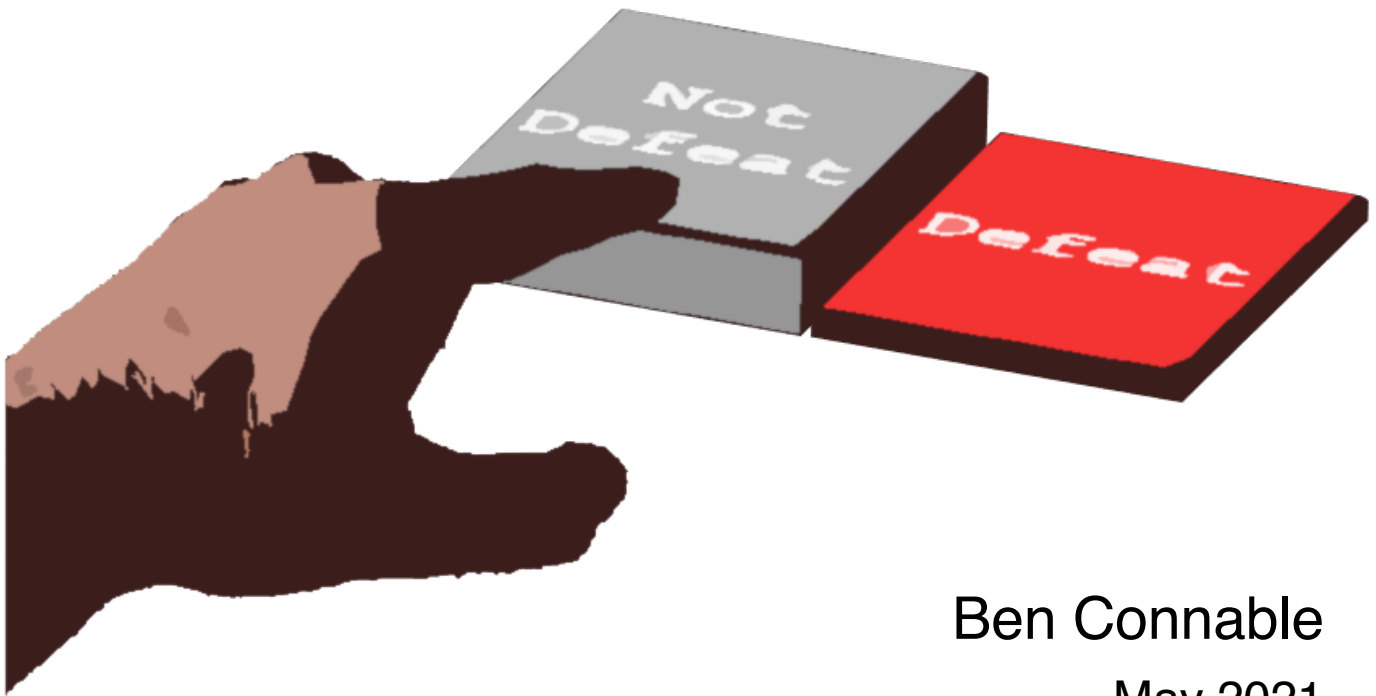


Deselecting Defeat in Afghanistan

Sustaining a Small Military Footprint to Pursue Real Peace



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Executive Summary

I wrote this commentary in late March, 2021, before President Biden announced the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. My purpose was to provide more depth to the practical arguments to keep a small force in Afghanistan to pursue a genuine and lasting peace. While the withdrawal enters its final stages, and while this momentous policy decision appears all but irreversible, I argue it is not too late to pause.

American and other NATO military forces are racing for the exits. Weak and increasingly disheartened Afghan security forces face a rising Taliban foe. The Taliban have routinely violated the peace agreement they signed with the United States in 2020, and they will continue to try to overthrow the Afghan government once it stands alone.

I present arguments for and against withdrawal, analyze costs and risks of staying, and recommend reversing the present decision. The United States should keep a small footprint military mission in Afghanistan to achieve its published strategies. Table E.1 lists President Biden's 2021 interim strategic objectives and compares them to the risks of leaving and prospective benefits of staying.

Table E.1 Grand Strategic and Strategic Risks and Benefits

Objective	Risks of Withdrawal	Benefits of Staying
Revitalize democracy	Afghan democracy degrades or collapses and Taliban increase power	Afghan democracy, though weak, is preserved and over time, secured
Strengthen partnerships	Effectively ends partnership with Afghan security forces, leaves them in an untenable military situation against a rising opponent	Provides minimal air, intelligence, logistics, and advisory support to prevent collapse and to set security conditions for negotiations
Compete with China	China likely to gain some long-term advantage controlling rare-earth elements	China less likely to gain some long-term advantage controlling rare-earth elements
Protect the vulnerable	Afghan women will be attacked and repressed, and the United States will likely be blamed for these conditions	Millions of Afghan women—not all—will be protected and given better opportunities, signaling U.S. prioritization of human rights
	Counterterror operations conducted in the absence of close-in support are likely to harm and kill more civilians	Counterterror operations conducted with close-in support are less likely to harm and kill civilians than long-range operations
Protect American citizens	Al-Qaida and the Islamic State likely survive and probably expand in parts of Afghanistan as security degrades	Counterterror operations are more effective in suppressing terrorist groups that intend to kill Americans
Responsibly end the war in Afghanistan	Afghanistan will remain a sanctuary for international terrorists and the Taliban will almost certainly pursue their objective to overthrow the pro-American government	Effective negotiations from a position of equity or strength are more likely to set conditions for reduced international terrorism and enduring Afghan security

Deselecting Defeat in Afghanistan

As of late May 2021, the United States military is well on the way to completing the withdrawal of all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan.¹ Given this decision, historical analyses will probably give Al Qaida and the Taliban significant credit for eroding American will to fight.² Unfortunately, if the United States follows through on the present commitment to meet the stipulations of the 2020 Doha agreement with the Taliban, Al Qaida leaders, foot soldiers, and followers will thereafter have two reasons to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Taliban leaders are already celebrating American defeat, openly flaunting the terms of the Doha agreement, and openly planning to abrogate the remaining terms of the deal once U.S. forces depart.³

For twenty years U.S. military forces, diplomats, intelligence experts, and aid officers have worked to prevent Al Qaida from using Afghanistan as a sanctuary and to prevent the Taliban from retaking power. While there has been and remains no clear path to total victory in Afghanistan, the United States and its NATO allies almost certainly have it within their power to avoid the kind of strategic collapse that now appears likely and, in doing so, pursue a genuine peace agreement. By withdrawing from a position of notable disadvantage, and by accepting the likely resurgence of international terrorist groups and the Taliban in Afghanistan, the United States knowingly—and unnecessarily—selects strategic defeat at the expense of its own stated geostrategic objectives.

