

## Opinion: Biden made the tough, correct call on Afghanistan

Opinion by **Henry Olsen**



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President Biden's announcement that the United States will unconditionally withdraw its military forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11 reflects a regrettable reality, but it is the right decision.

The United States invaded Afghanistan on Oct. 7, 2001, because the Taliban government had allowed its territory to be used by the Islamist terrorist group al-Qaeda to launch the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington. That response was right: The United States had to bring the war home to the attackers. Along with our NATO allies, we were able to cripple al-Qaeda and show other nations that if they connived with terrorists, the United States would not tolerate their covert encouragement of our open enemies.

Twenty years later, the Taliban no longer controls the government, but the United States is still at war with the Taliban. We have tried a variety of strategies, including a surge of military forces in 2009 that was supposed to stop Taliban fighters operating from bases in neighboring Pakistan. None have worked. The Taliban remains a persistent power, drawing succor from its core support group, ethnic Pashtuns in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Moreover, they have consistently held the strategic initiative because the U.S. forces cannot — or will not — cross the Pakistani border to eliminate the bases the insurgents retreat to. They thus control the war's flow, ramping up attacks or lowering them according to their designs. The United States cannot win under those conditions; it can only create a stalemate preventing the Taliban from toppling the weak Afghan central government we have supported in Kabul.

This situation creates a clear strategic quandary for Washington. Is it worth spending billions of dollars a year, and committing thousands of troops and their equipment, indefinitely to keep the Taliban out of power? Viewed as an isolated question, the answer is clearly yes. It is in U.S. interest to prevent a potentially hostile power from again controlling a hard-to-attack nation from which anti-U.S. terrorism groups can freely operate. But viewed against the broader strategic challenges the United States faces, the answer is clearly no.

Today's global environment is far different from what it was 20 years ago. In 2001, China and Russia were much weaker entities. Their economies were vastly smaller than they are today, and their military forces were incapable of posing even a regional threat to U.S. allies in Asia or Europe. We could afford to concentrate our considerable power on fighting terrorism.

Today, those two countries pose very serious threats to NATO allies in Europe and the free nations in Asia. U.S. interests would be much more threatened by the loss of Taiwan to Chinese invasion or the subversion of Estonia by Russian-backed forces than they would be by a terrorist resurgence. Compared with those threats, it makes more sense for the United States to withdraw its assets from Afghanistan and concentrate them in the regions more important to

our national security.

If Biden chose to stay in Afghanistan, on the other hand, the situation could be dire. Russia, China and Iran have an informal anti-Western alliance with increasingly close military cooperation. This raises the specter of simultaneous, coordinated assaults on the U.S.-led global order that would severely tax U.S. power. Signs of that are already appearing. Russia is currently building forces on the Ukrainian border at the same time Iran is ramping up its uranium enrichment activities, and China is increasing its military presence in the South China Sea and close to Taiwan. U.S. forces would already find it difficult to support our allies in all three regions at the same time. Imagine if we also had to maintain or increase our presence to support the Afghan government in the face of a ferocious Taliban offensive — and do so to protect the lives of thousands of American soldiers and citizens now in harm's way. The political pressure to make the wrong decision — to support our troops in the peripheral Afghan theater at the expense of other, more important, engagements — would be immense.

It is regrettable that our withdrawal could easily lead to a Taliban victory. We should continue to support the elected Afghan government with arms and nonlethal aid. We should declare that we reserve the right to launch missile and airstrikes against any terrorist bases that reemerge in Taliban-controlled territory. We should also liberally apply economic sanctions against a Taliban government should it resume support for anti-U.S. groups. But we should not reconsider our decision to strategically withdraw from an untenable position.

The hard fact is that losing Afghanistan does not pose an essential threat to U.S. security, but losing a conflict against one of our three main enemies would. Kudos to President Biden for making the tough, correct call.

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