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Impacts of the Withdrawal from Afghanistan on Terrorist Threats to the United States

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On February 29, 2020, then secretary of state Mike Pompeo signed what has come to be known as the “Doha Agreement” between the United States and the Taliban.² In that agreement, the administration of President Donald J. Trump agreed to withdraw all military forces from Afghanistan within about 14 months (May 2021). For its part, the Taliban agreed to “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.”³

After candidate Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election, President Trump ordered a drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan to 2,500 troops and 11 bases.⁴ President Biden inherited this force structure upon his inauguration in January 2021. After several months of deliberation, on April 14, President Biden announced his intent to complete the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan,⁵ and he eventually set a deadline of August 31, 2021.⁶ On August 15, after several months of severe battlefield losses by Afghanistan’s security forces, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, and the Taliban captured Kabul. Over the remaining days in August, the US military surged troops into Afghanistan to secure the Hamid Karzai International Airport. Those troops, along with our coalition partners and US government civilians, then evacuated over 100,000 individuals from the airport in the largest airlift ever conducted by the United States.⁷

In the rest of this testimony, I will focus on the following topics, at the request of the subcommittee:

- The nature of the Doha Agreement secured under the Trump Administration as well as the Biden Administration’s decision to see the agreement through
- Why withdrawals are among the most difficult military operations to undertake

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² “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,” US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

³ Ibid, p. III.

⁴ “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” US Department of Defense, Dec. 2020, pp. 5-6.

⁵ “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” The White House, Apr. 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan>.

⁶ The initial date set for the withdrawal was September 11, 2021. This date was revised after criticism emerged of its symbolism.

⁷ “US Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” The White House, Apr. 6, 2023, p. 9, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/US-Withdrawal-from-Afghanistan.pdf>.

- The extent to which Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) retain the intent and capability to conduct attacks against the US homeland from Afghanistan
- The extent to which the Taliban have upheld their commitment to address terrorist threats in Afghanistan
- Impacts of the drawdown of US counterterrorism (CT) presence and resources dedicated to Afghanistan

The following sections will address these topics in turn and will be followed by a brief conclusion.

The Doha Agreement and the Decision to Withdraw

As the US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, began negotiations with the Taliban at the direction of President Trump, he stated publicly that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.”⁸ In this case, “everything” meant four main items: (1) the withdrawal of all US forces from Afghanistan, (2) a Taliban guarantee to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for international terrorist attacks, (3) a framework for negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban on the future governing structure of the country, and (4) a comprehensive ceasefire. The final agreement signed by the US and the Taliban in 2020 addressed the first two points in detail. However, it stated that the third point would be addressed after the signing of the deal and the fourth point would “be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations.”⁹ Over the ensuing year, the Taliban engaged in direct talks with representatives of the Afghan government. Those discussions, however, accomplished very little. Additionally, even though the two sides engaged in several limited ceasefires (e.g., around the Eid holiday), a comprehensive ceasefire was never obtained.

By the time the US withdrawal began, the security situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated markedly since the US completed the removal of President Barack Obama’s surge forces in 2014. At that time, the US had adopted a limited role of advising Afghanistan’s security forces and conducting partnered CT operations. One (imperfect but still useful¹⁰) metric demonstrating the decline in the security situation is the change in how many administrative districts the Afghan government controlled. In 2017, it was assessed to control 217 of the country’s 407 districts, but this number fell to just 129 districts in 2021 (a decrease of 40 percent).¹¹ By my own assessment, when the US withdrawal began, the Taliban had effectively surrounded at least 15 of the country’s 34 provincial capitals.¹² Contrary to the arguments of some former senior US government officials, the situation President Biden confronted upon entry to the White House was not one of a stable stalemate that afforded an effective “insurance policy” against terrorism from Afghanistan;¹³ rather, it was a war on the downslope.