This is a reversible decision, and it is a decision that should be reversed. Keeping a small U.S. military and diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan can stave off what will almost certainly be a major setback in the administration's laudable and clearly articulated grand strategy to champion and preserve global democracy, defend the rights of women and minorities, and guarantee American security.⁴ It is possible to craft a logical, evidence-driven, risk-conscious policy in Afghanistan that will help sustain the weak Afghan democracy, rebuild and preserve American will to fight, and leverage a stronger position to negotiate a far more legitimate and, hopefully, enduring peace.

Overview of This Report

I offer a brief examination of the pathway to American self-selected defeat, using the RAND Corporation's National Will-to-Fight model as a guide. I then examine the central arguments in support of withdrawal from Afghanistan, focusing on the realist international policy proposals that appear to be in ascendance. Building from my previous analyses, the recent work of the top U.S. experts on Afghanistan policy, and a number of international experts, I then offer a number of interrelated, moderated arguments to sustain a small military footprint in Afghanistan.

How American Will to Fight in Afghanistan Broke

RAND defines national will to fight as the determination of a national government to conduct sustained military and other operations for some objective even when the expectation of success decreases or the need for significant political, economic, and military sacrifices increases.⁵ Will to fight is, arguably, the single most important factor in war. We assess national will by looking at factors, contexts, and mechanisms. This table shows the fifteen political, economic, and military variables we employ for assessment.⁶

Table 1 National Will to Fight Factors, Contexts, and Mechanisms

	Political	Economic	Military
Factors shaping will to fight policy decisions	Stakes Cohesion Civil-military relations Popular support Allies	Leverage	Capabilities
Contexts for understanding factors	Government type National identity	Resilience	Conflict duration
Mechanisms for influencing national will	Engagement Indoctrination and messaging	Pressures	Casualties

As part of this analytic team, I examined the narrative of American and Taliban will to fight in the Afghanistan war.⁷ Evidence explaining the U.S. path to self-defeat is readily available. In Afghanistan, President Obama, President Trump, and President Biden came to believe that the stakes associated with defeat were not sufficiently high to keep troops on the ground.⁸ Political cohesion to support ongoing operations has been, at best, shaky.⁹

Civil-military relations on Afghanistan were eroded by the distrust sewn between General Stanley McChrystal and President Obama during early days of the 2009-2011 surge.¹⁰ It is helpful to recall that one of McChrystal's aides was reported to have specifically insulted then-Vice President Biden in reference to his perspectives on the war in Afghanistan.¹¹ Strained civil-military relations are often cited in the present analyses of the impending withdrawal.¹²

Popular support for the war ebbs and flows, though it is often portrayed inaccurately (see below).¹³ A democratic election cycle and short turn shifts in policy do not lend themselves to what are necessarily long-term irregular warfare operations.¹⁴ U.S.

political leaders have been inconsistent in their efforts to build and sustain American support for the war.¹⁵

Opponents of the war routinely cite casualty counts and financial costs.¹⁶ While relative costs in both lives and treasure have decreased dramatically in the past few years—and would probably stay low—this important nuance is generally lost in the public debate.

Recipricol Dynamics: We Get Weaker, They Get Stronger, We Get Weaker...

On the other side of the equation, Al Qaida and the Taliban have taken a long-term perspective. The Taliban have nowhere else to go; they have always viewed their sanctuary in Pakistan as temporary. Every indication of weakening American will to fight, political dissent, and the more tangible and tactically unsound fluctuations in U.S. and European troop presence have bolstered Taliban will to fight.¹⁷ While they probably could never have militarily defeated a NATO-backed Afghan military, they are confident they can succeed after a U.S. (and now planned full NATO) withdrawal.¹⁸ Taliban confidence has contributed to American perceptions of hopelessness and to American self-defeat.¹⁹

The United States has lost its national will to fight in Afghanistan. But will to fight can be rebuilt once it has been lost. Evidence and logical arguments are available to help build a strong case to stay long enough to build a genuine and enduring peace.

From Good War to Forever War

For now, arguments to stay have been defeated. Twenty years after the United States overthrew the Taliban government, and twelve years after President Obama called Afghanistan “the good war,” opinions on Afghanistan have changed.²⁰ Proponents of withdrawal now refer to Afghanistan as the *forever war*.

Forever war is a compelling term, evoking the absurdity and hopelessness central to Joe Haldeman’s classic 1974 science fiction novel and to Dexter Filkins’ 2008 nonfiction book.²¹ Haldeman’s *Forever Wars* was a deeply personal examination of his own analogous experiences in the Vietnam War. Filkins’ *Forever Wars* was a ground-up, impressionistic take on his experiences as a reporter in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the present context, *forever war* casts the shadow of Vietnam on the Afghanistan war and paints the current conflict as absurd and hopeless. Rhetorical use of *forever war* is typically accompanied by bleak facts: tens of thousands wounded and thousands of dead over twenty years, trillions of dollars down the drain, and the specter of an implacable and rising Taliban foe.²² Some arguments for withdrawal also identify the logical fallacy in appeals to keep U.S. troops on the ground: Sunk costs of lives and

treasure do not logically justify spending more lives and treasure, assuming the United States is willing to accept defeat and not return.

But while they perhaps justifiably attack the sunk cost fallacy, some of these same appeals to leave Afghanistan also fumble into assailable territory.²³ Listing sunk costs in arguments to leave is perhaps no more logical than listing sunk costs in appeals to stay.

