

# A Responsible Withdrawal From Afghanistan

The Biden administration should support a regional effort to stabilize the country.

## By The Editorial Board

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For years, the stalemate in Afghanistan has left American officials torn between two bad options: Prop up a corrupt, hopelessly divided Afghan government indefinitely or admit defeat and go home, leaving the country to its fate. At 19 years and counting, the U.S.-led effort in Afghanistan is already the longest war in American history. A consensus has been forming that it is time for U.S. troops to come home. But the speed of the withdrawal and whether any residual force will be left behind to carry out counterterrorism operations remain open questions.

The Trump administration has taken laudable steps toward a U.S. exit. In February, it struck a deal with the Taliban to withdraw American forces from the country within 14 months. In exchange, the Taliban agreed to cut ties with Al Qaeda, prevent terrorists from using Afghanistan as a base for international attacks, help reduce violence and participate in talks with Afghanistan's political leadership to try to end the conflict.

American diplomats have been pressing the Taliban to live up to their end of the bargain. Qaeda fighters are still believed to be embedded with the Taliban, although Al Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahri, may now be dead, according to Pakistani media. Intra-Afghan peace talks began in Doha, the capital of Qatar, in September but have stalled over a fresh wave of attacks and uncertainty over whether the Biden administration will honor the deal with the Taliban. Over the weekend, the Taliban announced on social media that both sides had agreed to a set of guiding principles for the talks, but President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan has reportedly pushed back on that claim, denying that an agreement has been reached.

The two sides have yet to begin confronting a host of seemingly irreconcilable differences, including whether to be a theocracy or a republic, and the status of women and followers of the Shiite sect of Islam. The Taliban claim that they now accept Shiites as fellow Muslims. But previously Taliban leaders have justified persecuting them as infidels. In 1998, Taliban commanders massacred thousands of Hazaras, an ethnic minority that predominantly follows Shiite Islam, when they took power in their region. Today, two commanders of that bloody operation are among the Taliban negotiators in Doha. Some Hazaras fear the Taliban are simply going through the motions of peace talks until U.S. forces leave.

Efforts to hold the Taliban accountable for their commitments have been undercut by the Trump administration's abrupt announcement that it will pull all but 2,500 American troops out of the country by Jan. 15, regardless of whether the conditions the Taliban agreed to have been met. President Trump, who spent Thanksgiving 2019 with U.S. soldiers at Bagram Airfield, wants to keep a promise to bring American soldiers home before he leaves office. But NATO's secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, expressed alarm at Mr. Trump's announcement and said the alliance would continue to train Afghan security forces even with the planned U.S. reductions. NATO has 12,000 personnel in the country, about half of whom are often American troops, and relies heavily on the U.S. military for transportation and logistics.

President-elect Joe Biden is unlikely to depart radically from the Trump administration's exit plan. Mr. Biden opposed the Obama-era surge in Afghanistan and wrote in the spring in *Foreign Affairs* magazine that "it is past time to end the forever wars."

But an American withdrawal does not have to mean ending financial support for the Afghan people or leaving the region in chaos. The United States has a moral obligation to work with regional partners to try to clean up the mess we are leaving behind.

Americans have the geopolitical luxury of flying away from a war they plunged into in 2001 in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Afghanistan's neighbors do not. Six countries share a border with Afghanistan. Not one wants a failed state on its doorstep. Afghanistan has been at war almost continuously since 1978, partly because its powerful neighbors have all tried to manage the chaos inside it by funding proxies. A debilitating free-for-all might be prevented if Afghanistan's neighbors work together to support a peace process.

This is a rare instance where Iran, Russia, China, Pakistan and the United States all share a common interest: the orderly departure of American troops and preventing Afghanistan from imploding.

Mr. Trump, who has a well-known allergy to multilateral cooperation and a zero-sum mentality toward Iran and China, has been unable to fully engage Afghanistan's neighbors in the effort to stabilize the country. In March 2019, American diplomats threatened to veto the U.N. Security Council resolution renewing the mandate of the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan because it referred to China's Belt and Road Initiative. And the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran scared off international investors in Chabahar, an Iranian port considered essential for increasing trade in landlocked Afghanistan.

Barnett Rubin, a former State Department official who is now the director of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Regional Project at New York University, argues that the United States would benefit from having a strategic vision for the region that was bigger than "no Al Qaeda."

"Stop looking at Afghanistan as either 'war on terror' or nothing and broaden the aperture to see that it is a country in a region with China, Russia, Iran, India and Pakistan — four nuclear powers," he said. "They all have a very strong interest in trying to stabilize Afghanistan. Even though they want our troops out, they are worried we are doing it too quickly."

The Biden administration is better positioned to test the limits of regional diplomacy. While it is far from clear that Afghan talks can negotiate a political settlement that will end the war between the Taliban and the Afghan government, a coordinated regional approach is more likely to produce success than a rapid unilateral American withdrawal. American soldiers should not be held hostage to a peace agreement that might never come. But with U.S. troops down to 2,500 soldiers, some portion of which is needed as a security umbrella for the embassy, the costs of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan have fallen sharply. The Biden administration has time to craft a more responsible withdrawal.

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