

America's mission in Afghanistan isn't accomplished

The Taliban and al-Qaeda remain threats to the Afghan government — and to Americans.

By **Bradley Bowman**

Bradley Bowman is a senior director at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. He served as an Army officer in Afghanistan, was an assistant professor at the U.S. Military Academy and was a senior adviser on the staffs of former senator Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.) and Sen. Todd Young (R-Ind.).



April 17, 2021 at 1:27 p.m. EDT

On Wednesday, President Biden announced the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, declaring that “it’s time for American troops to come home.” In his remarks, Biden rightly said the purpose of sending U.S. forces has been “to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again.” But he is dangerously wrong in suggesting U.S. forces are no longer needed in Afghanistan to accomplish that objective.

After nearly two decades, with close to 2,500 Americans killed and over 20,000 Americans wounded, it is certainly reasonable to ask why our forces are still there. As an Afghanistan veteran, I have asked the same questions. But a review of the continuing terrorist threat and the vulnerability of the Afghan government demonstrate that a date-certain withdrawal would empower terrorists, invite all-out civil war and endanger the Afghan government.

Biden’s speech reveals a troubling gap between the reasoning informing his withdrawal plan and realities on the ground.

Terrorism is still a threat

Biden declared, “We accomplished that objective,” saying the United States had prevented Afghanistan from being used to attack our homeland. Indeed, American and coalition forces in Afghanistan have helped accomplish that mission for two decades. But Biden’s remark leaves many with the incorrect impression that the international terrorist threat in Afghanistan is over.

The global terrorism threat has evolved since 9/11, but the Afghanistan-Pakistan region remains a hotbed for terrorist groups. In December, former Trump national security adviser retired Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster said the broader region includes “over 20 U.S. designated jihadist terrorist organizations.” The U.S. intelligence community, in its Annual Threat Assessment, issued April 9, found that al-Qaeda leaders “continue calls for attacks against the United States and other international targets, and seek to advance plotting around the world.”

If American forces leave, we will know less about terrorist activities in the region and will be slower and less effective in responding. “When the time comes for the U.S. military to withdraw, the U.S. government’s ability to collect and act on threats will diminish,” CIA Director William J. Burns said on Wednesday, the same day as Biden’s speech. “That’s simply a fact.”

Reflecting an appreciation of the continued threat, the administration is reportedly considering how to put counterterrorism elements in neighboring countries, and to position air assets nearby. But as Joseph Maguire, a retired admiral, top Navy SEAL officer and former acting director of national intelligence, told the New York Times, “there is no substitute for being there.” He warns that “our effectiveness in protecting our homeland will be significantly diminished.”

Even if we can detect a terrorism target with our reduced intelligence capabilities, counterterrorism experts such as Foundation for Defense of Democracies analyst David Kilcullen say not having military bases in closer proximity to potential targets will make it more difficult to carry out any necessary counterterror strikes that — along with international support for the Afghan security forces — have been essential to denying breathing space to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

Afghan forces still need help

That international support has also enabled Kabul to improve the capability of the Afghan security forces, who’ve fought bravely and increasingly carry the security burden: In this month alone, the New York Times reports, 147 pro-government troops have been killed. And as Afghans fight to secure their country, Americans benefit: Terrorists there have been deprived of the uncontested safe havens they seek to launch another major international terrorist attack.

As Afghans have increased their capacity over time, they have enabled Americans to go home. U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan have dropped dramatically from close to 100,000 a decade ago to a range estimated between 2,500 and 3,500 today. But Afghan forces still need help to address threats in their country, including training and continued assistance related to intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, medical evacuation and close air support.

Taliban leaders know this, and it’s one of the reasons they’re eager for Americans to depart. They believe they can defeat the Afghan government after the U.S. military withdraws. And if Biden’s withdrawal proceeds, they’ll soon have the opportunity to test that proposition. The U.S. intelligence community assesses that the “Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support.” Similarly, in its February report to Congress, the Afghanistan Study Group concluded that “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.”

Level with Americans

By pinning our departure to the calendar, rather than specific markers of progress, Biden risks repeating the mistake President Barack Obama made when he withdrew militarily from Iraq on a set timeline at the end of 2011. Recall that within a few years, the security situation deteriorated, forcing Obama to send troops to Iraq in 2014 to train and support Iraqi and Kurdish forces fighting the Islamic State. If Biden repeats that playbook in Afghanistan, Americans should expect a comparable result. Perhaps that is why Democratic former congressman and former White House chief of staff Leon Panetta — who served as CIA director and defense secretary during Obama’s administration — recently offered this caution:

Americans are certainly right to scrutinize and debate military interventions. There is much to criticize, for example, about the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and how the campaign in Afghanistan has been conducted.

But we must also apply the same scrutiny to withdrawals. In doing so, Americans will find that some withdrawals can be equally deleterious to our national security, especially when the withdrawals are conducted precipitously and without clear preconditions.

So, what is to be done? To start, our leaders should level with the American people about the situation in Afghanistan.

The Taliban hasn't negotiated in good faith with the Afghan government and will have even less incentive to do so once coalition forces leave. They've waited us out, and now they can see that paying off. Taliban leaders have refused to break with al-Qaeda and prevent it from operating in Afghanistan — one of the stipulations under the Trump administration's agreement with the Taliban that called for U.S. forces to leave Afghanistan in May. Al-Qaeda continues to enjoy the Taliban's protection — and the Taliban benefits from al-Qaeda's advice and financial support.

Americans should understand that there is a real risk that civil war could erupt once the U.S.-led coalition withdraws, and we could eventually see a Taliban-controlled, al-Qaeda-influenced country bordering nuclear-armed Pakistan.

These threats won't just go away once we leave. Rather than looking for the exits, then, the prudent course would be to view a modest U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, with troop levels roughly comparable to the coalition presence there now, as part of America's enduring global military posture, a manageable investment in American security. To put it in perspective, U.S. strength in Afghanistan today is around 10 percent of the U.S. force stationed in South Korea.

Clearly, we must always ensure our troops have what they need to defend themselves and carry out their mission. And we certainly shouldn't keep our service members in harm's way a day longer than America's interests require. Every military casualty is a tragedy, as is every death here at home from a terrorist attack. But given the continued threats in Afghanistan and the benefits of retaining a modest force there, the burden of proof rests with anyone — including members of Congress and the president — making the case to the American public that we can safely withdraw in September.