More egregiously, these same articles supporting withdrawal incorrectly claim that on the whole the American people are sick of the war and want to leave.²⁴ But as a recent review of polling data by The Brookings Institution points out, Americans have been and continue to be ambivalent about U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan.²⁵ Afghanistan is neither America's longest undeclared war nor particularly long in relation to other cases of irregular warfare.

How Do Insurgencies Really End?

While twenty years seems like a forever war to many supporters of withdrawal, it is in fact about average in duration given the circumstances in Afghanistan. In *How Insurgencies End*, the RAND Corporation found that insurgencies tend to last approximately 10 years, with a an additional 6-year tail from the tipping point to conclusion when the government is successful.²⁶ Complexity correlates with longer wars: More insurgent groups, more ethnic conflicts, tougher geography, and sanctuary add years to insurgencies. We analyzed the Afghanistan case as “ongoing” in this analysis.

In the absence of physical military collapse, defeat is both a state of mind—a matter of will to fight—and also a subjective interpretation of facts. Case analyses are not predictive, but they are useful to inform subjective, or impressionistic interpretations of irregular war. While many supporters of withdrawal argue that the war is lost, and that the Taliban can simply outlast the United States, RAND case analysis showed that governments tend to outlast insurgencies when they can sustain their own will to fight. In the longest running cases RAND examined in *How Insurgencies End* (30, 40, or 50 years) governments generally prevailed. Major powers supporting foreign governments against an insurgency tend to lose not when they have been physically defeated, but when they make a conscious choice to stop fighting.

Rearticulating the Arguments to Stay in Afghanistan

In the Appendix I examine realist arguments to leave and some of the present arguments to stay. In general, the arguments to stay are normative, out of step with current socio-political dynamics in the United States, and ineffective. Given the failure

of normative arguments to convince three successive presidential administrations to stay in Afghanistan, some rearticulation of these arguments is needed.

Building from the work of the Afghanistan Study Group, my RAND colleagues—in particular, former Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) Ambassador James Dobbins, and former acting SRAP Laurel E. Miller—and others, I offer a number of interrelated arguments to retain a small military presence in Afghanistan to support a genuine, sustainable, conditions-based peace plan and eventual withdrawal.²⁷ I specifically address the Biden Administration’s stated policy objectives—the Biden grand strategy—offered in the 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance.²⁸ These arguments are designed to provide the building blocks for a collective case to retain a small footprint military force in Afghanistan.

Using Estimative Language

A constructive argument to stay in Afghanistan should avoid some of the logical fallacies that have plagued the current debate. This approach requires moderated, evidence-driven forecasting.

It is a logical fallacy to predict (to claim with certainty) that a future event will happen based on past and current events, *forecasting* is a necessary aspect of policy debate. Forecasting is the process of estimating future conditions with some degree of certainty while providing supporting evidence and analysis. Intelligence analysts use words of estimative probability to help policymakers understand the degree of confidence associated with a forecast.

Given the intended policy audience, I apply a modified version of the traditional Sherman Kent estimative language familiar to most U.S. policymakers.²⁹ For the purposes of these arguments, *almost certain* suggests an approximately 95% confidence; *likely* suggests an approximately 85% confidence; *probable* suggests an approximately 70% confidence; *uncertain* suggests an approximately 40% to 60% confidence; *unlikely* suggests an approximately 30% confidence; and *improbable* suggests 20% confidence or less. These estimates reflect my informed analysis and my assessment of the cited sources.

Linking Practical Arguments to Published Strategy

President Biden’s administration has identified its interim grand strategic and country-specific priorities: (1) end the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) revitalize American democracy and the U.S. economy; (3) revitalize democracy around the world and defend global democratic values; (4) strengthen our international alliances and partnerships; (5) protect vulnerable populations (women, children, disabled, LGBTQI) around the world; and (6) to “work to responsibly end America’s longest war in Afghanistan while

ensuring that Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorist attacks against the United States.”³⁰

Together, these priorities describe a democracy-friendly, humanitarian, multilateralist grand strategy. There is a dichotomy in this grand strategy as it might be applied to Afghanistan. At the grand strategic level the United States will “double down on building partnerships,” advance gender equality and women’s empowerment, and “join with likeminded allies and partners to revitalize democracy the world over.”³¹ But in Afghanistan—a weak pro-Western democracy effectively created by the United States and European allies, with a military partner force that is almost completely dependent on U.S. support and leadership—the United States will seek to find a quick responsible exit and focus solely on counterterrorism.

As of May 2021, the Administration intends to offset the lack of military presence with increased economic aid and funding. This is a noble but impracticable alternative. The U.S. Government’s own reporting has shown that effective execution of aid programming is extraordinarily difficult even with U.S. military personnel providing overwatch and guaranteeing rural access for U.S. aid experts.³² Removing NATO security guarantees will almost certainly reduce access to the areas that most need help and push local aid partner organizations to make security arrangements with the Taliban (or worse).³³ Corruption will almost certainly increase, and aid effectiveness will almost certainly decrease in the absence of U.S. security guarantees.³⁴ Increased aid is not a viable alternative to physical security, and it will not prevent the likely collapse of large parts of the Afghan state security structure and government.

An effective argument to stay must help the administration address these conceptual gaps.³⁵ The following five arguments describe the risks of leaving and the proposed benefits of staying as they relate, specifically, to President Biden’s grand strategy and country-specific strategies as spelled out in the *2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. In the following sections I provide some supporting analysis to inform possible next steps.

