

# Opinion: Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan is a terrible risk

Opinion by **Michael Gerson**



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On Sept. 11, 2021, President Biden will *not* end the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

This is not a prophecy, but a fact. The reason is that the U.S.-led war — our country's pursuit of military victory — concluded six years ago.

In 2014, President Barack Obama announced the end of Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan. The Afghan government assumed responsibility for the nation's defense. The new phase of U.S. involvement, called Operation Freedom's Sentinel, focused on two goals: a U.S. counterterrorism mission against al-Qaeda and other groups, and a NATO-led mission to train Afghan forces.

When Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently said there was "no military solution" to the Afghan conflict, he was correct. But this has not been the U.S. objective for quite a while. Rather, it has been to destroy terrorist havens and to strengthen local security partners. These are the aims that Biden proposes to abandon, or weaken, by his total withdrawal.

Why does Biden feel obligated to act at all? He has provided several inadequate answers.

First, he argues that the United States has fulfilled its initial purpose, which was "to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again." But you can't accomplish this mission once and for all any more than you can weed a garden once and for all. Terrorist threats are defeated by relentless pursuit. Losing a forward base in a volatile region is likely to be costly to the United States, since it is difficult to strike from a longer distance without the benefit of local intelligence. A day before Biden's announcement, CIA Director William J. Burns told Congress that upon withdrawal, "the U.S. government's ability to collect and act on threats will diminish."

Second, Biden wants to remain faithful to the withdrawal agreement signed by President Donald Trump. But this makes Biden the only person in the world concerned about keeping Trump's word — and that includes Trump. The Afghan government would prefer the United States to stay. Our NATO allies would prefer the United States to stay. There is no deadline, except in Biden's mind.

Third, Biden contends that "our reasons for remaining in Afghanistan are becoming increasingly unclear." But this simply isn't the case. The U.S. role has been narrowed and focused over the past few years. Past U.S. policy has sometimes been aimless. But that should not prevent the salvaging of current benefits out of past failures.

Fourth, while promising he will not "take our eye off the terrorist threat," Biden argues that the United States must

focus attention and resources on the challenges that are in front of us. These he defines as increasing economic competitiveness, countering an assertive China and defeating the pandemic. But drawing the eyes of the country to what Biden describes as urgent future challenges sounds like the definition of averting your gaze from the past threat.

The most serious of Biden's arguments is his deep, authentic concern for the troops who should not be "used as a bargaining chip." He is right that every casualty matters because every life matters. For a country with global interests and duties, however, the scale of sacrifice is not irrelevant. Gaining the benefits of a counterinsurgency base in Afghanistan would probably not be worth the commitment of 1 million troops, with thousands of fatalities each year. But the U.S. commitment is down to about 3,000. In the past year, there have been 19 American fatalities from hostile action, and none since February. (The U.S. Army, by comparison, had 20 deaths in 2019 from training accidents.)

Is the commitment of 3,000 troops — and the terrible risks that result — worth the benefits? It depends, of course, on unknowable factors. But U.S. military leaders, by most accounts, sought to maintain the status quo. They value the ability to remain close to human intelligence sources and build relationships with local leaders and units. They fear the fall of Kabul, the repression of women, the destabilizing flow of refugees and the systematic murder of Afghans who sided with the United States. And they are concerned that Afghanistan will eventually revert to being a jihadist bed and breakfast.

The argument about military sacrifice can cut both ways. If America's absence from Afghanistan contributes to a new attack on our country by terrorists there, the U.S. military may need to act again, under even more trying conditions. The immediate precedent is Iraq, where a precipitous withdrawal in 2011 (supported by then-Vice President Joe Biden) helped create the whirling chaos in which the Islamic State thrived.

In any case, Biden's choice of Sept. 11, 2021, as abscond-from-Afghanistan day is obscene. For years, the Taliban has insisted it won't negotiate for peace until the last American soldier leaves the country. On the 20th anniversary of an attack on America it enabled, the Taliban will get its fondest wish.

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