

Opinion: Biden is right. It's time to end the forever war in Afghanistan.

Opinion by **Fareed Zakaria**



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“To govern is to choose,” a French prime minister once said, and this week, President Biden made a difficult strategic choice. He announced a timeline for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, 20 years after they arrived. For several years, the United States had been unwilling to make a choice in Afghanistan, settling into a policy that was more a punt than a strategy. Biden should be commended for actually making a hard choice and not kicking the can down the road one more time.

Was it the right choice? I believe so. Let's recall that the United States has tried virtually every possible approach in Afghanistan. Initially, after 9/11, it went in with a light footprint, allying with local forces. After a few years, that strategy was seen as flawed by giving the Taliban the opportunity to regroup. Under President Barack Obama, Washington expanded coalition forces so that, at their peak, they numbered around 130,000. They attempted a comprehensive counterinsurgency policy — namely, to provide safety and win the hearts and minds of the locals.

But while the surge produced gains, they proved temporary. As U.S. forces withdrew, the Taliban always bounced back. Then, President Donald Trump announced a mini-surge of his own, adding troops but claiming that American soldiers would only fight the enemy and do no nation-building. Eventually, Trump decided he'd had enough and withdrew some of those troops, bringing them down to the current level of around 3,500.

To understand why the United States couldn't win, we should remember the dictum coined by Henry Kissinger in 1969 when describing the war in Vietnam: “The guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win.” Or recall the famous exchange between a North Vietnamese commander and Col. Harry Summers, in which the American officer told his Vietnamese counterpart just before the fall of Saigon in 1975, “You know you never defeated us on the battlefield.” To which the Vietnamese replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.” The guerrillas win by not losing.

[How has Biden done in his first 100 days? Assign a grade to him here.]

The question we don't ask enough, however, is not why the United States failed but why the Taliban has succeeded. For the past 20 years, facing the world's most powerful army — with the most advanced weaponry and intelligence in history — the ragtag Taliban has survived and often prevailed. We spend a lot of time condemning the Taliban for its fanatical ideology and its treatment of women. We call its members terrorists. But we don't seem to ask, despite all that, why it has done so well.

Mao once noted that guerrillas can succeed only if they can move among the people “as a fish swims in the sea.” The Taliban have managed to do that. Scholars on the ground have found that ethnic identity and solidarity are key to understanding Taliban success, far more important than military prowess, economic aid or even good government. Many people, particularly Pashtuns (the largest ethnic group in the country), identify with the Taliban. The Kabul government is often associated with the outsider, with foreigners. In his brilliant book, “The Accidental Guerrilla,” counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen recounts a battle in which local Afghans joined the Taliban even though they were not ideologically aligned with the group. They simply felt they had to join the fight against the outsiders. And no matter how much money and services the United States may provide, it remains the outsider.

There are other reasons for Taliban success, as well. The group has enjoyed a haven in Pakistan and received help from that country’s military. It is difficult to think of a single case in history in which an insurgency was defeated when it had a sanctuary across the border. The Taliban also benefited from the massive corruption unleashed by the tens of billions of dollars of U.S. aid and military spending that has utterly distorted the Afghan economy. The United States weakened the Kabul government by insisting that it fight opium production, which for better or worse has been a staple agricultural product in provinces such as Helmand for centuries.

But ultimately, it comes down to a simple reality: An outside force that has an ambitious set of goals — establishing a functioning democracy, ending the opium trade, ensuring equality for women — cannot succeed without a powerful, competent and legitimate local partner.

People will claim that this withdrawal shows that the United States does not have the capacity to stay the course. They will say U.S. troops should remain in Afghanistan as they have in South Korea and Germany. But those forces are stationed to deter a foreign invasion, not to hold the country together. American soldiers have stayed in Afghanistan longer than they did in Vietnam and twice as long as the Soviets stayed there. It is time for them to come home.

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