⁸ Siyar Sirat, “Nothing Is Agreed Until Everything Is Agreed: Khalilzad,” *TOLO News*, Jan. 29, 2019, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/khalilzad-says-%E2%80%98nothing-agreed-%E2%80%99-qatar>.

⁹ “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,” p. I.

¹⁰ Jonathan Schroden, “The Challenges of Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan,” *Lawfare*, Aug. 1, 2021, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/challenges-mapping-taliban-control-afghanistan>.

¹¹ Bill Roggio, “Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>.

¹² Jonathan Schroden, “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 8 (Oct. 2021), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/lessons-from-the-collapse-of-afghanistans-security-forces>.

¹³ Mark F. Bernstein, “Q&A: Former Ambassador Ryan Crocker *85 on Afghanistan,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, Oct. 1, 2021, <https://paw.princeton.edu/article/qa-former-ambassador-ryan-crocker-85-afghanistan>.

Thus, Biden effectively had two options in early 2021: complete the withdrawal of US forces that Trump had begun in accordance with the Doha Agreement or abrogate that agreement and surge US forces in what would have been the third consecutive presidential attempt to jumpstart a turnaround in the war. Faced with those choices, Biden chose to withdraw, stating: “I’m now the fourth United States President to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan: two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth.”¹⁴

Why Withdrawals Are Difficult

When President Biden announced the full withdrawal from Afghanistan, he said it would begin on May 1, 2021, and be complete by the end of August. Just before Biden’s announcement, military logistics expert Ryan Baker and I examined why several months would be necessary to withdraw the 2,500 troops from the country. We found that while the US military had the logistical capacity to remove that many people from Afghanistan in a shorter timeframe, doing so would have required “pulling transportation and logistical resources away from other missions around the world, abandoning a bunch of perfectly good equipment in Afghanistan, signing expensive contracts for quick-turn transportation capacity, leaving allied and partner forces in Afghanistan twisting in the wind, and potentially increasing the risk to US troops on the ground during the withdrawal.”¹⁵

One of the most difficult types of military operation is a retrograde under fire. Even withdrawing under the *threat* of fire greatly increases the difficulty of moving military personnel and materiel.¹⁶ In Afghanistan, while the US and the Taliban had reportedly agreed not to attack each other as the withdrawal proceeded,¹⁷ the degree of trust between the two sides was not high. US forces in Afghanistan therefore had to assume that the withdrawal could turn violent at any time. Additional factors further complicated the withdrawal: the land-locked and highly mountainous nature of Afghanistan, the array of coalition forces that the US was supporting there, legal complexities surrounding the disposal or retrograde of US military equipment, and the absence of a staging area in a neighboring country.¹⁸

Those complexities notwithstanding, the US military concluded that the best way to meet Biden’s intent of a “safe and orderly” withdrawal¹⁹ was to conduct it as rapidly as possible, in keeping with the notion that the longer one takes to complete a withdrawal under the threat of fire, the longer one is exposed to the high degree of risk associated with such an operation. To minimize risk to US servicemembers during the withdrawal, the US military therefore responded to Biden’s order with alacrity. By June 8, 2021, just over a month after the withdrawal began, US Central Command (CENTCOM) reported that the drawdown was half complete. Three weeks later, it reported 90 percent completion (see Figure 1).

¹⁴ “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan.”

¹⁵ Ryan Baker and Jonathan Schroden, “Why Is It So Tough to Withdraw from Afghanistan?” War on the Rocks, Apr. 8, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/why-is-it-so-tough-to-withdraw-from-afghanistan>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kimberly Dozier, “Secret Annexes, Backroom Deals: Can Zalmay Khalilzad Deliver Afghan Peace for Trump?” *TIME*, Feb. 15, 2020, <https://time.com/5784103/secret-annexes-backroom-deals-can-zalmay-khalilzad-deliver-afghan-peace-for-trump>.

¹⁸ Baker and Schroden, “Why Is It So Tough to Withdraw from Afghanistan?”

