

With Afghanistan decision, Biden restores foreign policymaking process that Trump had largely abandoned

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April 18, 2021 at 6:44 p.m. EDT

Three months after taking office, President Biden has reestablished the formal decision process, which his predecessor seemed determined to destroy, that has guided U.S. administrations through foreign policymaking since the Second World War.

Afghanistan was among the first major issues on which the process, organized and directed by the National Security Council, became fully operational. Dozens of high-level meetings were held, including four separate sessions with the president in the Situation Room. Military, intelligence and diplomatic assessments were compiled, and consultations were held with allies and lawmakers.

Yet at the end of the day, Biden did not budge from where he began nearly 13 years ago, when a visit to Afghanistan as vice president-elect convinced him, he said last week, that “more and endless American military force could not create or sustain a durable Afghan government.”

His decision to withdraw all of the few thousand American troops remaining in Afghanistan by Sept. 11 — the 20th anniversary of the 2001 al-Qaeda terrorist attacks that began the war there — defied the advice of senior military leaders and raised significant national security questions.

U.S. officials said that Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, and Gen. Austin “Scottie” Miller, commander of U.S. and NATO troops, all advocated a conditions-based approach, additional time for negotiation, or, at a minimum, keeping some sort of residual counterterrorism force on the ground in Afghanistan. The generals said that the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, waves of Afghan refugees rushing to neighboring countries and Europe, and the reemergence of al-Qaeda as a potent terrorist threat were very real possibilities.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, asked by reporters last week in Brussels whether the top brass had agreed with the “down to zero” decision, rebuffed the question, saying only that “their voices were heard, and their concerns taken into consideration.”

Officials said that Austin, like his counterparts in uniform, supported a continued military presence, although he shared his personal views with only a small group of people. A Defense official said Austin’s approach was informed by his own experiences in uniform, including in Iraq, where he oversaw the Obama administration’s rapid withdrawal of forces in 2011. Less than three years later, the Islamic State took over a third of the country.

CIA Director William J. Burns, in testimony the day before Biden's Wednesday announcement, told Congress that "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," referring to the possible resurgence of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups with global ambitions. "That is simply a fact."

At NATO, where Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Austin officially informed the alliance of the decision last week, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg indicated that NATO members with troops in Afghanistan had little choice but to follow suit. "In light of the U.S. decision," he said, "all Allies agreed to the statement" of joint withdrawal.

To many in the White House, widely reported accounts of the disagreements miss the point, especially in light of President Donald Trump's habit of not even consulting the military before tweeting abrupt diktats on troop withdrawals.

Even Trump, however, often succumbed to after-the-fact military pressure to reverse his decisions.

A senior administration official acknowledged that "there were people among [Biden's] senior team on both sides of this question. It's certainly not that everybody was in favor of one option or the other."

But the decision process worked "exactly how the system was designed to work," the official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity under White House ground rules. "These decisions do not rest in our democracy with the Pentagon. They rest with the president." The military's views "are extremely consequential, given its role in the policy that is made. But the policy decisions rest with the president."

Although Biden supported the initial deployment of U.S. troops to Afghanistan two decades ago, his views had changed sharply by 2009, when he argued against the force surge the military advocated and President Barack Obama ultimately approved.

In 2011, he was an outlier in publicly saying that the Taliban "per se is not our enemy" and had never expressed a desire to attack the U.S. homeland. During his presidential campaign last year, he promised to end the country's "forever wars."

Administration officials have cited Trump's 2020 agreement with the Taliban to withdraw by May 1 this year as limiting Biden's options. "We started from the perspective of having inherited a policy that candidly was not in a very good place," the senior official said. "We had the lowest troop numbers since the early years of the war. We had the Taliban feeling ascendant on the battleground and kind of fighting the Afghan government to virtually a stalemate." "And we had this May 1 deadline," he said, after which the Taliban had threatened to resume attacking any remaining U.S. and other allied forces on grounds that the Trump agreement had been broken.

Neither the United States nor the Taliban have complied with other elements of the agreement, including full prisoner releases, the lifting of sanctions against the militants and a reduction in overall violence. The militants have not severed their ties with al-Qaeda, according to the Pentagon and the United Nations. Agreed inter-Afghan talks began last fall but have gotten nowhere.

But the deadline gave Biden a template for the withdrawal. "It is perhaps not what I would have negotiated myself, but

it was an agreement made by the United States government, and that means something,” he said in his Wednesday announcement. “So, in keeping with that agreement and with our national interest, the United States will begin our final withdrawal . . . on May 1 of this year.”

Administration officials disputed any suggestion that the three-month National Security Council review was a mere formality. “We ran a real process,” the senior official said. In addition to the Situation Room meetings Biden led, “the principals” — the top national security officials — met without the president three times in sessions chaired by national security adviser Jake Sullivan. Their deputies met at least 10 times, the official said, as risks and options were honed for delivery to increasingly higher levels. Afghanistan was a frequent topic of discussion during the president’s daily intelligence briefing, often attended by Austin and Milley, officials said.

“I think it’s noteworthy that, unlike previous policy reviews, particularly on this subject . . . there was remarkably little backstabbing and leaking in the press, people saying they weren’t being heard, the process was being circumvented, or the president had already made up his mind when he went into this,” the senior official said.

During the course of those meetings, if not before, the president came to several key conclusions. He rejected the notion that U.S. troops could or should be used as leverage to stem inter-Afghan violence or promote negotiations.

He believed that anything other than a fixed departure timeline meant going back to war with the Taliban. And he concluded that there was no viable middle option between setting a date certain for complete withdrawal or staying indefinitely.

By the time of NATO’s winter meeting of defense ministers on Feb. 17, though the decision process was incomplete, Austin began informing allies of the direction it was heading. In March, alarmed by news reports suggesting that the lack of a decision meant an indefinite stay was becoming more likely, Blinken told NATO foreign ministers that getting out was a very real possibility.

In a news conference at the end of March, Biden gave the clearest public indication of his thinking, saying full withdrawal was “unlikely” by May 1, but that “I can’t picture” U.S. forces still being in Afghanistan when 2022 begins.

Some experts have questioned whether a refusal to leave meant return to war with the Taliban was inevitable. Others have noted that the United States has often used its military forces as leverage in other countries such as South Korea and Japan, where tens of thousands of troops are deployed both to dissuade North Korea from attacking as well as to fight back if it does.

The militants have insisted the May 1 deadline is real, no matter what timetable Biden has set for departure, and any foreign troops remaining after that will be subject to attack. The United States and NATO have promised aggressive retaliation if they are attacked while heading for the exit.

But the bottom line, according to several senior administration officials, is that Afghanistan is no longer a high U.S. priority, as it was in 2001, compared with the threats of 2021, including Chinese and Russian aggression, terrorist surges elsewhere in the world, climate change, global health and nonproliferation. Public opinion has strongly supported withdrawal.

The administration has pledged it will continue paying for Afghanistan's own security forces, pressing for inter-Afghan negotiations, providing humanitarian assistance, and using diplomatic and economic tools to keep the Taliban from returning to the draconian policies and repression of women and minorities that characterized the last time it controlled Afghanistan, from the mid-1990s until the 2001 U.S. incursion in pursuit of Osama bin Laden that quickly became war with the Taliban.

In an interview Sunday with ABC's "This Week," Blinken seemed to accept an inevitable militant takeover. If the Taliban has "any expectation of getting any international acceptance, of not being treated as a pariah," he said, "it's going to have to respect the rights of women and girls" or risk the withdrawal of "international recognition" and "international status."

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