1: Preserve Afghan Democracy to Support Global Democracy

Sustaining a small U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan will almost certainly help prevent the likely, partial collapse of the democratic Afghan government and its security forces. There is sufficient evidence from recent and current reporting to forecast that, given current conditions, a withdrawal of U.S. military forces is likely to directly contribute to Taliban military success against Afghan security forces in the west, south, and east of the country, and at least a partial collapse of the democratic Afghan government and its security forces in those areas.³⁶

On April 9, 2021, the U.S. Intelligence Community forecast that the “Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support.”³⁷ This is strong estimative language for a consensus-based, community-wide analytic report.³⁸ More dire outcomes, including prospective civil war or outright Taliban military victory, are possible, but they cannot be defensibly forecast.³⁹

Because they view the 2020 peace negotiation as a formal acknowledgement of American defeat, the Taliban have significant political and military will to continue to pursue the military defeat of the Afghan government.⁴⁰ Afghan security forces are relatively weaker than the Taliban in many parts of the country.⁴¹ Absent U.S. military support, European military presence in Afghanistan is scheduled to end.⁴² In the absence of international military assistance, the Taliban almost certainly retain sufficient military force to at least partially defeat the Afghan security forces in areas with high percentages of ethnic Pashtun.⁴³

The Taliban have reportedly not abided by the terms of the 2020 peace deal while U.S. troops are in place, suggesting they are likely to ignore many or all of the terms of the deal after the United States withdraws.⁴⁴ Therefore, U.S. military withdrawal will likely undermine rather than support President Biden’s stated national security objectives to double down on building partnerships like those with the Afghan security forces, and to defend international democracy.

Keeping a small footprint, or light footprint of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan will almost certainly entail sustaining the NATO air base at Bagram (if European forces remain alongside American forces) and probably some supporting air and advisory bases in areas like Mazar-e-Sharif.⁴⁵ It will require keeping security forces, intelligence personnel, advisors, logisticians, and other support personnel in place to help sustain Afghan security operations, renew the grinding task of improving Afghan security forces, and to secure U.S. diplomatic facilities.

Sustaining embassy-centric operations in conflict zones is challenging. But the United States has historically maintained embassies, consulates, security force assistance missions, and small military bases in capital cities and limited peripheral areas of conflict-stricken countries for well over 100 years. It continues to do so today in places like the Philippines, Iraq, Pakistan, Mali, Myanmar, Lebanon, and Ukraine. While there is no proven template for the number of forces needed to secure an embassy and conduct effective security force assistance, the U.S. Government has conducted extensive needs assessments in Afghanistan and should be able to effectively manage a secure and effective small footprint operation.⁴⁶

If the United States chooses to keep its military personnel in Afghanistan, U.S. personnel will be at some risk alongside their NATO allies and Afghan partners. War is

uncertain and inherently risky. But the U.S. military has already taken positive steps to mitigate risks.⁴⁷ Considerable work has been done to estimate the needed number of troops to prevent further serious erosion or collapse in Afghanistan. The *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report* describes several alternative approaches that are worth considering.

2: Suppress International Terrorism to Keep Americans Safe

Sustaining a small military presence in Afghanistan will almost certainly allow for sustained and at least moderately effective counterterror operations against international terrorist organizations that seek to kill American citizens. International terrorist organizations that have repeatedly stated and demonstrated their intent to attack the United States, its interests abroad, and its allies and partners, continue to use poorly governed spaces in Afghanistan as sanctuary.⁴⁸

As recently as April 9, 2021, the U.S. Intelligence Community made it clear that the threat from the Islamic State and Al-Qaida represent a sustained threat and that they are using areas—just like the poorly governed areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border—to rebuild:⁴⁹

ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and Iran and its militant allies continue to plot terrorist attacks against US persons and interests, including to varying degrees in the United States. Despite leadership losses, terrorist groups have shown great resiliency and are taking advantage of ungoverned areas to rebuild.

While reporting is mixed, there is considerable evidence to suggest that Al Qaida retains a strong footprint in Afghanistan.⁵⁰ In 2020 a United Nations sanctions monitoring team reported “The senior leadership of Al-Qaida remains present in Afghanistan, as well as hundreds of armed operatives, Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, and groups of foreign terrorist fighters aligned with the Taliban...Al Qaida has reacted positively to the [U.S.-Taliban peace] agreement.” Taliban leaders have reportedly violated the Doha agreement by continuing to support Al Qaida in Afghanistan.⁵¹

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), arguably the strongest remaining Islamic State element worldwide, is firmly entrenched in the mountains of eastern and southeastern Afghanistan. In 2020 my RAND colleagues argued that ISKP operations continue and will grow in the absence of effective countermeasures.⁵² U.S. Government outlets report on an Islamic State resilience and, in some cases, resurgence in Afghanistan.⁵³

There are key distinctions between the kind of U.S.-led counterterrorism operations currently underway inside Afghanistan and the proposed long-range, or “offshore”

operations under consideration.⁵⁴ Current U.S.-led counterterror activities against Al Qaida and the Islamic State, and other groups along the Afghan-Pakistan border, have had limited but fairly consistent effectiveness with on-the-ground human intelligence, signals intelligence, and drone support.⁵⁵

Withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan will at the very least significantly reduce these intelligence activities and may force all of them to relocate outside of Afghanistan's borders. In general, long-range counterterrorism intelligence and strike missions are less effective at suppressing terrorists than close-in operations because long-range intelligence is less plentiful, less timely, and less accurate.⁵⁶ Any increase in the time lag between intelligence notification and strike increases the chances of error as targets move about the battlefield.

In the wake of the withdrawal announcement, several senior U.S. military and intelligence officials have publicly described the challenges associated with long-range counterterror operations. General Kenneth McKenzie, the commander of U.S. Central Command and the senior military officer responsible for Afghanistan called this proposed "over the horizon" counterterror mission "extremely difficult."⁵⁷ CIA Director William Burns stated "The U.S. government's ability to collect and act on threats will diminish. That's simply a fact." Burns also stated that both Al-Qaida and the Islamic State remained "intent on recovering the ability to attack U.S. targets" in the region or on American soil.

Civilian casualties are a pressing concern for counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.⁵⁸ Full withdrawal and cessation of all military and counterterror activities will ensure that the United States does not directly contribute to unintentional civilian deaths during air strikes or raids.⁵⁹ However, the Biden Administration has clearly stated its intent to sustain some form of counterterror operations in Afghanistan. Conducting counterterrorism from within Afghanistan's borders is almost certain to reduce the likelihood of accidental civilian casualties in comparison with long-range operations for the same reasons close-in operations reduce errors in targeting terrorists.⁶⁰

Remaining NATO elements, including those from key allies Great Britain and Italy, will not pick up the slack in counterterrorism operations if the United States departs. The U.S. counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan "complements the NATO [train and assist] mission."⁶¹ European NATO allies have neither the mandate nor capabilities to suppress Al Qaida or ISKP in the remote regions of Afghanistan. In any event, remaining NATO forces are scheduled to depart Afghanistan in parallel with U.S. forces. If the withdrawal is executed, by 2022 there will be no meaningful infrastructure in place in Afghanistan to support effective counterterrorism operations or to reduce civilian casualties from long-range operations.

3: Keep a Foothold for Economic Competition with China

Sustaining a small military presence will probably help ensure U.S. access to Afghanistan's rare-earth elements and limit Chinese access to these strategic resources. Rare-earth elements are strategic economic and military resources used in the construction of smartphones, jet aircraft, and clean-energy technologies.⁶² China provides approximately 80% of the United States' rare-earth metals, giving it passive but de facto control over U.S. advanced manufacturing capacity.⁶³ Strategic control over rare-earth elements is likely to have significant impact on U.S. efforts to counter growing Chinese global influence, to slow China's aggressive Belt-and-Road Initiative, to speed domestic clean energy technology growth, and to sustain a technological military edge over China and other near-peer threat states.⁶⁴

The U.S. Department of Defense has identified China's control of rare-earth elements, and the future U.S. access to rare-earth elements, as a strategic military challenge.⁶⁵ A 2007 estimate by the U.S. Geological Survey and the Afghanistan Ministry of Mines showed that Afghanistan may have over 1 trillion U.S. dollars of rare-earth minerals in both the plains and mountainous areas of the country.⁶⁶

Some dispute these findings. Gaining access to these elements is quite difficult under present security conditions and without major infrastructure improvements. Rare-earth elements do exist elsewhere in the world. But the scale of this potential find suggests that influence over the rights to Afghanistan's rare-earth elements in the absence of international competition might, over the long run, provide some strategic economic advantage to China.⁶⁷

China is prepared to take advantage of this long-term opportunity. It is openly pursuing increased engagement in Afghanistan. China has developed extensive capabilities to extract resources in conflict areas, and it can apply these in Afghanistan with fewer concerns for human rights or Afghan government sovereignty than the United States might have.⁶⁸

Therefore, sustaining a small U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would likely help ensure U.S. access to Afghanistan's rare-earth elements, help to limit China's access to rare-earth elements, help achieve the Biden Administration's strategic objective to "prevail in strategic competition with China..." and at least indirectly, modestly support U.S. domestic clean energy investments and clean energy competitiveness.

4: Protect Defend Afghan Women to Defend All Women

Sustaining a small U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan will almost certainly help guarantee U.S.-led women's rights progress in Afghanistan and help avoid significant

repression of Afghan women and their children. While the United States cannot protect all women everywhere, as long as it provides military support to the Afghan government it can continue to protect at least several million Afghan women in the center and north of the country.

Protection and championing of women has been a bedrock of arguments to sustain a military footprint in Afghanistan.⁶⁹ It is central to the Afghanistan Study Group's argument to stay. But these arguments generally rely more on normative justification than logical, practical argumentation. Normative arguments to protect Afghan women are subject to legitimate critique: they are subjective and somewhat ephemeral.

I and others believe that, given its past and present role in Afghanistan, the United States has moral duty to protect Afghan women.⁷⁰ We believe that this duty is in keeping with longstanding American, democratic cultural norms. But other Americans do not hold this belief. Or, if they do, they do not value these norms to the point that they outweigh other practical or other normative variables. Normative arguments have failed in this case because, in my reading of the many shifts in public opinion and policy over the past two decades, they have too often resorted to the logical fallacy of emotional appeal.

There is a more practical, and perhaps more effective argument to protect and champion Afghan women. It is an action that directly aligns with the published foreign policy and grand strategic objectives of the U.S. Government: Successful protection and advancement of women's rights in Afghanistan—no matter how imperfect—have and will continue to directly support women in the United States. It will also support President Biden's objective to champion democracy worldwide. Here are the relevant statements from the Biden Administration's interim strategic guidance:⁷¹

When we defend equal rights of all people—of women and girls, LGBTQI individuals, indigenous communities, people with disabilities, and people of every ethnic background and religion—we help ensure that those rights are protected for our own children in America...Global development is among our best means to articulate and embody our values, while simultaneously pursuing our national security interests...our foreign assistance programs and partnerships are both the right and smart thing to do.

These statements are consistent with longstanding U.S. national security priorities designed to uphold and improve global democratic norms in order to improve global conditions for Americans and others.⁷² Harm to these U.S. grand strategic concepts and objectives in the aftermath of withdrawal is almost certain. The instances of psychological and physical injuries to Afghan women that are almost certain to occur will likely be blamed on the United States. The global and domestic perception of abandoning millions of women to harsher and less-safe conditions will almost certainly

undermine current and future U.S. policy actions to protect and champion women elsewhere, including (as the Biden Administration argues) within the United States.

The facts of U.S. policy in Afghanistan from 2001 through 2021 are inescapable and transparent to the many global observers of the planned withdrawal. The United States purposefully overthrew the Afghan government in 2001.⁷³ It then supported a quota for the inclusion of women in the new Afghan government that ambitiously exceeded any such standard in the United States.⁷⁴ It also provided tens of millions of dollars to employ Afghan women in areas that, under Taliban rule, would have been impermissible to women's rights, education, and labor. Through hundreds of development programs over nearly two decades, the United States then encouraged thousands of women to risk their lives and expose themselves to violent Taliban retribution to help meet those quotas, take jobs, go to school, and start businesses.⁷⁵

In response, the Taliban have specifically targeted women for assassination and have continued to do so after the signing of the 2020 peace deal.⁷⁶ U.S. military forces support the Afghan Government security forces that provide the only substantial security to Afghan women.

By purposefully choosing to abandon the Afghan security forces and handing at least a partial military victory to the Taliban in areas where women are most vulnerable to retribution, the United States will knowingly expose women and their children to violence.⁷⁷ This will be a choice that other extremist groups and some repressive governments will almost certainly see as a sign of weakness and, possibly, as a justification to repress women elsewhere.

Therefore, retaining a small U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan to help prevent Taliban local or (worse) national control over Afghan women will support President Biden's stated national security objective to "advance gender equality, LBGTQI+ rights, and women's empowerment" in the application of American values to influence international and domestic behavior in ways that favor U.S. national security objectives.

5. Sustain Diplomatic Leverage to Negotiate Peace

Sustaining a small U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan almost certainly will provide the United States with more diplomatic leverage to negotiate for a genuine and enduring peace than a withdrawal of military forces. Whether or not the United States withdraws its military forces from Afghanistan, it is likely to pursue a broader diplomatic solution with neighboring and international states to pursue the important elements of a peace agreement not represented in the Doha deal. This broader international approach is stipulated both in Part Three of the Doha agreement, and in a separate joint declaration between the United States and the Afghan government.⁷⁸

U.S. success in broader negotiations will require diplomatic leverage, some of which derives from American international military, economic, and diplomatic influence, and some of which derives from physical presence and activities in Afghanistan.⁷⁹ American military advisors, air combat presence, intelligence capabilities, and humanitarian and development aid missions provide the United States with significant diplomatic leverage with the Government of Afghanistan, the Taliban, China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and India.⁸⁰

Voice of America reported that Secretary of State Antony Blinken presented Afghan President Ashraf Ghani with a letter in which he stated that he would ask the United Nations to “convene foreign ministers and envoys from Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the United States to discuss a unified approach to supporting peace in Afghanistan.”⁸¹ The U.S. role in these proposed negotiations, and in any future negotiations, likely will be more or less effective depending on its military-supported diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis Afghanistan affairs.

Withdrawal almost certainly puts several components of this leverage at risk. U.S. military forces create the security environment that allows for continuing U.S. diplomatic and aid activities, all of which would likely be curtailed in the event of a military withdrawal. A full NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan—now a scheduled outcome—would almost certainly make U.S. diplomatic and aid activities in Afghanistan more difficult, less effective and, in a possible extreme case, impracticable. Safely sustaining an embassy in Kabul will be quite difficult.

Allowing the security situation in Afghanistan to deteriorate therefore does not support the Biden Administration’s objectives to double down on partnerships or to apply diplomatic leverage to solve international conflicts. Military withdrawal on 9/11 will effectively certify the diplomatic failures extant in the Doha deal: failure to negotiate from a position of equity or strength; failure to achieve any favorable conditions other than withdrawal; failure to set mechanisms for enforcement; et al.

By sustaining a small military footprint and, additionally, abrogating the Doha deal, the United States can help to offset the current imbalance in relative will to fight and diplomatic leverage.

Summary of Arguments to Stay

Given these arguments, keeping a small number of U.S. military and intelligence personnel in Afghanistan better supports Biden Administration grand strategy and specific policies than withdrawal. I include here President Biden’s stated objective to pursue a responsible exit from Afghanistan.

Table 2 shows President Biden’s grand strategic objectives and country-specific strategies drawn from the 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, alongside the estimated risks of withdrawal and prospective benefits of staying.

Table 2 Grand Strategic and Strategic Risks and Benefits

Objective	Risks of Withdrawal	Benefits of Staying
Revitalize democracy	Afghan democracy degrades or collapses and Taliban increase power	Afghan democracy, though weak, is preserved and over time, secured
Strengthen partnerships	Effectively ends the partnership with the Afghan security forces and leaves them in an apparently untenable military situation against a rising opponent	Provides minimal air, intelligence, logistics, and advisory support to prevent partner collapse and to set security conditions for more effective negotiations
Compete with China	China likely to gain some long-term advantage through increased control of rare-earth elements	China less likely to gain some long-term advantage through the increased control of rare-earth elements
Protect the vulnerable	Afghan women will be attacked and repressed, and the United States will likely be blamed for these conditions	Millions of Afghan women—not all—will be protected and given better opportunities, signaling U.S. prioritization of human rights
	Counterterror operations conducted in the absence of close-in support is likely to harm and kill more civilians	Counterterror operations conducted with close-in support is less likely to harm and kill civilians than long-range operations
Protect American citizens	Al-Qaida and the Islamic State will likely survive and will probably expand along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and in other parts of Afghanistan as security degrades	Counterterror operations will be more effective in suppressing terrorist groups that have stated and demonstrated their longstanding intentions to kill Americans
Responsibly end the war in Afghanistan	Afghanistan will remain a sanctuary for international terrorists and the Taliban will almost certainly pursue their objective to overthrow the pro-American government	Effective negotiations from a position of equity or strength are more likely to set conditions for reduced international terrorism and enduring Afghan security

First Step: Abrogate the Irreparable Doha Deal

There is ample justification to abrogate the 2020 Doha deal. This is an agreement between a U.S. Government interlocutor and the representatives of a nongovernment insurgent group.⁸² It is not a formal treaty. While it contains some of the language stipulated in Department of State guidelines for formal agreements, it does not clearly meet standards under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties.⁸³ Repeatedly throughout the Doha agreement, the United States explicitly refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Taliban as a state entity. The Vienna Convention stipulates that agreements recognized under its auspices are concluded only between states.⁸⁴

The United States has entered into thousands of bilateral and multilateral state agreements, and agreements with nonstate international organizations, some of which

also do not meet every prerequisite under the Vienna Convention.⁸⁵ But engagements and agreements with nonstate insurgent organizations that maintain close ties to international terror groups are rare and, in relation to common formal diplomatic agreements, *sui generis*.⁸⁶

The Doha agreement with the Taliban has more in common with the semi-formal U.S. military agreement with the so-called Fallujah Brigade militia group in Iraq than it does with a formal agreement with nonstate entities like the African Development Bank, or the European Space Agency, etc.⁸⁷ These informal agreements with nonstate hostile entities are, arguably, more subject to unilateral reconsideration by the U.S. Department of State and the President than formal bilateral state-to-state agreements.

More importantly, according to President Trump's administration and other government reports, the Taliban have not met their obligations under the Doha agreement.⁸⁸ Part One, Section B makes clear that the United States will commit to withdraw remaining military forces from Afghanistan on the explicit condition that the Taliban meet all of its obligations in Part Two of the agreement.

Reporting through the end of 2020 and since the President Biden took office, cited in this report, shows that the Taliban have likely, consistently violated Part Two, Section 1, 2, and 3. These sections stipulate that the Taliban will not engage with or support groups like Al-Qaida, nor allow these groups to reside or remain active in Taliban-controlled parts of Afghanistan. Given that the Taliban have not clearly met their obligations in Part Two, the United States is not required to meet its conditional obligations in Part One.

There is a fundamental flaw in the agreement itself: It contains no assurance or monitoring measures. The United States agreed to leave the Afghan security forces to stand on their own without any verifiable assurances that the Taliban would meet their obligations to pursue peace as stipulated in Part 3 of the agreement. There are no means in the agreement to verify or assure that the Taliban stop supporting international terrorist groups as stipulated in Part 2 of the agreement. This is less a formal diplomatic agreement than it is a list of wishful statements of intent.

Abrogating the Doha deal appears to be justified, and abrogation is strategically advisable. It would be a formal recognition of the agreement's inherent and irrecoverable flaws, including the absence of representation by the Afghan government and the absence of agreed-upon monitoring and assurances to guarantee U.S. interests. It will also signal to the Taliban that they have not defeated the United States, and that they cannot violate terms of agreement with the U.S. Government without consequence. In turn this recognition, while it may lead to more violence in the near term, will help establish U.S. and Afghan government positions for more effective negotiations.

Can Disaster Be Averted? We Have Been Here Before

While the situation in Afghanistan appears to many observers to be hopeless, the rise and subsidence of Taliban power from 2005-2006 is instructive. Through 2005 and into 2006, the Taliban built up their military power, took control of many rural areas in the south and southwest, and started massing as many as 500 insurgents at one time—effectively, a light infantry battalion—to conduct major attacks.⁸⁹ They were intent on seizing the major southern city of Kandahar.⁹⁰

These large-scale attacks represented the post-2001 high water mark for Taliban military power. In 2006 NATO, led by the Canadian armed forces in Operation Medusa, pushed back the Taliban, cracked their massed units, and pushed them away from major urban areas.⁹¹ Taliban forces reverted to guerrilla tactics thereafter. Their recent successes have been achieved primarily through gradual infiltration and by filling spaces left by the withdrawal of NATO and Afghan forces.

The Taliban can probably continue to infiltrate and control many of the rural and mountainous areas that ring Afghanistan's capital to the southwest to the southeast. In all likelihood the Afghan government will never exert security control over the entire country. But with NATO air support the now-improved Afghan security forces can almost certainly prevent the Taliban from massing and seizing major urban areas. When the Taliban are successful in infiltrating urban areas like they were in Kunduz in 2015, the Afghan security forces are far more likely to be able to expel them with NATO air support.⁹²

A Small Military Footprint is Almost Certainly Sustainable

Sustainability is a relative concept informed by actual costs, risks, public support, and political will. Presidents and congresspeople set their own expectations for sustainability. Looking at the objective costs, there is sufficient evidence to support a finding that keeping a small military footprint in Afghanistan would be sustainable.

There has not been a U.S. combat casualty in Afghanistan for over a year, including during a period of several months when there were two and three times the number of U.S. troops on the ground.⁹³ While this is due in great part to the Taliban shift in tactics after the signing of the February 2020 peace deal, the U.S. military has, over the past two decades, found an effective way to partner with Afghan security forces while reducing exposure to both Taliban attacks and green-on-blue insider attacks.⁹⁴

Keeping a force of a few thousand advisors, support personnel, and air crews in Afghanistan will probably cost about 1% of the overall U.S. defense budget, approximately one-third of estimated costs in 2019 and approximately one-tenth of the

cost at the peak of the troop surge in 2011.⁹⁵ While the war in Afghanistan is not popular with the American public, there is sufficient support for a policy that prevents a collapse of the Afghan government.⁹⁶

Deselect Defeat

Afghanistan is not a forever war. It is just interminably long for many Americans in comparison with the public expectations that were set in 2001, 2009, and on many occasions between and thereafter. Given the complexity of the Afghan war, twenty years of conflict is unsurprising.⁹⁷

By comparison, the insurgency in Colombia formally lasted from the early 1960s through the mid-2010s.⁹⁸ The United States retains a strong presence in Colombia 21 years after the onset of Plan Colombia, a concentrated U.S. military advisory, intelligence, and aid operation to support the Colombian government's counter-narcotics and, later, counterinsurgency operations.⁹⁹

The United States almost certainly cannot achieve a decisive victory in Afghanistan, and the Taliban almost certainly will continue to have some success. But the United States can choose to prevent defeat and set conditions for a genuine and enduring peace in Afghanistan. It can and should deselect the option it chose in 2020 in Doha, and in 2021: willing defeat.

I encourage President Biden to reverse his withdrawal order and commit to an indefinite military presence in Afghanistan in order to set the security conditions for a better negotiated peace. Negotiating from a position of equity or strength and demonstrating to the Taliban that they cannot simply outlast the United States and its NATO allies is far more likely to achieve U.S. strategic objectives. American will to fight—really, will not-to-lose—in Afghanistan can be rebuilt and sustained by setting clear and transparent expectations for time, cost, and risk.

Reversing course after such a weighty and dramatic declaration of withdrawal will be quite difficult. The Biden Administration should explore other options to sustain a NATO military presence to meet its stated objectives.

Appendix: Arguments to Leave and to Stay

This appendix provides some additional insights into present arguments to leave and stay. It is intended to help inform readers interested in broader strategic debate and in the challenges of policy analysis.

Realists Rule, or Do They?

Many realists argue that Afghanistan is already lost and, in any case, Afghanistan is not of critical strategic interest to the United States. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt made perhaps the most well-read realist case for withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ Their article entitled “The Case for Offshore Balancing” is echoed in the views of prominent realist thinkers (and some libertarian thinkers) on the deployment of U.S. military forces worldwide, and specifically in Afghanistan.¹⁰¹

Mearsheimer and Walt propose a realist grand strategy, or global paradigm for applying U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic power. They argue that the United States should only keep military forces in a select few areas of the world that are most relevant to U.S. national security interests, and that elsewhere—including in Afghanistan—locals should be left to sort out their own problems. This approach directly contradicts the stated grand strategy of the Biden Administration.

This realist argument rests on several supporting claims. Mearsheimer and Walt argue that the United States has overextended itself and repeatedly failed in places like Lebanon, Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq, making the world a more dangerous place. The threat of terrorism has increased because the United States responded to terrorist attacks by deploying troops overseas instead of quickly striking and withdrawing. American liberal leaders, including in their telling both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, have wasted thousands of lives and trillions of dollars in their efforts to police the world. Afghanistan is a central case in “Offshore Balancing.”

One might expect a realist argument to withdraw ground forces from Afghanistan (and elsewhere) to be coldly logical and soundly structured. But in some places, “Offshore Balancing” is unsupported by fact. For example, Mearsheimer and Walt claim without evidence that the presence of U.S. military ground forces causes conflicts. Recent RAND work showed that U.S. military presence generally correlates with reduction in proximate conflict.¹⁰²

They imply that democracy promotion always requires intensive large-scale social engineering in foreign societies. In fact, the vast majority of democracy promotion activities conducted by the United States are small-scale, gradual, and do not seek to reengineer entire societies.¹⁰³

They selectively ignore cases of mixed but generally positive outcomes in protecting democracies or shifting governments from autocracy towards democracy with multi-

year small footprint military deployments including in Colombia, El Salvador, Kosovo, the Philippines, and even Iraq in the 2010s.¹⁰⁴

The “offshore” concept appears to be directly reflected in the U.S. post-withdrawal counterterrorism plan. This plan is sometimes referred to as “offshore counterterrorism.”¹⁰⁵ But landlocked Afghanistan does not have a shore. This means that neither the U.S. Navy nor the Air Force would have direct access to Afghanistan’s airspace without overflying countries like Iran or Pakistan. Neither of these countries would necessarily be amenable to supporting U.S. military or intelligence operations.¹⁰⁶

Realists tend to argue for the strategic valuations and objectives they want, not the ones that policymakers hold and pursue. It is ironic that in doing so, realists tend to remove their coldly practical recommendations from the realm of real-world practicality.

Flaws in “Offshore Balancing” and related articles cited here bring into question the availability of any substantial realist contribution to what has evolved into an exigent policy debate over the presence of U.S. ground forces in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁷

If the United States is withdrawing from Afghanistan in line with these realist arguments, then the decision to withdraw is not founded on practical geostrategic logic or compelling evidence.

Arguments to Stay Need Rearticulation

In general, the arguments to leave are insufficient to objectively justify a policy of withdrawal. But given the withdrawal announcement, it is clear that the most prominent arguments to stay in Afghanistan have also been insufficiently compelling.

The Afghanistan Study Group’s final report to Congress is broadly representative of arguments to keep a small U.S. military force on the ground.¹⁰⁸ It states that removing U.S. troops would allow terrorist groups to reemerge, waste two decades of investment towards developing Afghan democracy, put women and minorities at risk, undermine economic opportunities for energy-hungry South Asian countries, and erode U.S. regional influence. It also argues that leaving Afghanistan might increase the risks of nuclear war between Pakistan and India.

Coming from the top U.S. experts on Afghanistan, these should be sobering and convincing arguments in favor of keeping a small military footprint in place. For those of us who need no further convincing, they are. But these arguments apparently have failed to persuade President Biden and his cabinet, and they have not been sufficient to generate substantial dissent to a 2021 withdrawal in Congress or amongst the American public. Several rhetorical challenges stand out.

First and foremost, the Study Group arguments presuppose that the reader is sufficiently compelled to preserve and protect Afghan democracy, Afghan women and

minorities, and South Asian regional stability. It assumes that traditional democratic norms prevail in current policy debate. The report states “...Afghanistan’s stability depends on it having political institutions that are representative, inclusive—including women and minorities—and based on a legal system that embodies the aspirations of the Afghan people for justice.” This is probably accurate as it pertains to Afghanistan.

But this normative appeal is likely to have only limited impact on the relatively fixed positions of members of Congress.¹⁰⁹ It is also unlikely to change the mind of the Study Group’s most important audience, President Biden. Biden has made clear his reluctance to put American servicepeople at risk to solve internal problems—including problems like threats to human rights—in Afghanistan.¹¹⁰

Counterterrorism has long been a lynchpin in the arguments to stay in Afghanistan. Al Qaida terrorism triggered the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Both Democratic and Republican politicians have consistently supported counterterrorism operations to suppress Al Qaida, and now the Islamic State, in Afghanistan. While he generally champions democracy and human rights, President Biden has been fairly consistent in describing U.S. interests in Afghanistan through the lens of counterterrorism.¹¹¹

However, with Osama Bin Laden long dead and the Islamic State declared defeated, international terrorism is no longer a front-page issue for the American public, Congress, or even for the U.S. Department of Defense.¹¹² The U.S. Government is now focused on the rising political, economic, and military threat from China and explicitly not on legacy counterterror operations in South Asia. Many experts are convinced that counterterrorism can be safely and effectively conducted from outside of Afghanistan.¹¹³

American geostrategic interest in China could anchor a compelling case to stay in Afghanistan; more on this later. But the Study Group report and other arguments for sustaining military force in Afghanistan describe China’s role prospective regional partner or perhaps regional spoiler. They fail to frame Afghanistan as a focal point for global great power competition with China (and Russia) and, in doing so, miss an opportunity to align the conflict in Afghanistan with the current geostrategic interests of the United States.

Likely consequences of withdrawal have been clearly articulated.¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, normative arguments to stay centered on protecting Afghan women and the value of Afghan democracy—and even some of the more practical, tactical arguments centered on counterterrorism—have limited rhetorical power in 2021.

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⁴⁶ It is outside the scope of this report to recommend a force level in Afghanistan. Effective assessment would require access to classified information, including threat information, that is readily available to U.S. Government analysts. The author has directly participated in both efforts to calculate effective troop levels in Afghanistan while supporting the NATO Afghan Assessment Group, and through extensive case study analysis. See: Connable, 2010; and Connable, 2012.

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