¹⁹ Anne Gearan, “Biden Signals Short Delay in Withdrawal of Forces from Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 25, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-signals-short-delay-in-withdrawal-of-forces-from-afghanistan/2021/03/25/2a37dbc2-8d9e-11eb-9423-04079921c915_story.html.

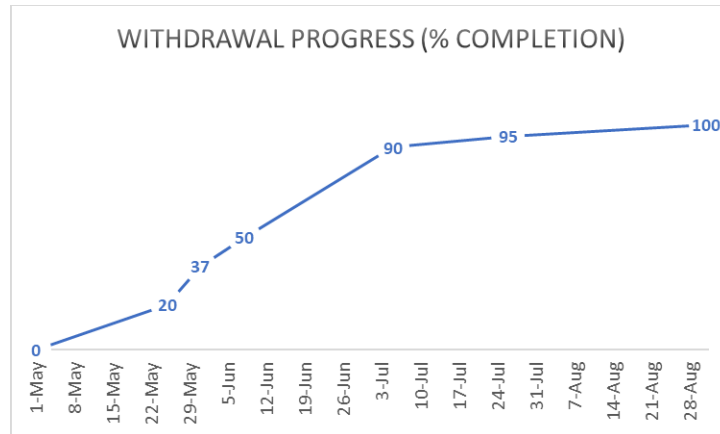


Figure 1: Reported progress of the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan (April–August 2021)²⁰

As the US withdrew, Afghanistan’s security forces overused its air force and special operations forces to compensate for the loss of US and coalition capabilities. The Afghan Air Force (AAF), for example, roughly tripled the number of sorties it flew in June and the Afghan Commandos’ operational tempo increased by 30 percent. These activity levels were unsustainable in the absence of contracted maintainers and logisticians who left along with the US military forces that had been protecting them. By the end of June, the AAF’s readiness rates had plummeted to 39 percent (from 77 percent in May), and the Commandos had suffered substantial casualties.²¹ As Afghanistan’s military rapidly depleted the few capabilities that provided overmatch of the Taliban, more and more districts fell, with the largest acceleration of Taliban capture occurring between mid-June and mid-July (see Figure 2).

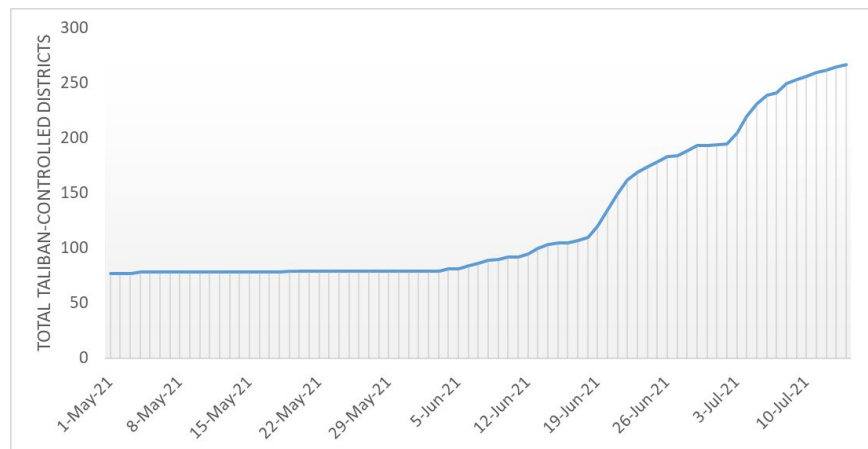


Figure 2: Total number of Taliban-controlled districts in Afghanistan (May–July 2021)²²

²⁰ Compiled from updates issued by US Central Command on the progress of the withdrawal. See: <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2640121/update-on-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-may-31-2021>; <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2632456/afghanistan-retrograde-nearly-one-quarter-complete>; <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2649542/update-on-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-june-7-2021>; <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2682484/update-on-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-july-5-2021>; <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2708638/update-on-the-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-july-26-2021>.

