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Argument for Small U.S. Military Presence in Afghanistan

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The United States has enduring interests in South Asia that can be safeguarded and promoted by keeping a small military footprint concentrated in two bases leased from Afghanistan, a country which connects Central and South Asia. We argue that negotiating to maintain a small, isolated security presence will have several advantages discussed below that by any measure outweighs its associated costs and is in line with the overall strategic objectives of the United States for the foreseeable future.

The Main Reason the United States is in Afghanistan

First and foremost, after two decades of investments in lives, treasure and political capital in Afghanistan, the United States has to ensure that the country cannot revert back to becoming an unchecked breeding ground for terrorists with international agenda and reach. The sole reason for the initial U.S.-led international intervention in Afghanistan was the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. The Taliban did not instigate those attacks, nor have they been a hard security threat to the United States and its allies at any point outside of Afghanistan. The threats emanated from al-Qaeda based in Afghanistan. