally of the United States, Pakistan, one of only three countries to recognize the

Taliban regime in the 1990s, has also simultaneously supported the Taliban insurgency over the past two decades in Afghanistan. Much of the Taliban leadership was trained in madrassas located in Pakistan. There were consequently close links between the Taliban and the Pakistani government at all levels, which the Pakistani government was unwilling to sever after 9/11. The U.S. government continues to be worried about safe havens in Pakistan that allow the Taliban and other groups to pose a threat to the region and beyond. Throughout the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, Pakistan has played both sides of the field. It has allowed the United States to use its airspace to carry out operations in Afghanistan as well as its ports and roads to supply the U.S. military presence while receiving significant U.S. funding for doing so. At the same time, it has continued to harbor and advise the Taliban leadership, which is based in Quetta, capital of Pakistan's Balochistan Province and close to the Afghan border.

Pakistan has adopted a policy that can loosely be described as preferring instability in Afghanistan to a stable Afghanistan that is allied to India. It has managed this policy while defending its own territory from attacks by terrorist organizations that it claims are being sheltered in Afghanistan. Pakistan has generally supported the U.S. effort to negotiate with the Taliban that was publicly acknowledged in July 2018. Although Pakistan has influence over the Taliban, it does not have total control over the movement. There are also indications that Pakistan is reevaluating some elements of its strategy, given the economic opportunities that would arise from a more stable Afghanistan and the possibility of the Taliban gaining a meaningful share of power. But there are few reasons to believe that there will be fundamental changes in policy, particularly in the strategic thinking of Pakistan's politically powerful army and intelligence services.

Whereas Pakistan has the longest border with Afghanistan of any of its neighbors, **China** has the shortest. And that 100-kilometer border is an apt metaphor for China's somewhat circumscribed interest in Afghanistan. China might have been expected to pay more attention to, and invest

greater resources in, Afghanistan given Beijing's concerns about the possibility of radicalization within China's Muslim Uyghur population and given the chance for China to counteract India's influence in Afghanistan. But those interests have not generated significant engagement. And despite its demonstrated appetite to build sophisticated infrastructure in complicated places, China has no developed plans to link Afghanistan to its global Belt and Road Initiative, which includes projects in both Pakistan and Central Asia.

From the perspective of great power competition, China may consider the U.S. presence in Afghanistan beneficial, given the complicated, costly, and distracting effects on U.S. foreign policy of that presence. Still, China has been supportive of the peace process and, like the other neighbors, probably prefers the United States not to have a presence in bordering Afghanistan, though for now it prefers that presence to a chaotic civil war. The increasing closeness of the China-Pakistan relationship means that, for the most part, Beijing's Afghanistan policy has hewed closely to that of Islamabad, with Islamabad taking the lead. China does have concerns about general instability in Afghanistan, however, and sees Afghanistan not primarily in terms of a bilateral relationship but in terms of regional stability.

Russia shares this interest in regional stability. Russian interlocutors told the Study Group that the Russian Federation's goal is a peaceful, independent, and sustainable Afghanistan, free of terrorism and illicit drugs, that exists in harmony with both its close and its more remote neighbors. Russia viewed the earlier, substantial U.S. military presence as a threat, but those fears have been somewhat allayed by the recent U.S. troop drawdown and the ongoing peace process. Russia shares U.S. concerns about extremist threats emanating from the country and has its own concerns about illegal narcotics as well. It has played a limited role in post-2001 Afghanistan, expending few resources, but it nonetheless has influence with some Afghan political elites. In recent years, Russia has hedged its bets, forming a relationship with the Taliban that it justifies by invoking the Islamic State as a common enemy.

Russia favors a negotiated solution to the Afghan conflict and in recent years hosted talks between the Taliban and a representative group of Afghans, including some designated by the government in Kabul. This “Moscow format” was suspended once the United States entered into direct talks with the Taliban. Russia’s preferred format for international cooperation in support of the peace process is what it describes as the “Troika”: China, Russia, and the United States. It has indicated that it would ideally like to expand the Troika to include Pakistan and Iran, but it has also accepted that, for reasons not related to Afghanistan, Iran will not join this group for now. This may change if the United States drops its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran. Moscow’s policy in Afghanistan remains low risk and low cost. Both its limited resources and the Soviet legacy constrain the leverage that Russia can exert with the Taliban and Afghan elites. It is open to cooperating with the United States in a pragmatic and coordinated way to prod the parties to the Afghan negotiations to reach an acceptable agreement. The Russians claim to have informed the Taliban that Moscow will not accept an emirate as a negotiated outcome, and that should an emirate emerge, Afghanistan will return to the isolated status it had in the 1990s.

Given the weight of the India-Pakistan rivalry over regional and even global politics, it is not surprising that **India’s** interests in Afghanistan have been the mirror image of Pakistan’s. Currently, India has declared itself to be extremely skeptical of the peace process and unambiguously supportive of the Kabul government. The only major country in the region without some sort of relationship with the Taliban, India calls for a democratic Afghanistan with a constitution that protects basic rights; it favors continued U.S. support for Afghanistan, both military and civilian. Indian interlocutors stress their appreciation for the transformative achievements in Afghanistan as a result of the U.S. presence and fear the consequences of an unconsidered U.S. withdrawal for Afghan as well as Indian interests. Anxieties about a peace deal include the risk that extremist actors would redirect their efforts toward India. At the same time, ongoing instability allows groups

such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad to use Afghanistan as a training ground for attacks against Indian targets in Afghanistan.

But India also faces a number of competing priorities, not least China’s incursions along the Line of Actual Control separating India and China in the Himalayas, which reduce the policy attention available to deal with Afghanistan. India may conclude that its relative strength vis-à-vis Pakistan and its desire to act more as a global than a regional player could allow it to reduce the importance of Afghanistan in its geopolitical calculations, lessening the effect of its competition with Pakistan there. At the same time, New Delhi may consider concessions to Pakistan vis-à-vis Afghanistan as impediments to India’s global emergence and therefore unallowable. Beyond its security implications, the India-Pakistan rivalry also prevents the development of a number of economic and trade initiatives that could be highly beneficial to the entire region.

Iran’s ties to Afghanistan are both physical, in the form of a 950-kilometer border on Afghanistan’s west, and intangible, in the form of a shared history and culture. Iran sees itself as a protector of Afghanistan’s Shia population, which had been the target of Taliban persecution when the movement controlled Afghanistan in the late 1990s, and its long-standing connections with Shia leaders give it a certain prominence in Afghan domestic politics. After 2001, Iran was reported to have been helpful to the overall objectives of the United States and the international community, albeit discreetly. Following the Bush administration’s 2003 “Axis of Evil” designation, Iran’s position shifted, following a somewhat similar trajectory to that of Russia: discreet support for U.S. objectives, followed by a hedging strategy, and, finally, discreet support for U.S. enemies, including the Taliban. Unlike Russia, Iran has significant leverage in domestic Afghan politics, which it uses to support the interests of the Afghan Shia population, frustrate U.S. interests, and otherwise attempt to secure political outcomes that accord with its own agenda. Iran’s limited support for the Taliban is a calibrated, tactical policy; it does not want to see the

return of a Taliban regime in Kabul. It does, however, want to see U.S. troops leave and is following closely the progress of the peace talks.

Meanwhile, Iran maintains a great deal of influence over Afghan socioeconomic dynamics, having housed millions of refugees for decades, hundreds of thousands of whom have returned in recent years due to Iranian governmental pressure, lack of economic opportunities, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The borderlands remain a zone of population exchange and narcotics flows, as well as licit economic activity. Iran-Afghan trade has grown to an estimated \$2.8 billion annually, and Iran offers Afghanistan an outlet to global markets.²⁰ Iran's new port at Chabahar, a joint venture with India, opens up a new trade route that provides an alternative to Karachi and Pakistan's new port at Gwadar. For all of its limitations, this supply line and the prospect of greater Afghan economic dependence on Iran form a nontrivial element of Iran's Afghanistan strategy. Its success could also support the U.S. goal of lessening Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan.

To the north, the **Central Asian states** share an interest in Afghan stability and have begun to play a more active and constructive role in encouraging that development, with Uzbekistan in particular emerging as a proactive supporter of the peace process. To the south, **Saudi Arabia**

remains the most important Middle Eastern country for Afghanistan. Absent a large overt presence on the ground, Saudi Arabia mostly amplifies Pakistani priorities while using soft power to promote Sunni (and anti-Iranian) politics. It is unlikely to play a greater role as a development donor. The **United Arab Emirates**, with the commercial entrepot and second home of the Afghan elite, Dubai, could amplify its role, while **Qatar's** prominence rises as it hosts the Taliban delegation and the ongoing peace talks.

In summary, the region's countries seem to have converged on their general opposition to a long-term U.S. presence alongside a fear that a precipitous U.S. withdrawal could provoke an Afghan civil war. Otherwise, there is little in the way of regional consensus. An apparent convergence around the U.S.-driven peace process should not be mistaken, in other words, for a consolidated regional consensus on Afghanistan. That regional consensus could be built, however, in the context of the peace process and a gradual, managed U.S. military withdrawal. The task for U.S. diplomacy in the region, therefore, is to midwife an Afghan political agreement, guaranteed by the international community with U.S. backing, that sufficiently holds in abeyance the region's various and overlapping security dilemmas to allow space and confidence to transform negative competition into positive cooperation or, at least, neutral coexistence.

The Strategic Logic behind a New Approach

The Afghan Peace Negotiations provide an opportunity to align U.S. policies, practices, and messaging in Afghanistan in a way that was not possible before. Previously, the United States pursued multiple goals, all of arguable worth, but sometimes in competition with each other. The overarching objective of achieving an acceptable negotiated end to the conflict in Afghanistan provides a strategic benchmark against which policy actions can be measured. As this section demonstrates, difficult choices and policy dilemmas will remain, but the question of whether they support or undermine that objective of an acceptable negotiated outcome can help these choices to be made and these dilemmas to be resolved.

The twin February 29, 2020, agreements, one with the Afghan government issued in Kabul (reproduced in annex 7) and the other with the Taliban signed in Doha, provide the conditions for a new U.S. policy in Afghanistan. For the first time, there is a structured negotiation process that provides an opportunity to achieve the United States' long-stated aspiration of a negotiated solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. The ultimate goal of the United States is for these negotiations to result in a political agreement that creates the conditions for normal relations with a post-agreement Afghanistan, and for that post-agreement Afghanistan to be sufficiently stable and effective to ensure that its territory can never again be used as a terrorist haven.

During the ongoing negotiations, the United States and the international community should continue to support the donor-dependent Afghan state while signaling that future support will be contingent on an acceptable negotiated outcome. The purpose of this support would be threefold: first, to increase the chances of reaching that agreement; second, to maintain sufficient institutional continuity to allow a transition to a post-agreement government; and third,

to provide a basis for protecting U.S. interests should the current negotiating effort founder. This support will need to be qualitatively different from that provided in previous decades. It should be less ambitious and more conditional. It should be aligned to promote a more responsive and less corrupt state, provide basic services, support civil society, and meet humanitarian needs rather than to undertake ambitious projects that have little chance of success in a chronically insecure environment. The United States also needs to continue its support to the Afghan security sector, which continues to defend the state against the Taliban. The United States provides about 80 percent of the costs of the Afghan security forces as well as crucial logistics, training, and strategic assistance. Future support must lead toward a streamlined and more sustainable ANDSF.

The provision of U.S. support represents a key source of leverage with both parties to the talks. Financial support must be linked to progress in the negotiations and respect for some basic principles of democratic governance and human rights. The Afghan government must recognize that U.S. patience is strained, that other priorities are emerging, and that it cannot allow future assistance to be squandered through elite corruption. It also must understand that this support is not a blank check and that in the event of a peace agreement, which will require compromises, there will likely need to be some form of power sharing. The Taliban must recognize that the United States is capable of maintaining, for as long as it deems necessary, a force that is sufficiently strong to prevent the Taliban from achieving their objectives by force and that any future assistance will be calibrated to the particular political outcome of current talks.

This new approach must be founded on a robust regional diplomatic strategy to gain support for a peace agreement and reduce the burden in Afghanistan that is currently

shouldered by the United States, our European and NATO allies, and other key donors. Ending the war in Afghanistan will open up new possibilities for cooperation in a region of increasing geopolitical importance. It will end the suffering in Afghanistan and provide opportunities for peaceful development. Finally, a conclusion to the war that allows a responsible withdrawal of U.S. troops will demonstrate America's fidelity to its foreign policy objectives and the benefits of diplomatic engagement.

The new approach must also be accompanied by clearer and more strategic communications. A message that the Study Group heard repeatedly from its interlocutors, not least America's allies in arms in Afghanistan, was the damaging effect of the lack of clarity in U.S. intentions. For the successful implementation of the strategy the Study Group is proposing, the United States must not only avoid unnecessary ambiguity but also coordinate its messaging to all relevant stakeholders so as to prevent misunderstandings that encourage hedging behavior, undermine confidence, diminish trust, and fuel antagonism.

Implementing this strategy, however, involves confronting a dilemma. On the one hand, the Taliban have signaled publicly that if all international forces are not withdrawn by May 2021, as envisaged in the Doha agreement, they will resume their "jihad" against the foreign presence and will withdraw from the peace process. On the other hand, a withdrawal in May under current conditions will likely lead to a collapse of the Afghan state and a possible renewed civil war. How should the United States deal with this dilemma?

The mandate of the Study Group explicitly guided it away from making recommendations on the negotiation process itself. The overall strategy that the Group is proposing, however, depends on the U.S. negotiating team making clear to the Taliban that they have not fulfilled the conditions in the Doha agreement under which a U.S. withdrawal can take place.

Given the six-month delay in the start of the Afghan Peace Negotiations, the Biden administration can make the case

that there has been insufficient time for these negotiations to create the hoped-for conditions under which international military forces could leave Afghanistan by May, as envisaged in the Doha agreement. A withdrawal would not only leave America more vulnerable to terrorist threats; it would also have catastrophic effects in Afghanistan and the region that would not be in the interest of any of the key actors, including the Taliban.

The Biden administration will face an immediate decision on whether or not to withdraw all troops by May 2021. Regardless of whether it accepts the overall strategic approach presented by the Study Group, the new administration will have far greater flexibility if it is able to secure an extension of the May deadline in a way that does not lead to the Taliban withdrawing from the peace process. The complexity and the urgency of accomplishing this are augmented by the NATO defense ministerial meeting that will take place in mid-February 2021, which is expected to make common decisions on the future international military presence under NATO command.

The Study Group believes that the most prudent course of action is to immediately begin discussions with the Taliban on a common understanding that the outcomes sought by all parties can be achieved only if the peace process is given more time to mature. It must be emphasized to the Taliban that this need for more time does not constitute a breach of the agreement but is instead a reassertion of its foundational premise that the withdrawal be linked to specific conditions, some of which the Taliban are responsible for, including preventing terrorist threats in areas they control and helping to achieve a reduction in violence that would lead to a ceasefire. Ongoing violence, including targeted assassinations of journalists and civil society activists, are indications that these conditions have not been met. Although the Taliban have denied responsibility for the assassinations, they raise doubts about the Taliban's commitment to the peace process. The United States will find it hard to withdraw its forces if it does not have full confidence that the Taliban have met their commitments.

Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to expect the Taliban to demonstrate commitment to a negotiated settlement by helping to create the optimal conditions for that settlement. By the same token, it is unreasonable to expect only the deadline for the international withdrawal to be met if all other deadlines have been missed.

This outreach to the Taliban should be combined with a diplomatic outreach to key countries in the region, especially China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia. These countries, all of which have relations with the Taliban, share a desire to see an ultimate U.S. military withdrawal from the region but not at the cost of chaos in Afghanistan. The U.S.

position will be more compelling if it is backed by such a regional consensus. The Taliban's desire for international recognition, sanctions relief, and a share in Afghan governing structures suggest they may be receptive to such an approach. At the very least, the United States and its NATO allies and partners possess the means to continue to keep low levels of troops in Afghanistan, support the ANDSF, and prevent a Taliban takeover of Kabul for the foreseeable future. This war can end only by negotiation. All parties know that there is no military solution. If international troops withdrew without a peace agreement, the result would more likely be a prolonged civil war than a quick Taliban victory.

Recommendations

This strategic logic leads to the following specific recommendations. These recommendations constitute a suite of comprehensive actions that, if implemented in early 2021, can lead to the desired objective of achieving an acceptable negotiated end to the conflict in Afghanistan.

1. Clarify the End State

The most certain manner of ensuring U.S. interests in Afghanistan over the long term at a gradually reduced cost to the United States would be to clarify the following end state as our goal:

An independent, democratic, and sovereign Afghan state with the governance, stability, and security forces to prevent al-Qaeda, ISKP, and other terrorist groups from attacking the United States and its allies and to contain other potential challenges to U.S. and allied security and interests, including those associated with illicit narcotics and mass migration that threaten our allies and Afghanistan's neighbors.

An Afghan state that exercises sovereignty over its borders and internal affairs and governs in terms that reflect the popular will and self-determination of the Afghan citizenry while managing conflict peacefully through accountable civilian institutions.

An Afghan state that supports and protects minorities, women's rights, the democratic character of the state, and a free press but that could include Taliban figures.

An Afghan state that is progressively less reliant on international assistance and is neither a source of regional instability nor a locus of proxy regional competition.

A country where the citizens of Afghanistan, who have suffered so much during forty years of war, have the prospect of year-on-year improvements in their prosperity, security, and well-being.

2. Reinforce the Conditionality of a Final U.S. Troop Withdrawal

The United States must elevate the importance of the conditions allowing the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Both sides must understand the conditions that will enable U.S. support. The ambiguity of the Doha agreement may have been helpful in initiating dialogue, but it has proven increasingly problematic as the process has moved forward and should be removed.

- *Change the narrative from timelines to conditions, while keeping the overall objective of total withdrawal on the agenda for discussion.* As the texts of both the joint declaration issued in Kabul and the Doha agreement make plain, the withdrawal of remaining U.S. forces is conditional on the Taliban's "commitment and action on the obligations" to which they agreed. That multipart obligation involves prohibitions on Taliban members participating in and cooperating with groups that threaten U.S. and allied security. It requires the Taliban to make clear that these groups "have no place in Afghanistan" and to ensure that they cannot recruit, train, fundraise, or reside on Afghan soil. A report issued by the United Nations in May 2020 observed that relations between the Taliban and al-Qaeda remain close and that ISKP and other terrorist groups remain active in Afghanistan. The continued use of terror in rural areas and urban centers also reflects a failure on the Taliban's part to meet these obligations.

- *Underscore to the Taliban that the May withdrawal date is not a fixed deadline.* If the Taliban have not clearly met the conditions of the Doha agreement, the United States should avoid rushing to withdraw troops by May 2021, a date that was set with the expectation that negotiations would have significantly advanced and violence would have significantly reduced by that time. Even a small number of U.S. forces on the ground provide leverage to the Afghan government, which was forced to make a number of painful concessions, including the release of thousands of prisoners, before the talks even began. The principle that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” should be reintroduced into the framing and messaging of the process, in accordance with the spirit of the February 2020 declaration and agreement.
- *Make clear to the Taliban that they need to reduce violence against the Afghan people—and ideally commit to a full, verifiable ceasefire—and work to contain terrorist groups.* The United States needs to deliver a consistent message that the high levels of violence are undermining the talks, casting doubt on the Taliban’s stated desire to achieve a negotiated solution, and calling into question the Taliban’s commitment in the Doha agreement to prevent terrorism within the areas they control—thereby violating the conditions for a U.S. troop withdrawal and making the eventual issue of reconciliation more problematic. A ceasefire is one of the four interlocking parts of the Doha agreement. The Taliban have demonstrated that they are able to maintain a ceasefire. Few measures would improve the atmosphere of the negotiations and build confidence between the parties more emphatically than a ceasefire.
- *Use the prospect of lifting UN sanctions against the Taliban as leverage.* The Taliban place a high priority on having sanctions removed on the 135 individuals who are still on a UN sanctions list (known as the “1988 Sanctions Regime”) that monitors their assets and prohibits their travel. Up to now, the Security

Council has granted—on a case-by-case basis—individual Taliban members permission to travel in a limited fashion in order to take part in peace talks. The sanctions regime is, therefore, not an operational impediment to the peace process. Removing Taliban members from the list permanently or abolishing the regime entirely would represent a significant and unnecessary concession to the Taliban. Such irrevocable and rewarding actions should follow, not precede, the conclusion of an acceptable peace agreement. Because multilateral sanctions require Security Council support and are subject to permanent member vetoes, the U.S. Permanent Mission at the Security Council should keep key members informed of progress on the negotiations to maximize the effective use of this leverage. (India, it is worth noting, will be a nonpermanent member of the Security Council for two years, starting in January 2021.)

- *Seek to expand the U.S.-Taliban military-military channel to include the Afghan government.* The U.S. negotiating team should work to overcome the Taliban’s opposition to expanding the existing military-military channel between the United States and the Taliban to include Afghan government forces. Inclusion of the Afghan government would improve the deconfliction and adjudication of reported breaches of the agreement (conflicting information has contributed to the escalation of violence that began in September 2020). It could help to build confidence between the two sides and might also enable the delivery of badly needed humanitarian (including medical) assistance to parts of the country where the battle lines remain unclear. In the case of renewed and sustained attacks, whether against Afghan or U.S. and coalition forces, the U.S. and international forces retain the right to retaliate. Until the negotiations are successfully concluded, the United States should continue to carry out counterterrorism operations, in particular against ISKP and al-Qaeda.

3. Clarify the U.S. Commitment to the Current Afghan State

The United States must issue a clear statement that it will provide sufficient levels of assistance to maintain Afghanistan's core state institutions, support civil society, and ensure key services are provided to the Afghan people. The purpose of ongoing assistance is to bolster the Afghan government while it negotiates an end to the conflict. At the same time, the United States should continue to express willingness to support an acceptable post-agreement Afghan state and encourage other countries and international and regional organizations to do the same. Current assistance must be understood to be linked to adequate government efforts to make progress during the negotiations. More generally, that assistance should be based on effective measures to prioritize anticorruption efforts and ensure mutual accountability. The principles enunciated in the Global Fragility Act (see the box "Fragility, Extremism, and Prevention" on pages 16–17) provide guidance on how to better coordinate all forms of U.S. assistance and diplomacy toward a shared goal of a more inclusive, accountable, and legitimate government, based on strong evidence that these factors determine sustainable stability. These measures to promote accountability and inclusivity must be part of an acceptable negotiated peace agreement that ends the conflict in Afghanistan. The recommendations below focus on sustaining existing essential state institutions and continued support for civil society during the negotiation process, ensuring the existence of a stable institutional platform for a post-settlement state.

- *Continue to provide, alongside allies, essential support to sustain Afghanistan's core state institutions.* The United States, along with other donors, should support key ministries, in particular, Finance, Defense, Health, Education, Interior, and Rural Development. National projects providing key services to the population should be prioritized, implemented by teams selected based on merit, and subjected to rigorous project reviews and regular audits. Meanwhile,

ambitious infrastructure schemes should be delayed until post-agreement conditions allow them to be implemented without excessive security costs.

- *Condition aid in terms that hold both recipients and donors accountable.* Corruption and misuse of resources have greatly reduced the impact of the significant amount of foreign assistance, much of it provided by the United States, to Afghanistan over the past two decades. In addition to embracing the mutual accountability measures agreed to at the November 2020 Geneva conference, U.S. support should be framed in conditional and predictable terms based on a manageable number of accountability benchmarks shared by all major donors, and should contain credible and enforceable sanctions for obviously corrupt behavior. Even the simple denial of visas to officials deemed to be corrupt and their family members can be a serious deterrent. For those officials with American citizenship, corruption should be prosecuted within the full measure of U.S. law. The U.S. Treasury Department should continue its work with Afghan government financial institutions to improve their effectiveness and accountability and maintain pressure against tendencies toward corruption.
- *Emphasize and continue the tradition of U.S. support for Afghan civil society groups that promote the shared values of democracy, human and women's rights, and free media.* The United States should continue to provide around 25 percent of nonmilitary aid to the Afghan government. The remainder is provided by other donors, mostly through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. The United States should continue to encourage improved coordination and efficiency by those other donors, and actively participate in efforts to improve coordination and aid effectiveness and accountability. With regard to its own resources, the United States should focus its support on civil society efforts led by those Afghans who promote values shared by the United States and codified in international conventions that Afghanistan has joined. Not only has

this support been effective in promoting these values, which are embraced by large numbers of Afghans, but also it provides the opportunity to demonstrate the importance of accountable, inclusive, and representative governance institutions.

- *Continue needs-based humanitarian assistance.* The people of Afghanistan continue to live in deep poverty, plagued by food insecurity and battered by droughts, floods, internal displacements, and other emergencies. COVID-19 exacerbated the vulnerability of the Afghan population, raising the poverty rate from an estimated 54 percent to as high as 72 percent. The United Nations estimates that \$1.1 billion in humanitarian aid is required to provide lifesaving support to nearly 16 million people in need. Only about one-third of this amount has been made available. The United States provided nearly \$277 million in humanitarian assistance in 2020. Without this continued, basic lifesaving assistance, provided through nongovernmental organizations and international organizations, there is the risk of further waves of massive migration to the region and on to Europe, as occurred in 2015.
- *Configure the U.S. troop presence and ongoing support to the Afghan security sector to ensure that key Afghan security institutions—especially the ANA, the ANP, the Air Force, and the ASSF—are sustained.* This support should be aligned toward the overall strategic objective of supporting a peace process that leads to an acceptable agreement. An improved, more efficient Afghan security force would raise the cost for the Taliban to walk away from the negotiating table and strengthen the Afghan government's leverage. Maintaining these institutions will require continued international support. During the negotiations, this support should be focused on improving the effectiveness of these institutions and their ability to achieve greater self-reliance. This will require simplifying structures and processes where necessary, continuing to address corruption, and improving the training of military leaders.
 - Maintain at least current levels of financial and operational support for the ANDSF, especially the ANA, the Air Force, and the ASSF.
 - Retain existing authorities for U.S. forces, including authorities allowing U.S. forces to conduct air strikes against the Taliban and to accompany Afghan forces into combat when deemed necessary, until a ceasefire or the explicit terms of a reduction of violence dictate otherwise.
 - Remain involved in the selection of security ministers and ANDSF key leaders with the object of improving combat effectiveness and reducing corruption.
 - Maintain support for national military training institutions such as the National Military Academy of Afghanistan, which has helped to improve leadership within the ANDSF.
 - Maintain the close relationship with and support provided to the ASSF, which remain the best-trained units, and retain engagement in leadership selection, operational support, and tactical advising.
 - Continue to support the Afghan Air Force. This support is expensive but will enable the Afghan military to conduct operations independently of U.S. airpower.
 - Continue to implement administrative reform aimed at reducing the complexity of logistics and procurement systems to enable future ANDSF self-reliance, subordinate to a more accountable, less corrupt government.
 - Work with other donors and the Afghan Ministry of Interior to begin converting the ANP into a community policing organization rather than a paramilitary force deployed against the insurgency.
 - Begin preparations for post-agreement Afghan security institutions, which over time should be significantly reduced, but which in the short term might require the integration of former Taliban soldiers.
- *Prepare for the delivery of a peace dividend in the event that an acceptable agreement is negotiated.* A peace agreement will be sustainable only if it is supported by

the Afghan people. USAID should begin working with multilateral organizations and other donors to prepare a package of support that will visibly and quickly reach the Afghan people, while acknowledging the important role that civil society organizations can play in monitoring and, in some cases, implementing this support. The publicized possibility of post-agreement support will serve as a valuable incentive for the parties to the Afghan negotiations to work through their differences at the negotiating table. The United States should also lead efforts with other donors to sustain the core institutions of a post-settlement state, with the expectation that, in the absence of conflict, the costs of this support should rapidly diminish. While implementing this recommendation is contingent on a peace agreement being reached, planning for a peace agreement cannot wait until an agreement is reached. It is imperative that the United States continue working with Afghan and international counterparts to build on the peace dividend planning that has already been undertaken by the World Bank in particular.

4. Work Diplomatically to Promote the Success of the Negotiation Process

The United States occupies an ambiguous position as part party to the talks, part facilitator, and (on occasion) a hidden mediator. It also exerts considerable leverage on both parties. It needs to continue conducting an active diplomatic strategy centered on ensuring success at the negotiating table.

- *Work with both sides toward a meaningful and lasting reduction of violence that leads to a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire.* Along with efforts to get the Taliban to reduce their attacks (see above), a priority issue for the negotiators—and the mediator, should one be designated (see below)—is to achieve an overall reduction in violence. A number of mechanisms can be considered to make this both achievable and sustainable, including:
 - Establishment of clearly designated disengagement zones.
 - Appointment of local elders, civil society leaders, and other credible local figures to monitor nonviolence or freeze-in-place agreements.
 - Limited agreements to reduce violence, delineated as a function of type of violence (for example, agreements not to use certain weapons, methods, or targets), geography (reductions of violence in certain areas), and time (reduction of violence over certain time periods).
- *Support facilitation, mediation, and other negotiation support efforts.* The negotiations have been held so far in Doha with minimal outside facilitation. Both parties have rejected mediation, but there are some signals that greater third-party intervention might be required to overcome their mutual distrust. The Qatari government plays the role of go-between but is not seen as a mediator. A five-nation facilitation group (Germany, Indonesia, Norway, Qatar, and Uzbekistan) is supporting the negotiations through financing, logistics, convening, and other important support. Steps that should be taken to enhance support for the negotiations include:
 - Support the five-nation facilitation group. This assistance should include advocacy to move the talks from Doha, if necessary. A new location (offered by another member of the five-nation group) might offer some fresh inspiration and also alleviate the Afghan government’s concerns that the Taliban are negotiating from a favorable position while in Qatar, where their political office has been based for the past decade and where many Taliban negotiators reside.
 - Promote the appointment of a third-party mediator. A UN mediator may offer the best hope for advancing the talks past the current stalemate, given the United Nations’ impartiality, deep knowledge of the Afghan case, and expansive expertise garnered by involvement in numerous other peace processes. If the parties agree to the appointment of such a mediator, the U.S. government should use its seat on the UN Security

Council to engage key members, the UN secretary-general, and the UN Secretariat to ensure the selection of an acceptable figure.

- *Maintain an empowered, full-time U.S. negotiator to manage the Afghan peace portfolio.* The United States retains considerable influence over the Afghan negotiation process. Given that the United States wants this process to yield a result that meets U.S. national objectives as well as the aspirations of the Afghan people, the United States must monitor closely the negotiation process and use diplomacy to keep the process alive. The proposed regional diplomatic strategy will also need the efforts of an empowered negotiator. Both the Afghan government and the Taliban have made clear their interests in maintaining constructive relations with the U.S. government in the event of a peace deal. The U.S. negotiator and his or her team must manage the narrow space between supporting an Afghan-defined outcome while acknowledging that the United States' stake in that outcome is sufficient to justify efforts to shape the peace process.
- *Enlist others to support a negotiated agreement.* The United States should use regional diplomacy to support progress toward an agreement, asking regional countries to nudge their proxies toward compromise and dissuade them from “spoiler” actions. (See below for specific recommendations on the diplomatic fora that could help achieve these goals.)
- *Coordinate and consult with NATO and other allies regarding the international military presence in Afghanistan.* U.S. troops, NATO allies, and other partners have formed the international military intervention in Afghanistan since 2003. They therefore constitute part of the leverage against the Taliban and represent the common purpose and shared sacrifice of many in the international community. They must be fully involved and informed in decisions on the future of the international military presence in Afghanistan.

- *Consider the potential benefits and costs of a more direct mediating role if the current stalemate persists.* The U.S. government has a demonstrated (if imperfect) track record of employing its leverage (through troop presence, aid, and relationships) to facilitate the resolution of acute political crises in Afghanistan. More recently, it has forged an understanding through diplomacy with the Taliban. Both the Afghan government and the Taliban have made clear that their future interests are tied to their standing with the United States. The United States should consider if necessary, and in particular if third-party mediation fails, using the leverage it possesses to act as an arbiter between the two sides to shape an outcome that is acceptable to both sides and that ensures U.S. interests.
- *Begin preparations for ensuring support to a post-agreement Afghan state.* Should a peace agreement be reached, the reduction in conflict will create greater opportunities for Afghanistan to become self-reliant, but state institutions will initially be as dependent on donor financing as they currently are. Both parties to the conflict have indicated the need for future donor support. A credible plan for future support, including transitional arrangements for former fighters, will increase the chances of the parties reaching an agreement. Some donors have already conditioned future aid on the protection of democratic and human rights and other values, which may help ensure that a political agreement addresses these issues.

5. Design an Overarching Regional Diplomatic Strategy

Any successful future U.S. policy in Afghanistan will need to be undergirded by a regional diplomatic strategy that is based on a clear understanding of the complex regional dynamics. The overarching goal of this effort should be to (1) keep our allies and partners engaged, (2) encourage stakeholders to play a neutral or constructive role, (3) put pressure on both parties to the Afghan Peace Negotiations to remain engaged, and (4) lay the foundation for the long-term integration of

Afghanistan into the region (socially, economically, politically, and eventually within a security architecture).

The elaboration of such a strategy is premised on the evidence that most countries in the region are united in the need to fight ISKP and al-Qaeda and are opposed to a complete takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban and the establishment of an “emirate”—even as the result of a political agreement. Furthermore, a stable Afghanistan would benefit the entire region by increasing trade and connectivity, creating investment opportunities, reducing the export of extremism and illicit activities, and releasing capital now spent on destructive activities for constructive purposes.

In sum, an end state that would satisfy all regional players would be an Afghanistan that:

- Is at peace with itself and with others.
- Does not allow its territory to be used for attacks on other countries.
- Is not the venue for proxy warfare.
- Is not the source of illicit narcotics or refugees.
- Is economically interconnected with the region.
- Has preserved gains made over the past twenty years.

At present, structures are in place to address two aspects of the Afghan conflict: The U.S.-Taliban track addresses the counterterrorism aspect, and the Afghan Peace Negotiations address core domestic Afghan issues. There is, however, no track for addressing the regional aspects of the conflict in a structured way or for marshaling wider international support for the peace process (both for negotiations and for implementation of an agreement). The participation of regional powers will be crucial both to nudge the parties toward an agreement and to contribute to an enabling environment that will allow an agreement to be successfully implemented.

U.S. engagement with regional states in support of an Afghan peace process should have the following objectives:

- Encourage the regional states individually to take active steps to pressure one or both Afghan sides to continue with the peace process and to propose and accept compromises.
- Build consensus, to the extent possible (which may be limited), on the content of compromises the Afghan parties should be urged to accept.
- Encourage consistent rhetorical support for the process and its outcomes.
- Spur action to pressure the Afghan parties to follow through with the implementation of any agreement or agreements they reach.
- Generate financial and other material support for implementation.
- Foster a willingness to abjure harmful interference in Afghanistan in the future (in particular, by not supporting nonstate armed actors).
- Promote tolerance of the U.S. and NATO military presence in Afghanistan at least while the peace process continues or if it collapses.

The challenge for U.S. diplomacy is to maintain sustained regional support for a peace process, understanding that as the contours of a peace settlement become clearer, the stakes for each country in the region become clearer, and some countries might perceive a particular outcome as detrimental to their interests.

The history of the region suggests that countries might seek to hinder an overall agreement if they believe that rivals will benefit more from that agreement than they do. U.S. diplomacy must seek to actively prevent this

race-to-the-bottom brinksmanship from foreclosing a win-win outcome. The United States must continue to actively lead the peace process, including strongly supporting any initiative to address the regional issue. It must also calibrate its bilateral relationships with all of these important players to secure this outcome. The countries in the region recognize the indispensable role of the United States, even if only grudgingly and privately on the part of some.

In order to play this role, the United States needs to promote the creation of a diplomatic architecture in which it can articulate its messages, respond to the stated interests of other countries, and resolve misunderstandings or differences—all in support of a stable Afghanistan that is in accord with fundamental U.S. interests. The principal challenge to the United States formally convening a regional track is the state of hostility between the United States and Iran. Iran is unlikely to participate in a U.S.-led process, but it would engage in a regional format that included the United States if that format were convened under UN auspices.

Pragmatism suggests using existing diplomatic structures (organizations, fora, and even informal groupings) rather than inventing a new group, both because there is already a plethora of groups and because creating a new group would inevitably face Pakistani efforts (perhaps backed by China) to veto participation by India. Of the abundance of diplomatic groupings available, none of them is particularly efficacious, and some are clearly aligned with U.S. rivals. That said, the multiplicity of groups offers leadership opportunities to a variety of countries, which can be helpful in managing regional rivalries. For instance, the dormant International Contact Group—which includes all the regional states, as well as key donors and troop contributors to Afghanistan—should be resuscitated, perhaps rebranded as “Friends of Afghanistan,” and jointly chaired by Germany and the Afghan government to enable the broadest information sharing. For more intimate gatherings, the 6+1 forum brings the United States together with all the key regional actors: China, Russia, India, Pakistan,

and Iran (plus the Afghan government). No single forum is going to meet all needs, however, and further creativity will be required.

More specific recommendations to design and implement this regional diplomatic strategy include the following:

- *Use the full panoply of U.S. government assets to support the regional approach.* To support the regional track, the U.S. government (and, more particularly, the State Department or perhaps an interagency task force) should develop a matrix of incentives and disincentives that can be applied to all regional states, taking into account overall bilateral and broader regional foreign policy objectives. The underlying principle of the exercise should be that a successful end state in Afghanistan is sufficiently important that it may impinge on other regional and functional objectives. The matrix should cover, at a minimum, the following incentives and disincentives:
 - Bilateral assistance programs, including those administered by USAID.
 - Trade facilitation programs under the United States Trade and Development Agency and the Export-Import Bank of the United States.
 - Bilateral security assistance programs.
 - Overarching regional programs, such as the Blue Dot Network (the global evaluation and certification system for roads, ports, and bridges in the Asia-Pacific region created in 2019).
 - Other forms of diplomatic leverage, especially leverage with actors that support potential spoilers of any Afghan peace settlement.
- *Seek consensus on a set of principles and concrete steps.* An initial outcome of the regional dialogue should be for the countries of the region to agree to principles that would lead to an acceptable end state in Afghanistan and that emphasize the benefits of Afghan stability, in particular the region’s stated desire for economic interconnectivity. Pursuit of such a consensus could entail:

- Pledging to work for an Afghanistan that is at peace with itself and with others and that does not allow its territory to be used for attacks on other countries.
 - Committing to eschewing proxy warfare on Afghan territory.
 - Working together to deal with flows of illicit narcotics and potential mass migration.
 - Developing concrete programs to promote economic interconnectivity.
 - Seeking to preserve the political, economic, and social gains Afghanistan has made over the past twenty years.
- *Build on the initial consensus with concrete actions.* As the regional states become invested in the process, they should be encouraged to support the outcomes in several ways:
 - “Witnessing” (by signature) agreements produced by the Afghan Peace Negotiations.
 - Signing one or more separate agreements declaring and specifying their support for peace process outcomes.
- In the cases of Pakistan and, potentially, Iran, Afghanistan’s most influential neighbors in terms of its domestic rivalries, signing bilateral agreements with Afghanistan on cooperation and noninterference as part of a final outcome of the peace process.
 - Providing material support for implementation. For instance, Pakistan should support any provisions to demobilize and reintegrate into civilian life the Taliban fighters based and resident in Pakistan.
- *Limit expectations on regional counterterrorism cooperation.* Although all countries in the region feel threatened by terrorism and conduct counterterrorism operations, cooperation in this sphere is inhibited by mistrust and mutual recriminations. Meaningful consultations on these issues will need to be conducted mostly through bilateral channels, with some additional consultations perhaps taking place within small diplomatic groupings.

Alternative Pathways

The United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, issued in December 2020 by the State Department in line with the Global Fragility Act, states that “if changing dynamics require alterations in approach, if programs are not showing results, or if partners are not living up to their commitments, the United States will change course.”²¹ It is entirely possible that dynamics in Afghanistan will change in ways that require an alternative approach. As this report has made clear, the current peace process is fragile. The Taliban have threatened to withdraw from the ongoing talks if all international troops are not withdrawn from Afghanistan by May 2021. The Afghanistan Study Group therefore considered several alternative approaches—or course changes—that might be considered should the current political process fail. For a number of reasons, the Group judged them to be inadvisable at this point. None of them would allow the United States to meet its interests as determined by the Group. Should a future administration alter their definition of national interests in Afghanistan, these options might be reconsidered.

Below is a summary description of each pathway. Annex 5 includes a more detailed presentation of these alternatives. Figure 4 (on page 57) shows how one pathway may give way to another.

A Recommitment to the State

Preserve, Improve, and Recommit to the Existing Constitutional Order

If the talks break down, or if the new administration decides that there is no way that core interests can be met through the current negotiation process, the United States has the option of recommitting to the existing constitutional order, continuing to support the Afghan state, continuing to disrupt terrorist networks, and continuing to maintain military pressure on the Taliban in an effort to create improved conditions for either an eventual withdrawal (through

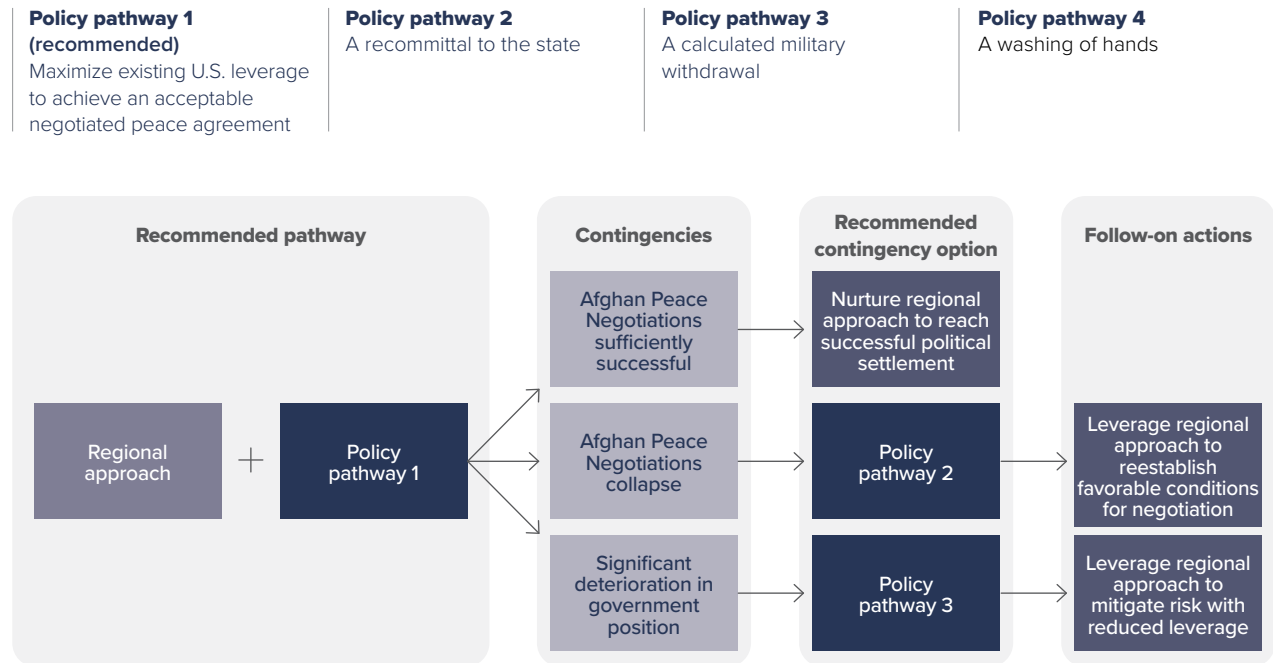
a stronger Afghan state) or a new negotiation with the Taliban from a more advantageous position.

Overall costs to the international community of sustaining the Afghan state could be reduced over the next five years from \$11 billion to \$8.6 billion per year. This would include a drop in the security bill, of which the United States covers 95 percent, from \$4.8 billion to \$3.6 billion per year. Nonmilitary support, of which the United States pays approximately 20 percent, could drop from \$3.8 billion to \$3 billion.²² These savings would result from increased revenues raised by the Afghan government, reduced off-budget spending, reduced large-scale infrastructure projects, more carefully targeted development assistance, and, perhaps, reduced corruption within the Afghan state. This approach would nonetheless still require a U.S. military presence at least at current levels, which could cost, at a conservative estimate, around \$20 billion per year. This approach would also not rule out a possible increase in troop levels if this were deemed necessary to prevent significant Taliban gains. In addition, at the time of publication of this report, it is clear that COVID-19-related effects have significantly worsened the fiscal and economic picture, which could require the above estimates to be revised.

While the Study Group is recommending that the international community needs to continue supporting the Afghan state during the negotiations, or if negotiations are suspended, it does not recommend a return to the status quo ante of indefinite and high levels of assistance combined with waiting for a peace process to emerge from the initiatives of the two parties. The indefiniteness of this approach provides little incentive for Afghan leaders to make serious overtures to the Taliban for peace, and the Taliban will continue to refuse to recognize the Afghan government. Furthermore, in the likely event that the trends of the last few years continue, the Afghan government may lose further ground to the Taliban,

FIGURE 4.

Alternative Policy Pathways



continue to fracture, and ultimately face the prospect of a negotiation from an even weaker position. There is little in Afghanistan’s recent history to suggest that a stronger state will emerge under current conditions of insurgency, even with increased international support.

A Calculated Military Withdrawal Leave while Prioritizing U.S. Interests and Mitigating Risks with Nonmilitary Means

Working from the hypothesis that it is unlikely that the Afghan state will strengthen, even with a recommitment of U.S. support, and assuming for these purposes that the peace process is unlikely to yield an acceptable result, the Study Group considered a policy pathway of cutting U.S. losses and withdrawing its military forces from Afghanistan while still attempting to influence the resulting situation. Under this scenario, the United States would continue to maintain an embassy presence as long as security conditions permit, recognizing that at some point it would likely have to close its embassy. It would work with actors inside and outside Afghanistan to mitigate the risk of a terrorist attack against the United States and to

achieve additional but more limited interests where possible. It would continue to fund some development and humanitarian efforts and exert diplomatic leverage to create and sustain a regional framework for Afghan stability and to encourage additional donors to support the state.

The guiding logic of this pathway would be to withdraw troops by May 2021 according to the Doha agreement’s timetable and to prepare for, or at least be willing to accept, an eventual Taliban ascendance. The expectation that the Taliban would return to power is based on the Taliban’s relative unity, their backing by Pakistan, and the fact that the already problematic centrifugal forces within elite government factions will be intensified if there is reduced funding for the Afghan state and, more importantly, a rapid and total U.S. withdrawal. It is difficult to predict whether Taliban ascendancy would be rapid as a consequence of a government implosion; or would be resisted and prolonged if the government—facing an existential crisis—found the resources to unite against a common enemy; or Afghanistan would become bogged down in a complicated, multiparty, and regionalized civil war.

The United States would seek to use available positive and negative incentives on all actors to attempt to influence a political settlement that aligns as much as possible with U.S. interests. It would consider support for a third-party mediator if an acceptable figure can be identified. Under most scenarios, the United States would have to close its embassy, making it more difficult over time to influence events on the ground. As a general line of effort, the United States would use its relations with armed Afghan actors on the ground to prevent for as long as possible a Taliban military takeover of Kabul and the north; continue, for as long as possible, to provide (reduced) assistance to whatever Afghan state structure emerges, including continuing to provide ASSF and Afghan Air Force units with such support as can be furnished without a U.S. military presence; encourage allies and international financial institutions to continue providing assistance; and engage with the Taliban on mutual counterterrorism threats (in particular, ISKP).

The drawbacks of selecting this option are obvious: the United States is highly unlikely to meet even a minimal definition of its interests, and Afghanistan is highly likely to fall into chaos. The short timeline to implement this option, including coordinating a retrograde (i.e., a methodical return of troops and their equipment in every form) with NATO and other allies that would also likely want to leave, reduces its chances for success. The human suffering that would be caused should a complex civil war erupt would be difficult to calculate and would understandably be blamed on the United States. Yet, although this option is an inadvisable *choice*, it is possible that circumstances could compel the United States to decide to leave Afghanistan in such a calculated manner.

A Washing of Hands

Prompt Military Withdrawal and Diplomatic Disengagement

The repeated messaging from the White House during 2020 indicating a total troop withdrawal by the end of the year prompted the Study Group to consider the implications of

a rapid and complete troop withdrawal that is disconnected from the peace process (whether progress is made or not) and indifferent to the outcome on the ground or to the effect on the decision-making of allies. The accompanying diplomatic effort would essentially be to signal to regional powers that it is their responsibility to ensure stability in Afghanistan. Most aid, except for humanitarian efforts through multilateral channels, would be discontinued. The embassy would likely close and the United States would not wield significant diplomatic muscle to forge a regional framework for Afghan political stability or to nudge Afghan conflict parties toward an agreement.

This would be a highly risky, and even dangerous, approach that could foment more conflict than it resolves and create the sort of threats that imperil U.S. security. It would most likely result in a new chapter of civil war, not unlike the one that erupted in the 1990s and led to 9/11. Some of the humanitarian consequences of a civil war can be anticipated from a study of the civil war in the 1990s, but Afghanistan has changed since then in ways that would likely make a civil war an even greater catastrophe for Afghanistan and the region. The much more urbanized population would face massive suffering as cities turned into battle zones. Infrastructure steadily built over the past two decades would be quickly destroyed. Afghanistan remains a heavily armed country, and no part of it would likely be spared from violence. Afghanistan's political institutions, as fragile and imperfect as they are, would be rebuilt only with great difficulty as another round of fighting created new grievances and inevitably radicalized political thinking. This set of likely outcomes would allow the reemergence and amplification of threats that imperil U.S. security.

Given that any withdrawal scenario will remove on-the-ground counterterrorism capabilities from Afghanistan and expose the United States to greater risk of attacks from terrorist organizations based there, it would be prudent to begin contingency planning for such an outcome, in case it is forced on U.S. policymakers by events.

Conclusion

With the launch of peace negotiations, the conflict in Afghanistan has entered a new phase. This new phase requires a new understanding. Afghans must take primary responsibility for their own future. The United States must orient its efforts and resources toward shaping the conditions around the peace process—resetting and reframing it in ways recommended in this report—in order to give it the best chance to succeed. It should be reiterated, however, that our troop presence is a key point of leverage. U.S. troops play

a vital role in ensuring the continuity of state structures, and thus their presence is essential to brokering a lasting peace. Success, it should be acknowledged, is not guaranteed. But there is a clear path forward. There is now a real possibility of the conflict winding down and Afghanistan becoming a country that needs far less help from the United States. If this happens, the United States can bring its troops home and both countries can move forward as sovereign nations with friendly relations based on shared values and sacrifices.

Annexes

ANNEX 1

Afghanistan Study Group Enabling Legislation

FY 2020 Further Consolidated Appropriations Act

H.R. 1865, P.L. 116-94

On December 20, 2019, Public Law 116-94, providing appropriations for fiscal year 2020, created the “Afghanistan Peace Process Study Group.” As noted in the legislation, the United States Institute of Peace was designated to support the operations and activities of the Group.

The Senate Appropriations Committee report language states that the Afghanistan Peace Process Study Group:

shall consider the implications of a peace settlement, or the failure to reach a settlement, on U.S. policy, resources, and commitments in Afghanistan. Not later than 45 days after enactment of the act, the USIP President shall consult with the Committee on the composition and terms of reference for the Study Group.

Members of the Afghanistan Study Group and Senior Advisers

Co-chairs

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Former U.S. Senator (R-NH)

General Joseph F. Dunford Jr. (Ret.)

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Ms. Susan Gordon

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ANNEX 3

Consultations

The Afghanistan Study Group consulted extensively with key stakeholders as a part of its deliberative process and is deeply grateful to the many individuals who made time to share their valued insights. This annex includes a list of many of those individuals. Some participants have asked to remain anonymous, and we have respected their wishes. Additionally, we want to acknowledge that many briefings and discussions took place outside of the formal consultations, particularly with Congressional and U.S. government staff, who fed essential input into this process.

Each category is organized alphabetically by last name.

U.S. Government Officials

Ms. Lisa Curtis, Former Deputy Assistant to the President and Senior Director for South and Central Asia, National Security Council, The White House

Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, U.S. Department of State

General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., Commander, United States Central Command

Ambassador Mary Catherine “Molly” Phee, Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, U.S. Department of State

Afghan Stakeholders: Government Officials, Political Leaders, Civil Society Representatives, and Experts (Current and Former)

H.E. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Chairman, High Council for National Reconciliation, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Ms. Shaharзад Akbar, Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission

General Ayoub Ansari, Member of Negotiating Team, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; Former Deputy Police Chief of Helmand Province

H.E. Mohammad Haneef Atmar, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

H.E. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, President, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Mr. Masood Karokhail, Director and Co-founder, The Liaison Office

Ms. Marjan Mateen, Former Deputy Minister of Education for Curriculum Development and Teacher Training, Ministry of Education

Mr. Mohammad Mohaqiq, Leader, People’s Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan People

Mr. Hamdullah Mohib, National Security Advisor, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Mr. Mohammad Nateqi, Member of Negotiating Team, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; Senior Vice Chair, Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan People; and Senior Advisor to the High Council for National Reconciliation

Ms. Nargis Nehan, Founder and Executive Director, Equality for Peace and Democracy

Dr. Orzala Nemat, Director, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Mr. Atta Mohammad Noor, Chief Executive, Jamiat-e-Islami Party of Afghanistan

Mr. Mohammad Younus Qanooni, Former First Vice President, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Mr. Aziz Rafiee, Executive Director, Afghanistan Civil Society Forum-organization

Mr. Abdul Salam Rahimi, Member of Negotiating Team, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; State Minister for Peace Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Ambassador Roya Rahmani, Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the United States

Ms. Mariam Safi, Founding Director, Organization for Policy Research and Development Studies

Mr. Barry Salaam, Independent Analyst

H.E. Amrullah Saleh, First Vice President, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Dr. Sima Samar, Former Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and Human Rights Defenders

Ms. Habiba Sarabi, Member of Negotiating Team; Former Minister of Women's Affairs; Former Minister of Education and Culture; and Former Deputy Chair, High Peace Council, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Ms. Naheed Sarabi, Former Deputy Minister for Policy, Ministry of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Mr. Masoom Stanekzai, Head of Peace and Reconciliation Effort, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Dr. Hazrat Omar Zakhilwal, Former Minister of Finance and Former Ambassador to Pakistan, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

International and Regional Organization Officials

Mr. Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Mr. Tobias Haque, Lead Economist and Program Leader, Afghanistan, World Bank

Mr. Henry Kerali, Country Director for Afghanistan, World Bank

Ms. Deborah Lyons, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Dr. John Manza, Assistant Secretary General for Operations, NATO

Foreign Government Officials

Mr. Gareth Bayley, Prime Minister's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan; and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office Director for South Asia and Afghanistan, United Kingdom

Mr. Per Albert Ilsaas, Special Representative for Afghanistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway

Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs of the Government of India

Ambassador Zamir Kabulov, Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for Afghanistan; Director, Second Department of Asia, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Ambassador Roland Kobia, EU Special Envoy for Afghanistan

Ambassador Markus Potzel, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Germany

Ambassador Irgashev Ismatulla Raimovich, Special Representative of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Afghanistan

Ambassador Mohammed Sadiq, Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Pakistan

Dr. Moeed Yusuf, Strategic Advisor to Prime Minister Khan, Pakistan

Individuals and Former Officials

Mr. Andrew Bacevich, President, The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

Professor Sultan Barakat, Professor, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies; Founding Director, Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies; and Honorary Professor, University of York

Ambassador John R. Bass, Former Ambassador to Afghanistan, U.S. Department of State

Ambassador William J. Burns, President, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Dr. Patricia Gossman, Associate Director, Asia Division, Human Rights Watch

Mr. Jeffrey Grieco, President and CEO, Afghan-American Chamber of Commerce

Mr. Toby Lanzer, Former Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Ambassador Jawed Ludin, Co-founder and President, Heart of Asia Society

Dr. Charlotte Maxwell-Jones, Senior Research Fellow, Heart of Asia Society

Ambassador Janan Mosazai, Co-founder and Vice President, Heart of Asia Society

General John Nicholson, U.S. Army (Ret.), Former U.S. Forces Afghanistan and NATO-led Resolute Support Commander

Ambassador Melanne Verwee, Executive Director, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security

Ambassador Alice G. Wells, Former Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Bureau, U.S. Department of State

Methodology

In February 2020, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) established a Secretariat team for the Afghanistan Study Group and began consultations on identifying potential members of the Group and a team of senior advisers, in accordance with the mandate it received from Congress in December 2019. In late April, the names were released. The co-chairs of the Afghanistan Study Group were the former senator from New Hampshire, Kelly Ayotte; former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford; and the outgoing president of USIP, Nancy Lindborg.

The fifteen-member Study Group convened as a plenary for the first time on April 24, 2020. At that meeting, the members agreed upon a methodology for producing a forward-looking report to Congress that would be delivered in early 2021. The methodology would be based on identifying core U.S. national interests in Afghanistan and a set of working assumptions that defined the situation in Afghanistan and the region. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all meetings and consultations were held virtually.

The Study Group immediately recognized that it would have to accommodate the uncertainty of the Afghan context. When it convened for its first meeting in April, almost two months had passed since the signing of the Doha agreement and the joint declaration; the negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban called for in those agreements had not begun and did not appear imminent. They were held up in part by the ongoing dispute over the 2019 presidential elections in Afghanistan, which prevented a negotiating team from being formed.

The Group considered several assumptions that had guided U.S. policy in Afghanistan up to that point that would need to be revalidated. It also provisionally agreed upon a definition of U.S. interests in Afghanistan.

The senior advisers were divided into teams and tasked with developing policy recommendations for the U.S. government under several different plausible scenarios. In addition, the Study Group designated a “Red Team” to explore a scenario of managed but prompt U.S. disengagement guided by a minimalistic reading of U.S. interests in Afghanistan. The Red Team exercise challenged the Study Group’s assumptions, suggested a narrower definition of U.S. interests in Afghanistan, and looked at the implications of a withdrawal of troops by May 2021 (see the box “The Red Team’s Policy Recommendation” on pages 67–68). Ultimately, the Study Group rejected this approach, assessing that it generated unacceptable risks to U.S. security.

The second plenary meeting was held May 21. The Group reviewed and refined the interests and foundational assumptions and heard three briefings from senior advisers on the nature of the threat from Afghanistan, the objectives of the Taliban, and regional stakeholders and dynamics. There was in-depth discussion about whether groups that could potentially threaten the U.S. homeland could reconstitute if the United States withdrew and the current pressure on them was lifted, and whether sufficient pressure could be maintained on these groups to prevent them from reconstituting if U.S. counterterrorism capabilities were withdrawn from Afghanistan.

The Study Group considered the senior advisers’ elaboration of these scenarios in its third plenary meeting on June 11. At this point, the electoral dispute in Kabul had been resolved and a negotiation team had been named by Kabul, but intra-Afghan negotiations had still not begun. Based on this new situation, the Study Group decided to refine its approach in order to define more specific policy recommendations. The senior advisers were asked to consider four general policy directions, or “policy pathways,” that the next administration might follow, and define specific recommendations across lines of effort to best achieve U.S.

interests. These policy pathways, were (1) continue the current administration's policy of seeking a political settlement within the framework of the February U.S.-Taliban agreement; (2) renew support to the current constitutional order, even if that risked breaking the existing agreement; (3) continue to disengage from Afghanistan with the understanding that disengagement would likely allow an ascendant Taliban to gradually take over the country, but seek ways of shaping that ascendance; and (4) withdraw all troops and most military assistance and encourage the regional powers to ensure stability in Afghanistan.

The actions that would have to be taken along each pathway, together with an assessment of their risks, costs, likelihood of success, and expected end state, were presented to the Study Group at the fourth plenary, which encompassed two meetings, one on July 22 and the other on July 30. The Study Group also decided that whatever set of policy recommendations was proposed, it would need to be undergirded by a more robust regional diplomatic strategy. Given that almost any likely scenario would involve some reduction in the levels of U.S. support, in particular in troop numbers, a greater effort would need to be made by neighbors and near neighbors to ensure stability.

No plenary meeting was held in August. During that month, the members and senior advisers collectively undertook a series of consultations with a wide number of stakeholders,

some American, some Afghan, and some from other countries (see annex 3 for a list of consultations). In light of the fact that not all members were able to participate in all the consultations, a common set of questions was formulated to allow for the conversations to be compared with one another. At least one co-chair attended each consultation. The co-chairs also sought official briefings from the U.S. government on key issues, such as the nature of the terrorist threat from Afghanistan. These anchored some of the key foundational assumptions eventually adopted by the group in making its recommendations and complemented foundational papers on thematic issues prepared by some senior advisers at the request of the co-chairs.

The fifth plenary meeting was held on September 15. The Study Group received a briefing from a senior Department of Defense official. The Group then reviewed the latest version of the foundational assumptions, incorporating changes from the previous meeting, and discussed and validated the policy pathways. Regarding the latter, the co-chairs had set the objective of obtaining consensus from the Group that the four policy pathways represented the most likely and comprehensive range of options available to a new administration in January 2021. After making some substantive changes, the Group agreed to the four policy pathways as the appropriate framework for its final recommendations. The group also reached a consensus on several additional foundational points.

The Red Team's Policy Recommendation

The Afghanistan Study Group commissioned a "Red Team" of senior advisers to examine basic assumptions and consider alternative policy recommendations.

The Red Team takes a highly prioritized view of U.S. interests, focusing on minimizing the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan while accepting as a humanitarian obligation the need to avoid prolonging an already forty-year-old Afghan civil war. The Red Team diverges from the Study Group's assumption that the need to preserve U.S. credibility dictates upholding the status quo in Afghanistan. To the contrary, the Red Team believes that by reinforcing an unsuccessful counterinsurgency in landlocked Asia—despite having to contend with a new set of global and regional challenges—the United States allows its credibility and some of its capacity to gradually bleed away.

THE RED TEAM'S POLICY RECOMMENDATION [CONTINUED]

The Red Team accepts that the Taliban are ascendant in Afghanistan and that the United States is incapable of reversing this dynamic at any acceptable level of resourcing and violence. The Taliban movement may not yet be capable of securing a decisive military victory, but it is held back from dramatically intensifying the civil war only by U.S. force, principally airpower and Special Operations Forces. Although the U.S. military presence slows the rate of Taliban ascendance, it cannot reverse it. Prolonging the U.S. military deployment much beyond May 2021 will not significantly moderate the Taliban's demands, but it will risk intensifying the fighting and precipitating the end of negotiations.

The Red Team also assesses that perpetuation of the status quo artificially heightens the Afghan government's expectations and positions in negotiations. Therefore, the Red Team recommends adopting a more neutral stance toward all Afghan parties (principally, the government and the Taliban) to facilitate a political settlement that recognizes Taliban ascendance while using remaining U.S. leverage to press the Taliban to maintain counterterrorism commitments and moderate their demands.

A principal point of leverage is that regional countries desire an Afghanistan that is no longer a cauldron of insecurity. Most are willing to accept Taliban ascendance, but do not want a recrudescence of the "Islamic Emirate." Most also desire a U.S. military withdrawal provided it is not conducted in such haste as to generate chaos. Capitalizing on this war-weariness, the United States can mount a diplomatic strategy to influence the Taliban to seek inclusive accommodation of their political rivals.

Another, more limited point of leverage is the Taliban's desire for international assistance and their apparently genuine interest in international legitimacy. Although the movement is unlikely to compromise on core positions, donors should condition any future aid on respect for human rights.

The Red Team believes that a policy that accepts and works with Taliban ascendance gives the Taliban the greatest incentive to control al-Qaeda and honor their Doha commitments. The Red Team expects the Taliban to continue to fight ISKP, which they regard as a rival. The Red Team does not believe that an ascendant Taliban would accept a residual U.S. military presence. If the United States wants to continue to have a counterterrorism platform in the region, it will need to find one elsewhere, as well as maintaining an over-the-horizon ability to strike targets in Afghanistan.

The Red Team assesses that the United States will have greater influence on the Afghan peace process and the policies of the new Afghan government if it works sooner rather than later to moderate Taliban behavior, principally by making clear that if post-conflict Afghanistan is to have any degree of international acceptance, it must accommodate its political opponents; show some respect for human rights, including the rights of women; and uphold its counterterrorism commitments. This approach would allow the United States to address its security concerns at a greatly reduced cost. Moreover, this rebalancing would allow the United States to focus its military resources on more pressing international challenges.

The sixth plenary was held October 15. The previous week, on October 7, President Trump had tweeted that the remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan would be withdrawn before Christmas. While the tweet did not constitute an order and was subsequently modulated or contradicted by senior administration officials, the co-chairs tasked the Afghanistan Study Group Secretariat with formulating a fifth policy pathway, one in which the next administration would take office with no American troops in Afghanistan. The Group discussed all five pathways and how they were interrelated, agreeing that it would seek to provide a report that presented an overarching strategy rather than merely a set of recommendations. The Group also reached consensus that the strategy would be based on the policy pathway that envisages the United States seeking a political settlement within the framework of the Doha agreement, assuming that, by the time the report was finalized, there was still an ongoing peace process.

The seventh plenary was held on November 16. The U.S. presidential election had been held on November 3, and by the time of the plenary, Joe Biden had a clear lead in the electoral college. The Study Group had met with President Ghani two days earlier. In that meeting, Ghani made clear that there was a hunger for peace in Afghanistan and the government had a negotiating strategy. He stressed, however, that as long as the Taliban believed that U.S. troops would leave without conditions, the Taliban would remain inflexible at the negotiating table. The previous week, personnel changes at the Department of Defense, including the resignation of Secretary Esper, suggested that preparations were being made to immediately withdraw all troops from Afghanistan, which would not only undermine the negotiation process but also leave the next U.S. administration with few options. At the plenary, the Group received a comprehensive briefing from a member of the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation's team on the status of the negotiations.

The co-chairs proposed that the Group consider making public its concerns that a withdrawal of U.S. troops by December would remove all leverage against the Taliban and significantly reduce the possibilities of a negotiated

solution to the conflict. The Group agreed that the co-chairs should publish an op-ed making that argument and that the Group as a whole should release its preliminary findings as soon as possible in the form of a draft interim assessment. The Group also agreed that its interim and final reports should focus less on laying out the alternative pathways that had been discussed and more on presenting a stand-alone series of recommendations that centered on creating conditions under which the negotiation between the Afghan government and the Taliban could result in an end state that secured core U.S. interests. The Group needed to reframe the central issue so that it was not a matter of whether the United States should or should not withdraw its troops, but of how the United States should use its leverage, which includes the troop presence, to increase the chances of an acceptable political settlement.

On December 4, the Study Group provided its draft Preliminary Findings document to key offices, including at the State Department, the Department of Defense, the National Security Council, Congress, and President-Elect Biden's national security transition team.

On December 17, the Study Group held its eighth and final plenary meeting. The main purpose was to review the initial draft of this report and address several remaining issues where consensus was lacking. The co-chairs also briefed the members on the final stakeholder consultations that had taken place. The discussion raised a number of issues that needed to be added to or amended in the final report, but there was a consensus that the draft reflected the deliberations and conclusions of the group.

The Secretariat spent the end of December and early January finalizing the draft, ensuring final sign-off by all members, and worked with USIP's publications team to put it into its final formatted form. Prior to its publication, the Group provided timely analysis to policymakers and their teams in both the legislative and executive branches. The Secretariat also elaborated a roll-out plan with USIP's public affairs and communications and congressional relations teams.

Policy Pathways

This annex presents the Afghanistan Study Group’s recommended pathway (summarized above on pages 47–55 and here referred to as “Policy Pathway 1”) and the three alternative pathways (presented above on pages 56–58).

Policy Pathway 1. Maximize Existing U.S. Leverage to Achieve an Acceptable Negotiated Peace Agreement

The administration that takes office in January 2021 decides to continue the current policy of seeking a political arrangement between the Afghan government and the Taliban according to the terms of the Doha agreement with the Taliban and the joint declaration with the Afghan government. It makes clear that, according to its understanding of these agreements, U.S. troop withdrawals will be tied to specific progress in the Afghan Peace Negotiations (i.e., troop withdrawals will be “conditions-based”) as well as to the Taliban’s fulfillment of their counterterrorism commitments. It adopts a stance in the negotiation process that seeks to ensure the preservation of gains made with respect to rights and values in any new political arrangement. It uses diplomatic leverage to create a regional and international framework to support the negotiation process and the sustainability of a peace agreement, if one is reached.

End State

An independent, democratic, and sovereign Afghan state with the governance, stability, and security forces to prevent al-Qaeda, ISKP, and other terrorist groups from attacking the United States and its allies and to contain other potential challenges to U.S. and allied security and interests, including those associated with illicit narcotics and mass migration. An Afghan state that exercises sovereignty over its borders and internal affairs and governs in terms that reflect the popular will and self-determination of the Afghan citizenry while managing conflict peacefully through accountable civilian institutions. An Afghan state that supports and protects minorities, women’s rights, the democratic character of the state, and a free press but

that could include Taliban figures. An Afghan state that is progressively less reliant on international assistance and is neither a source of regional instability nor a locus of proxy regional competition. A country where the citizens of Afghanistan, who have suffered so much during forty years of war, have the prospect of year-on-year improvements in their prosperity, security, and well-being.

Main Actions

- Maintain support for core existing Afghan state institutions in order to prevent state collapse. This would include providing ongoing support for the ANDSF and key ministries, as well as funding for basic services.
- Continue to support governance reforms and humanitarian and development projects that could boost the legitimacy of the state. Consider increases or adjustments in the mix of financial support as required to support the state and promote a successful negotiation outcome.
- Hold the Taliban strictly accountable to their counterterrorism and other commitments in the Doha agreement.
- Work via the Afghan Peace Negotiations to sustain a sufficient U.S. counterterrorism presence following the reaching of an agreement.
- Support the Afghan government during the negotiations in its defense of common values, while providing incentives and guarantees that will create the conditions for the government to make needed compromises.
- Pressure Pakistan and other regional actors that have influence in Afghanistan to support the process and encourage the Taliban to make compromises.

- Use diplomatic tools to encourage neighbors, regional powers, and other stakeholders to support the process and avoid spoiling behavior. Develop a regional diplomatic strategy to achieve these goals.
- Exercise strategic patience while the negotiations are taking place. Develop clear, consistent, and strategic messaging to encourage all stakeholders to reach an agreement that best meets U.S. interests.

Benefits

- The parties to the Afghan conflict achieve a workable political consensus that allows stability in terms that protect U.S. interests and affirm U.S. values.
- The United States is able to reduce its financial commitments to the Afghan state and withdraw most of its troops, reducing the overall cost of Afghanistan to the United States.
- Possibilities arise for Afghanistan to encourage investment and move toward greater long-term self-sufficiency.
- The prospect of Afghanistan's further regional integration improves.
- The United States can maintain a close relationship with Afghanistan as a friendly Islamic nation.

Risks

- The two sides are unable to reach an acceptable agreement and the Taliban renew the conflict. A return to conflict in the wreckage of the political process would leave the United States in a difficult position: wanting to withdraw; yoked to a disunited government; and facing, with far fewer resources on the ground than before, an emboldened insurgency.
- An agreement is reached on political issues, but the Taliban demonstrate that they are unwilling or unable

to meet their counterterrorism commitments. Should this occur after the United States effects its withdrawal, there is a significant risk of terrorist groups reconstituting and possibly threatening the American homeland.

- A peace agreement is reached, leading the United States to withdraw its remaining troops in accordance with its commitments, but then the agreement collapses and Afghanistan returns to a state of civil war, thereby presenting not only the risk of terrorist groups reconstituting but also the risk of regional instability.
- Human capital flees in the face of failure to reach an agreement or of the collapse of an agreement.
- Refugee and migration flows increase in the face of failure to reach an agreement or of the collapse of an agreement.

Resources

- Funding would need to be at near-to-current levels, but reoriented to increase state effectiveness and aid efficiency. Other donors funding the civilian part of government would need to be encouraged to extend their commitments to Afghanistan.
- The current level of troops would need to be maintained in the short to medium term. The prospect of a full withdrawal would be subject to an acceptable peace agreement being reached and Afghanistan demonstrating effective counterterrorism capacity.
- Additional or a different mix of resources might be required to provide a peace dividend or support the implementation of an agreement, including funding for a post-agreement government.

Probability of Success

- Medium probability of achieving an acceptable peace process in the medium term.

- Medium-to-high probability that the negotiation process will continue for some time in a manner that allows the United States to assess its likelihood of success and adjust its policy accordingly. Under these conditions, some variation of policy pathways 2 and 3 (see below) would still be available.
- Medium probability that the Taliban will break negotiations if U.S. troops are not withdrawn on or around May 2021.

Policy Pathway 2. A Recommitment to the State: Preserve, Improve, and Recommit to the Existing Constitutional Order

The administration that takes office in January 2021 decides that it cannot meet its core interests through the current political process based on the Doha agreement (or it concludes that prospects for a successful negotiation have been greatly reduced). It decides to recommit to supporting the current Afghan state and elected government as a means of securing U.S. interests and creating improved conditions for an eventual withdrawal of troops (through a stronger Afghan state) and/or a new negotiation with the Taliban from a position of greater strength. The administration continues to use diplomatic leverage to build regional support for Afghan stability and an extended U.S. presence.

End State

An independent, democratic, and sovereign Afghan state with the governance, stability, and security forces to prevent al-Qaeda, ISKP, and other terrorist groups from attacking the United States and its allies and to contain other potential challenges to U.S. and allied security and interests, including those associated with illicit narcotics and mass migration. An Afghan state that exercises sovereignty over its borders and internal affairs and governs in terms that reflect the popular will and self-determination of the Afghan citizenry while managing conflict peacefully through accountable civilian institutions. An Afghan state that supports and protects the rights of minorities, women’s rights, the democratic character of the state, and a free press. An

Afghan state that can end the conflict through a negotiation that incorporates the Taliban into government structures on terms favorable to the government. An Afghan state that is progressively less reliant on international assistance and is neither a source of regional instability nor a locus of proxy regional competition. A country where the citizens of Afghanistan, who have suffered so much during forty years of war, have the prospect of year-on-year improvements in their prosperity, security, and well-being.

Main Actions

- Withdraw from the current agreement with the Taliban and reassert support for the constitutional government in Afghanistan.
- Signal a willingness to reenter into negotiations with the Taliban but specify end-state conditions that ensure the maintenance of specific gains and the ability to implement robust counterterrorism measures, including with an ongoing U.S. security presence.
- Halt the troop withdrawal and make contingency plans for a possible increase in troop numbers.
- Commit to, and urge other donors to commit to, a multiyear support package for the government. Continue to support governance reforms and humanitarian and development projects that might boost the legitimacy of the state. Consider increases or adjustments in the mix of financial support to best achieve the desired end state.
- Implement a regional diplomacy strategy, based on U.S. resolve, that seeks support for the current government, a reduction of support to the Taliban, and support for a longer U.S. presence in the region.
- Support and fund preparations for parliamentary (2023) and presidential (2024) elections to maintain the integrity of the constitutional order.

Benefits

- A stable, modernizing Afghanistan with strong, inclusive institutions that is closely allied to the United States and a committed partner in the effort to ensure that the United States and its interests are never threatened by groups operating within the borders of Afghanistan.
- An Afghanistan that is increasingly able to finance its own budget.
- A strong U.S. geopolitical position in the region.
- A clear demonstration of U.S. resolve and capacity to meet its stated international goals.
- A strengthening of the U.S.-led alliance system, especially NATO.
- Eventual opportunities for investment in Afghanistan by U.S. companies, in particular in rare earth and mineral resources.

Risks

- Failure to achieve goals would undermine prestige, waste resources, and leave the United States still mired in Afghanistan without a clear exit strategy and with a weakened Afghan government compelling it to stay.
- A debilitated Afghan government would be forced to negotiate with the Taliban from an even weaker position.
- Abrogation of the Doha agreement would likely lead to a Taliban backlash, supported by Pakistan, increasing violence and distrust. If the Taliban are not significantly degraded by a U.S. recommitment, they would raise the cost of entering a new political process.
- Abrogation creates greater incentives for the Taliban to renew or make alliances with other terror groups.

- Even if the strategy is ultimately successful, the ongoing conflict would prolong the suffering of Afghans, given the likely long time frame required for the government to achieve adequate strength.
- Afghan elites respond to renewed support not as a “second chance” leading to genuine reforms, but as a further incentive to place individual interests and personal enrichment over national interests, making the objective harder to achieve.
- The ongoing focus on Afghanistan distracts Washington’s attention and resources from other, emerging problems.

Resources

- Financial resources and troops would be required at the same levels as in 2014–18. Increases in these levels of support could not be excluded.
- Significant diplomatic resources and attention would need to be invested.

Probability of Success

- Medium to low based on the history of the past two decades and the chronic weakness of the Afghan state.
- The probability of success would be increased by the implementation of a more coordinated whole-of-government effort and a strategic diplomatic effort, as well as by the provision of predictable levels of efficient aid.

Policy Pathway 3. A Calculated Military Withdrawal: Leave while Prioritizing U.S. Interests and Mitigating Risks with Nonmilitary Means

The administration that takes office in January 2021 either faces a breakdown of the negotiation process in early 2021 or judges that there is neither the prospect of an acceptable peace emerging through negotiation (pathway 1) nor a likelihood of improving the position of the Afghan government (pathway 2). It chooses to withdraw U.S. troops

by May 2021 and signals a reduction in support to the Afghan state, but not an indifference to outcomes. It continues to work with actors inside and outside Afghanistan to mitigate the risk of a terrorist attack against the United States and to achieve additional but more limited interests where possible. It continues to fund some development and humanitarian efforts and exerts diplomatic leverage for a regional framework for Afghan stability while encouraging additional donors to support the state.

End State

A relatively stable Afghanistan able to contain most terrorist threats in its territory that does not pose a significant threat to regional stability or to the United States or its interests. Domestic political stability is eventually achieved through a negotiated outcome that includes the Taliban in the government but at the cost of many of the gains in rights and values obtained over the past several decades.

Main Actions

- Continue withdrawing U.S. troops according to the Doha agreement timetable, regardless of Taliban behavior.
- Use available positive and negative incentives on all actors to attempt to influence a political settlement that aligns as much as possible with U.S. interests. Consider supporting the appointment of a third-party mediator, if an acceptable figure can be identified.
- Work with NATO and Resolute Support allies to coordinate with those allies that also wish to withdraw.
- Use relations with armed Afghan actors on the ground to prevent, for as long as possible, a Taliban military takeover of Kabul and the north of the country.
- Continue to provide (reduced) assistance to whatever Afghan state structure persists. Encourage allies and international financial institutions to continue providing assistance.

- Engage with the Taliban on counterterrorism interests.
- Continue providing support to ASSF and Afghan Air Force units as long as possible.

Benefits

- A reduction in financial costs in Afghanistan.
- Active U.S. neutrality does not preclude progress being made on Afghan peace negotiations led by international actors (such as the United Nations) or orchestrated by the Afghan parties themselves.
- Greater flexibility for a more strategic regional policy now that Afghanistan no longer dominates calculations.

Risks

- The government collapses, leading to a civil war akin to the current situation in Syria and reminiscent of Afghanistan itself in the 1990s.
- The government falls under Taliban control and acts counter to U.S. interests (both in terms of counterterrorism and with respect to Taliban policies that damage rights and values associated with the U.S. legacy).
- The terrorist threat to the United States and its allies can no longer be fully contained.
- Both the civil war scenario and the scenario that envisages a strong Taliban government threaten further regional instability (e.g., a strong Taliban government could push India to act against Pakistan in other areas).
- U.S. credibility and prestige are negatively affected.
- A flight of human capital and a likely migration and refugee crisis threaten the stability of the region and affect the European Union.

- Women's and minority rights are likely significantly curtailed.

Resources

- Given the uncertainty of various outcomes, two broad scenarios might be anticipated:
 - If a peace agreement is reached and state institutions survive, significant resource allocation might be warranted to support this outcome.
 - If a peace agreement is not reached and the country collapses into civil war, humanitarian assistance may be warranted.
- In either case, no U.S. troop deployment would be expected, eliminating corresponding costs of maintaining a U.S. military presence. At the same time, significant diplomatic effort and expertise would be required to manage either of the above scenarios.

Probability of Success

- Low-to-medium probability of achieving medium- to long-term stability.
- Medium-to-high risk of a new civil war.
- Medium-to-high risk of not meeting U.S. counterterrorism interests and, therefore, of seeing an increased threat to the homeland.

Policy Pathway 4. A Washing of Hands: Prompt Military Withdrawal and Diplomatic Disengagement

The United States begins a full and rapid troop withdrawal detached from the peace process (whether progress is made or not) and signals to regional powers that it is their responsibility to ensure stability in Afghanistan. It discontinues most aid except for humanitarian efforts through multilateral channels. It does not exert significant diplomatic muscle to forge a regional framework for Afghan political stability or to nudge the parties to the Afghan conflict toward an agreement.

End State

A civil war in Afghanistan in which no side gains the upper hand (akin to the situation in the early 1990s) or in which one faction takes control of Kabul and other key cities while pockets of resistance persist (akin to the situation in the late 1990s when the Taliban took hold of Kabul).

Main Actions

- Complete troop withdrawal as soon as possible.
- Implement a regional diplomatic strategy aimed at a greater role for Afghanistan's neighbors and remote neighbors in the country's stabilization.
- Work with NATO and Resolute Support allies to coordinate with those allies that also wish to withdraw.
- Reduce contributions (both civilian and military) to the Afghan state but urge other donors to continue contributions.
- Close the embassy or reduce the embassy presence, if conditions permit; make contingencies for evacuation.
- Make contingency plans for anticipated migration flows, both regional and global.

Benefits

- A reduction in financial costs in Afghanistan.
- Active U.S. neutrality does not preclude progress being made on Afghan peace negotiations led by international actors (such as the United Nations) or orchestrated by the Afghan parties themselves.
- Greater flexibility for a more strategic regional policy now that Afghanistan no longer dominates calculations.

Risks

- Civil war erupts in Afghanistan and fuels chronic humanitarian crises.
- U.S. and NATO/Resolute Support casualties are sustained as the Taliban harass the withdrawal operations.
- There is inadequate time available to professionally retrograde U.S. forces and equipment.
- A crisis develops within NATO/Resolute Support as partners are forced to withdraw on a similarly accelerated timetable. Allies grow resentful at the lack of consultation. Military coalitions become more difficult to assemble in the future.
- The terrorist threat is exacerbated.
- A flight of human capital takes place. Significant refugee and migration flows occur.
- U.S. prestige and credibility are reduced.
- Regional instability increases and Pakistan-India tensions heighten.
- The Afghan government allies itself with Iran or other U.S. rivals.

Resources

- Given the uncertainty of various outcomes, two broad scenarios might be anticipated:
 - If a peace agreement is reached and state institutions survive, significant resource allocation might be warranted to support this outcome.
 - If a peace agreement is not reached and the country collapses into civil war, humanitarian assistance may be warranted.
- In either case, no U.S. troop deployment would be expected, eliminating corresponding costs of maintaining a U.S. military presence. At the same time, significant diplomatic effort and expertise would be required to manage either of the above scenarios.

Probability of Success

- The probability of maintaining some sort of stability in Afghanistan after a prompt withdrawal of troops and a substantial reduction in aid is minimal. Almost every interlocutor the Study Group consulted used the word “catastrophic” or a synonym thereof to describe the effects of this option.
- The probability of threats to the U.S. homeland re-emerging is high, thereby making the preservation of U.S. counterterrorism interests unlikely.

Text of the Doha Agreement

**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 29, 2020

**which corresponds to Rajab 5, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar
calendar and Hoot 10, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar**

A comprehensive peace agreement is made of four parts:

1. Guarantees and enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies.
2. Guarantees, enforcement mechanisms, and announcement of a timeline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan.
3. After the announcement of guarantees for a complete withdrawal of foreign forces and timeline in the presence of international witnesses, and guarantees and the announcement in the presence of international witnesses that Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will start intra-Afghan negotiations with Afghan sides on March 10, 2020, which corresponds to Rajab 15, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 20, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar.
4. A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations. The participants of intra-Afghan negotiations will discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including

joint implementation mechanisms, which will be announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.

The four parts above are interrelated and each will be implemented in accordance with its own agreed timeline and agreed terms. Agreement on the first two parts paves the way for the last two parts.

Following is the text of the agreement for the implementation of parts one and two of the above. Both sides agree that these two parts are interconnected. The obligations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban in this agreement apply in areas under their control until the formation of the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations.

PART ONE

The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel within fourteen (14) months following announcement of this agreement, and will take the following measures in this regard:

- A. The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will take the following measures in the first one hundred thirty-five (135) days:
- 1) They will reduce the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to eight thousand six hundred (8,600) and proportionally bring reduction in the number of its allies and Coalition forces.
 - 2) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will withdraw all their forces from five (5) military bases.
- B. With the commitment and action on the obligations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban in Part Two of this agreement, the United States, its allies, and the Coalition will execute the following:
- 1) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will complete withdrawal of all remaining forces from Afghanistan within the remaining nine and a half (9.5) months.
 - 2) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will withdraw all their forces from remaining bases.
- C. The United States is committed to start immediately to work with all relevant sides on a plan to expeditiously release combat and political prisoners as a confidence building measure with the coordination and approval of all relevant sides. Up to five thousand (5,000) prisoners of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and up to one thousand (1,000) prisoners of the other side will be released by March 10, 2020, the first day of intra-Afghan negotiations, which corresponds to Rajab 15, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 20, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar. The relevant sides have the goal of releasing all the remaining prisoners over the course of the subsequent three months. The United States commits to completing this goal. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban commits that its released prisoners will be committed to the responsibilities mentioned in this

agreement so that they will not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.

- D. With the start of intra-Afghan negotiations, the United States will initiate an administrative review of current U.S. sanctions and the rewards list against members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban with the goal of removing these sanctions by August 27, 2020, which corresponds to Muharram 8, 1442 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Saunbola 6, 1399 on the Hijri Solar calendar.
- E. With the start of intra-Afghan negotiations, the United States will start diplomatic engagement with other members of the United Nations Security Council and Afghanistan to remove members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban from the sanctions list with the aim of achieving this objective by May 29, 2020, which corresponds to Shawwal 6, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Jawza 9, 1399 on the Hijri Solar calendar.
- F. The United States and its allies will refrain from the threat or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Afghanistan or intervening in its domestic affairs.

PART TWO

In conjunction with the announcement of this agreement, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will take the following steps to prevent any group or individual, including al-Qa'ida, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies:

1. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban 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.

2. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will send a clear message that those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan, and will instruct members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban not to cooperate with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies.
3. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will prevent any group or individual in Afghanistan from threatening the security of the United States and its allies, and will prevent them from recruiting, training, and fundraising and will not host them in accordance with the commitments in this agreement.
4. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban is committed to deal with those seeking asylum or residence in Afghanistan according to international migration law and the commitments of this agreement, so that such persons do not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.

5. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will not provide visas, passports, travel permits, or other legal documents to those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies to enter Afghanistan.

PART THREE

1. The United States will request the recognition and endorsement of the United Nations Security Council for this agreement.
2. The United States and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban seek positive relations with each other and expect that the relations between the United States and the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations will be positive.
3. The United States will seek economic cooperation for reconstruction with the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations, and will not intervene in its internal affairs.

Signed in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020, which corresponds to Rajab 5, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 10, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar, in duplicate, in Pashto, Dari, and English languages, each text being equally authentic.

Text of the Joint Declaration

[Issued February 29, 2020]

Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, a member of the United Nations and recognized by the United States and the international community as a sovereign state under international law, and the United States of America are committed to working together to reach a comprehensive and sustainable peace agreement that ends the war in Afghanistan for the benefit of all Afghans and contributes to regional stability and global security. A comprehensive and sustainable peace agreement will include four parts: 1) guarantees to prevent the use of Afghan soil by any international terrorist groups or individuals against the security of the United States and its allies, 2) a timeline for the withdrawal of all U.S. and Coalition forces from Afghanistan, 3) a political settlement resulting from intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations between the Taliban and an inclusive negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and 4) a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. These four parts are interrelated and interdependent. Pursuit of peace after long years of fighting reflects the goal of all parties who seek a sovereign, unified Afghanistan at peace with itself and its neighbors.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States have partnered closely since 2001 to respond to threats to international peace and security and help the Afghan people chart a secure, democratic and prosperous future. The two countries are committed to their longstanding relationship and their investments in building the Afghan institutions necessary to establish democratic norms, protect and preserve the unity of the country, and promote social and economic advancements and the rights of citizens. The commitments set out here are made possible by these shared achievements. Afghan and U.S. security forces share a special bond forged during many years of tremendous sacrifice and

courage. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan reaffirm their support for peace and their willingness to negotiate an end to this war.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan welcomes the Reduction in Violence period and takes note of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, an important step toward ending the war. The U.S.-Taliban agreement paves the way for intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan reaffirms its readiness to participate in such negotiations and its readiness to conclude a ceasefire with the Taliban.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan furthermore reaffirms its ongoing commitment to prevent any international terrorist groups or individuals, including al-Qa'ida and ISIS-K, from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States, its allies and other countries. To accelerate the pursuit of peace, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan confirms its support for the phased withdrawal of U.S. and Coalition forces subject to the Taliban's fulfillment of its commitments under the U.S.-Taliban agreement and any agreement resulting from intra-Afghan negotiations.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States therefore have made the following commitments:

PART ONE

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States recognize that al-Qa'ida, ISIS-K and other international terrorist groups or individuals continue to use Afghan soil to recruit members, raise funds, train adherents and plan and attempt to conduct attacks that threaten the security

of the United States, its allies, and Afghanistan. To address this continuing terrorist threat, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States will continue to take the following steps to defeat al-Qa'ida, its affiliates, and other international terrorist groups or individuals:

1. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan reaffirms its continued commitment not to cooperate with or permit international terrorist groups or individuals to recruit, train, raise funds (including through the production or distribution of narcotics), transit Afghanistan or misuse its internationally-recognized travel documents, or conduct other support activities in Afghanistan, and will not host them.
2. The United States re-affirms its commitments regarding support for the Afghan security forces and other government institutions, including through ongoing efforts to enhance the ability of Afghan security forces to deter and respond to internal and external threats, consistent with its commitments under existing security agreements between the two governments. This commitment includes support to Afghan security forces to prevent al-Qa'ida, ISIS-K, and other international terrorist groups or individuals from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States and its allies.
3. The United States re-affirms its readiness to continue to conduct military operations in Afghanistan with the consent of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in order to disrupt and degrade efforts by al-Qa'ida, ISIS-K, and other international terrorist groups or individuals to carry out attacks against the United States or its allies, consistent with its commitments under existing security agreements between the two governments and with the existing understanding that U.S. counterterrorism operations are intended to complement and support Afghan security forces' counterterrorism operations, with full respect for Afghan sovereignty and full regard for the safety and security of the Afghan people and the protection of civilians.

4. The United States commits to facilitate discussions between Afghanistan and Pakistan to work out arrangements to ensure neither country's security is threatened by actions from the territory of the other side.

PART TWO

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States have consulted extensively on U.S. and Coalition force levels and the military activities required to achieve the foregoing commitments including through support to Afghan security and defense forces. Subject to the Taliban's fulfillment of its commitments under the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the United States, and the Coalition jointly assess that the current levels of military forces are no longer necessary to achieve security objectives; since 2014, Afghan security forces have been in the lead for providing security and have increased their effectiveness. As such, the parties commit to take the following measures:

1. The United States will reduce the number of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan to 8,600 and implement other commitments in the U.S.-Taliban agreement within 135 days of the announcement of this joint declaration and the U.S.-Taliban agreement, and will work with its allies and the Coalition to reduce proportionally the number of Coalition forces in Afghanistan over an equivalent period, subject to the Taliban's fulfillment of its commitments under the U.S.-Taliban agreement.
2. Consistent with the joint assessment and determination between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the United States, its allies, and the Coalition will complete the withdrawal of their remaining forces from Afghanistan within 14 months following the announcement of this joint declaration and the U.S.-Taliban agreement, and will withdraw all their forces from remaining bases, subject to the Taliban's fulfillment of its commitments under the U.S.-Taliban agreement.

3. The United States re-affirms its commitment to seek funds on a yearly basis that support the training, equipping, advising and sustaining of Afghan security forces, so that Afghanistan can independently secure and defend itself against internal and external threats.
4. To create the conditions for reaching a political settlement and achieving a permanent, sustainable ceasefire, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will participate in a U.S.-facilitated discussion with Taliban representatives on confidence building measures, to include determining the feasibility of releasing significant numbers of prisoners on both sides. The United States and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan will seek the assistance of the ICRC to support this discussion.
5. With the start of intra-Afghan negotiations, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan commits to start diplomatic engagement with members of the UN Security Council to remove members of the Taliban from the sanctions list with the aim of achieving this objective by May 29, 2020, and in any case no later than 30 days after

finalizing a framework agreement and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.

PART THREE

1. The United States will request the recognition and endorsement of the UN Security Council for this agreement and related arrangements.
2. The United States and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan are committed to continue positive relations, including economic cooperation for reconstruction.
3. The United States will refrain from the threat or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Afghanistan or intervening in its domestic affairs.
4. The United States will continue to work to build regional and international consensus to support the ongoing effort to achieve a political settlement to the principal conflict in Afghanistan.

Notes

1. See U.S. Department of Defense, “Statement by Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller on Force Levels in Afghanistan,” January 15, 2021, www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2473337/statement-by-acting-defense-secretary-christopher-miller-on-force-levels-in-afg.
2. See Hope Hodge Seck, “In First, NATO Forces Now Outnumber US Forces in Afghanistan,” *Military.com*, December 21, 2020, www.military.com/daily-news/2020/12/21/first-nato-forces-now-outnumber-us-troops-afghanistan.html.
3. See, for instance, Siyar Sirat, “Nothing Is Agreed Until Everything Is Agreed: Khalilzad,” *Tolo News*, January 26, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/khalilzad-says-‘nothing-agreed-’-qatar>.
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7. For the text of the Afghanistan Partnership Framework, see <https://um.fi/documents/35732/0/Afghanistan+Partnership+Framework+2020.pdf/6875b99d-0223-b5e1-360d-614420af2a90?t=1606127229249>.
8. See Bill Byrd, “COVID-19 in Afghanistan (8): The Political Economy Repercussions of COVID-19 and the Aid Response,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/covid-19-in-afghanistan-8-the-political-economy-repercussions-of-covid-19-and-the-aid-response.
9. See U.S. Mission to International Organizations, “U.S. Reinforces Commitment to Secure, Stable, Democratic, and Self-Reliant Afghanistan at 2020 Conference,” November 24, 2020, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2020/11/25/us-reinforces-commitment-to-secure-stable-democratic-and-self-reliant-afghanistan-at-2020-conference>.
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