²¹ Jonathan Schroden, “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 8 (Oct. 2021), <https://ctc westpoint.edu/lessons-from-the-collapse-of-afghanistans-security-forces>.

²² Adapted from Schroden, “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces.”

AQ and ISKP Intent and Capabilities

There is no question that both AQ and the Islamic State retain the intent to attack the US homeland. The more pressing question is whether they have the capabilities to do so. Within Afghanistan, the United Nations (UN) assessed in 2022 that AQ maintained a few hundred fighters, but these individuals were mostly involved with local Taliban units. The only notable AQ leader reported to be in Afghanistan after the United States' killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri on July 31, 2022, is Abu Ikhlas al-Masri.²³ The UN has assessed that "it is unlikely that Al-Qaida and its affiliates will seek to mount direct attacks outside Afghanistan for the near term owing to a lack of capability and restraint on the part of the Taliban, as well as an unwillingness to jeopardize their recent gains,"²⁴ though some analysts have argued that the potential for future AQ threats is greater than it currently appears.²⁵

With roughly 1,000 to 3,000 fighters,²⁶ ISKP is now about half the strength of its zenith in 2017.²⁷ The group maintains sizable cells in Afghanistan's eastern Kunar, Nangarhar, and Nuristan provinces, as well as in Kabul. The UN recently assessed that smaller ISKP elements exist in the northern and northeastern provinces of Badakhshan, Faryab, Jowzjan, Kunduz, Takhar, and Balkh.²⁸ Since the Taliban's conquest of the country, ISKP has sought to undermine the Taliban government as a guarantor of security by attacking Taliban forces and political leaders,²⁹ foreign embassies and hotels housing foreigners,³⁰ and religious and ethnic minority groups.³¹ ISKP has also sought to undermine the Taliban's legitimacy as a

²³ Al-Masri is an AQ operational commander who had been captured by US forces in 2010 and was reportedly freed by the Taliban in 2021. Asfandiyar Mir, "Twenty Years After 9/11: The Terror Threat from Afghanistan Post the Taliban Takeover," *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 7 (Sept. 2021), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-terror-threat-from-afghanistan-post-the-taliban-takeover>.

²⁴ "Letter Dated 11 July 2022 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council," UN Security Council, July 15, 2022, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/394/29/PDF/N2239429.pdf?OpenElement>. The UN reaffirmed this assessment in its most recent report: "Letter Dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council," UN Security Council, Feb. 13, 2023, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N23/038/91/PDF/N2303891.pdf?OpenElement>.

²⁵ Mir, "Twenty Years After 9/11" and Sara Harmouch, "Al-Qaeda's Looming Threat: Are We Looking Over the Wrong Horizon?" *Lawfare*, Apr. 4, 2023, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/al-qaedas-looming-threat-are-we-looking-over-wrong-horizon>.

²⁶ "Letter Dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee."

²⁷ Amira Jadoon, Abdul Sayed, and Andrew Mines, "The Islamic State Threat in Taliban Afghanistan: The Resurgence of the Islamic State Khorasan," *CTC Sentinel*, Jan. 2022, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-islamic-state-threat-in-taliban-afghanistan-tracing-the-resurgence-of-islamic-state-khorasan>.

²⁸ "Letter Dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee."

²⁹ Andrew Mines and Amira Jadoon, "A String of Assassinations in Afghanistan Points to ISIS Resurgence with US Officials Warning of Possible Attacks on American Interests," *Military.com*, Mar. 21, 2023, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/opinions/2023/03/21/string-of-assassinations-afghanistan-points-isis-resurgence-us-officials-warning-of-possible-attacks.html>.

³⁰ "Deadly Attack on Kabul Hotel Popular with Chinese Nationals," *Al-Jazeera*, Dec. 12, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/12/deadly-attack-on-kabul-hotel-popular-with-chinese-nationals>, and Mohammad Yunus Yawar, "Two Russian Embassy Staff Dead, Four Others Killed in Suicide Bomb Blast in Kabul," *Reuters*, Sept. 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-police-report-suicide-bomb-blast-near-russian-embassy-kabul-2022-09-05>.

³¹ Ewelina U. Ochab, "Yet Another Attack on the Hazara in Afghanistan," *Forbes*, Oct. 1, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2022/10/01/yet-another-attack-on-the-hazara-in-afghanistan/?sh=3a93ec452fa6>.

religious movement—and to bolster its own recruiting and fundraising efforts—by increasing the quality, quantity, and number of languages of its online propaganda.³²

CENTCOM's General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, in his recent congressional testimony, stated that ISKP could conduct attacks against American interests outside Afghanistan in less than six months, "with little to no warning." When pressed on his assessment, however, he conceded that an attack within the region or Europe was more likely.³³ Indeed, ISKP has demonstrated its ability to conduct attacks throughout much of Afghanistan, against Uzbekistan and Tajikistan,³⁴ and inside Pakistan.³⁵

The Taliban's Commitment

In the Doha Agreement, the Taliban pledged to not allow terrorist groups "to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies."³⁶ As with much of the Doha Agreement, the language in this clause is imprecise—for example, the meaning of "threaten the security of" is not clear. The vagueness of this and similar clauses clouds the ability of analysts to determine whether the Taliban are meeting their commitment.

The United States' identification—and subsequent targeted killing—of AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in downtown Kabul demonstrates this disconnect. From a US perspective, the fact that al-Zawahiri was present in the capital—and reportedly staying in a house belonging to an aide of the Taliban's acting interior minister Sirajuddin Haqqani³⁷—violated this clause, since al-Zawahiri had continued to issue invectives online threatening the United States. From the Taliban's perspective, however, al-Zawahiri had not conducted or directed any external operations against the United States since the signing of the Doha Agreement, and his mere presence in Kabul did not violate the agreement. More concretely, the Taliban generally do not see AQ's presence in Afghanistan as a problem to be solved, and some senior members of the Taliban—beyond Haqqani—maintain close ties with AQ fighters.³⁸

The Taliban have, however, consistently pursued and targeted ISKP—which they view as the primary militant threat to their domination of Afghanistan—since their ascension to power. These operations were initially broad in aim and "brutally ineffective,"³⁹ but they have become refined and targeted over time. Most recently, the Taliban have engaged in a surge of apparently targeted raids against ISKP cells across the country.⁴⁰ The efficacy of these raids has been difficult to assess thus far, though a delay in

³² "Letter Dated 13 February 2023 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee."

³³ Svetlana Shkolnikova, "ISIS in Afghanistan Capable of Foreign Attacks in 6 Months, CENTCOM Commander Says," *Stars and Stripes*, Mar. 16, 2023, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2023-03-16/centcom-kurilla-isis-afghanistan-attacks-9514063.html>.

³⁴ Sudha Ramachandran, "ISKP Attacks in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, Aug. 31, 2022, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13731-iskp-attacks-in-uzbekistan-and-tajikistan.html>.

³⁵ Ismail Khan and Salman Masood, "ISIS Claims Bombing of Pakistani Mosque, Killing Dozens," *New York Times*, Mar. 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/world/middleeast/pakistan-peshawar-mosque-explosion.html>.

³⁶ "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan."

³⁷ Jonathan Schroden, "What Zawahiri's Death Tells Us About Afghanistan's Future," *Politico*, Aug. 2, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/08/02/zawahiris-death-and-afghanistans-future-00049239>.

³⁸ Mir, "Twenty Years After 9/11."

³⁹ Colin Clarke and Jonathan Schroden, "Brutally Ineffective: How the Taliban Are Failing in Their New Role as Counter-Insurgents," *War on the Rocks*, Nov. 29, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/brutally-ineffective-how-the-taliban-are-failing-in-their-new-role-as-counter-insurgents>.

⁴⁰ See, for example: Tweet by "Afghan Analyst," Apr. 8, 2023, <https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1644910476067831809?s=20>.

ISKP's media productions may suggest the Taliban are achieving some degree of success.⁴¹ Thus, in the case of ISKP, the Taliban are conducting operations that appear to be generally aligned with their commitments in the Doha Agreement, though the primary motivation behind these operations is likely a desire to crush any militant opposition in the country, rather than to demonstrate adherence to the agreement with the US.⁴²

Impacts of the US Drawdown on Counterterrorism

The Biden Administration recently released a white paper on the withdrawal that claims the “decision to leave Afghanistan freed up critical military, intelligence, and other resources to counter terrorist threats around the world, including in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen.”⁴³ The reality, however, is that in the wake of the 2018 National Defense Strategy⁴⁴ and then-Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis’ declaration that “terrorism is no longer the top priority” of the Department of Defense (DOD),⁴⁵ the US has been drawing down its CT capabilities across the globe. Rather than reinvesting capabilities that were tied up in Afghanistan to pursue increasing threats of terrorism more vigorously in places like West Africa, the US has steadily shifted its focus toward strategic competition and preparation for high-end conflict with China. As part of that shift, the US has been relying more on partners and proxies in what leaders of the US special operations enterprise recently described as a “partner-led, US-enabled” approach.⁴⁶ This global drawdown of CT capability, which began in DOD, is now cascading across the rest of the US government—a trend that CT practitioners are increasingly concerned about.⁴⁷

Specific to Afghanistan, the US withdrawal has left it reliant on an “over-the-horizon” (OTH) approach to CT, which primarily consists of flying drones from air bases in the Middle East, through Pakistani airspace, and over areas of interest in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ As national security analyst Seth Jones recently described, “It takes [an MQ-9A] Reaper roughly 14 hours to fly round-trip from Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar to Afghanistan, giving it only 12 to 15 hours to collect intelligence and strike targets if necessary.”⁴⁹ The inefficiency of this approach, combined with the absence of any US presence or intelligence partners on the ground in Afghanistan, has dramatically reduced the ability of US intelligence agencies to track terrorist threats there. General Frank McKenzie, the former head of

⁴¹ Tweet by Abdul Sayed, Apr. 11, 2023, <https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1645840194510127115?s=20>.

⁴² For excellent overviews of the Taliban’s political calculus, see: Andrew Watkins, “The Taliban One Year On,” *CTC Sentinel* 15:8 (August 2022), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-taliban-one-year-on> and Andrew Watkins, “What’s Next for the Taliban’s Leadership Amid Rising Dissent?” US Institute for Peace, April 11, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/whats-next-talibans-leadership-amid-rising-dissent>.

⁴³ “US Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” p. 11.

⁴⁴ “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America,” US Department of Defense, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

⁴⁵ David Martin, “Terrorism No Longer the Military’s Top Priority, Mattis Says,” CBS News, Jan. 19, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/terrorism-no-longer-the-militarys-top-priority-mattis-says>.

⁴⁶ “Statement for the Record, the Honorable Christopher P. Maier, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict and General Bryan P. Fenton, USA Commander, United States Special Operations Command Before the Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence & Special Operations United States House of Representatives,” Mar. 9, 2023, [https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/2023%20SOLIC-USSOCOM%20Posture%20-%20Maier-Fenton%20-%20Statement%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/2023%20SOLIC-USSOCOM%20Posture%20-%20Maier-Fenton%20-%20Statement%20(FINAL).pdf).

⁴⁷ Author’s conversations with CT practitioners in February and March 2023.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Schroden, “New Ideas for Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism in Afghanistan,” *Lawfare*, May 8, 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/new-ideas-over-horizon-counterterrorism-afghanistan>.

⁴⁹ Seth Jones, “Countering a Resurgent Terrorist Threat in Afghanistan” Council on Foreign Relations, Apr. 14, 2022, https://www.cfr.org/report/countering-resurgent-terrorist-threat-afghanistan?utm_source=studies&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=Seth%20Jones%20CPMU%20Sailthru%20Distro%20List.

CENTCOM, commented in the wake of the withdrawal, “We’re probably at about 1 or 2% of the capabilities we once had to look into Afghanistan.”⁵⁰ Although the US has likely improved its ability since then through experience with the new OTH approach, the current commander of CENTCOM, General Kurilla, recently testified that he believed “we can see the broad contours of an attack, [but] sometimes we lack the granularity to see the full picture.”⁵¹

Conclusion

There is no question that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan did not go as planned or as hoped. The negotiations between the US and the Taliban were supposed to continue until “everything is agreed,”⁵² but they concluded well before that point. Secretary Pompeo ultimately signed an agreement that fell far short of initial expectations and left the Afghan government in an even more precarious position than it was in previously.⁵³ In addition, the Trump Administration’s lack of detailed planning for the withdrawal⁵⁴ and reported efforts to obstruct the Biden transition team from beginning such work⁵⁵ left President Biden’s administration in an unenviable position as he entered office.

Nonetheless, once President Biden decided to complete the withdrawal and fulfill the terms of the US agreement with the Taliban, the US military recognized that a rapid withdrawal was necessary to minimize the risk associated with a retrograde under threat of violence. Within two months of the withdrawal’s commencement, it was 90 percent complete.⁵⁶ That pace—designed to prioritize the protection of US servicemembers—was far too rapid for Afghanistan’s security forces to absorb. As had been noted by independent entities for years prior to the withdrawal, Afghan security forces were critically dependent on US or contracted support for nearly all of their enabling functions.⁵⁷ With that support removed, numerous analysts predicted that their ability to defend the country against the Taliban onslaught would spiral downward. My own assessment of Taliban and Afghan security force capabilities, published in January 2021, concluded that after the US withdrawal, “the Taliban would have a slight military advantage [over Afghan security forces]...which would then likely grow in a compounding fashion.”⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, “US Commander: Al-Qaida Numbers in Afghanistan Up ‘Slightly,’” AP News, Dec. 10, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-middle-east-united-states-taliban-islamic-state-group-bec82acfe6dbd19bed4c11db21d7a78e>.

⁵¹ Jeff Seldin, “US General: Islamic State Afghan Affiliate Closer to Attacking Western Targets,” Voice of America, Mar. 16, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-general-islamic-state-afghan-affiliate-closer-to-attacking-western-targets/7008633.html>.

⁵² Sirat, “Nothing Is Agreed Until Everything Is Agreed: Khalilzad.”

⁵³ Schroden, “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces.”

⁵⁴ “US Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” p. 2.

⁵⁵ Lara Seligman and Bryan Bender, “‘Really Quite Shocking’: Inside the Ugly Transition at the Pentagon,” Politico, Jan. 20, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/20/biden-pentagon-transition-460768>.

⁵⁶ “Update on Withdrawal of US Forces from Afghanistan July 5, 2021,” CENTCOM, July 6, 2021, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2682484/update-on-withdrawal-of-us-forces-from-afghanistan-july-5-2021>.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Schroden, “Afghanistan Will Be the Trump Administration’s First Foreign Policy Crisis,” War on the Rocks, Dec. 5, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/12/afghanistan-will-be-the-trump-administrations-first-foreign-policy-crisis>; Jonathan Schroden, “Afghanistan Will Be the Biden Administration’s First Foreign Policy Crisis,” Lawfare, Dec. 20, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/afghanistan-will-be-biden-administrations-first-foreign-policy-crisis>. See also SIGAR’s quarterly reports to Congress from 2016 to 2021.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Schroden, “Afghanistan’s Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 1 (Jan. 2021), <https://ctc westpoint.edu/afghanistans-security-forces-versus-the-taliban-a-net-assessment/>.

On August 6, the first of Afghanistan's provincial capitals fell, and President Ghani abandoned Kabul nine days later. The resulting chaos in the capital substantially escalated the difficulty of the last leg of the withdrawal. In addition to heartbreaking scenes of Afghan civilians crowding in squalid conditions around the airport seeking an exit from the country and stories of Taliban brutality against them,⁵⁹ 13 US servicemembers and around 170 Afghans were killed in an ISKP attack at the airport's Abbey Gate.⁶⁰ Another 10 Afghan civilians lost their lives in an errant US drone strike in the wake of that ISKP attack.⁶¹

In the year and a half since the withdrawal, AQ has remained a problem for the United States in Afghanistan. The group has relative safety under the Taliban government to exist and operate, though it currently has minimal capability to conduct attacks beyond the country. The inverse is true of ISKP. It has substantially more capability in Afghanistan than AQ but is viewed by the Taliban as the primary challenger to their consolidation of control over the entirety of the country. The Taliban have thus conducted numerous operations and targeted raids against ISKP since the withdrawal.

For its part, the US has accelerated its pivot away from CT (toward strategic competition with China) and established an OTH CT capability aimed at AQ and ISKP in Afghanistan. This capability is limited in its scope and what it can detect, though it was clearly sufficient to identify the presence of al-Zawahiri in Kabul. Recommendations by national security analysts to improve the United States' ability to detect and disrupt terrorist threats in Afghanistan have included establishing new intelligence networks in the country, negotiating basing access in a neighboring country or establishing a sea base off the coast of Pakistan to reduce drone transit times, investing in longer duration drone platforms (such as the MQ-9B SkyGuardian), increasing cyber and open-source collection efforts,⁶² and potentially engaging in clandestine cooperation (e.g., intelligence sharing) with the Taliban against our shared enemy, ISKP.⁶³

Looking ahead, the Taliban's strong relationship with AQ in Afghanistan portends a consistent (albeit nascent) threat from AQ to the US for some time. Whether the Taliban will prevent AQ from using Afghanistan as a launchpad for external attacks in accordance with the Doha Agreement remains to be seen, but the discovery of al-Zawahiri in Kabul is not an encouraging omen. The Taliban are likely to continue operations against ISKP that may become more effective; however, the size, scope, locations, and resilience of ISKP auger against the group's elimination any time soon. The US will thus need to maintain—and possibly expand—its OTH approaches to CT in Afghanistan for years to come. Congress would therefore be wise to demand long-term strategies for doing so and to invest in OTH CT capabilities commensurate with operational timelines of a decade or more.

⁵⁹ Ali M. Latifi, "Chaos and Violence as Crowds Keep Growing Outside Kabul Airport," *Al-Jazeera*, Aug. 23, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/23/afghanistan-talibanchaos-and-violence-as-crowds-keep-growing-outside-kabul-airport>.

⁶⁰ Jim Garamone, "US Central Command Releases Report on August Abbey Gate Attack," DOD, Feb. 4, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2924398/us-central-command-releases-report-on-august-abbey-gate-attack>.

⁶¹ Azmat Khan, "Military Investigation Reveals How the US Botched a Drone Strike in Kabul," *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/us/politics/drone-civilian-deaths-afghanistan.html>.

⁶² Jones, "Countering a Resurgent Terrorist Threat in Afghanistan" and Schroden, "New Ideas for Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism in Afghanistan."

⁶³ Jonathan Schroden and Alexander Powell, "Working with the Devil? The Potential for US-Taliban Cooperation Against the Islamic State in Afghanistan," *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 16, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/working-with-the-devil-the-potential-for-u-s-taliban-cooperation-against-the-islamic-state-in-afghanistan>.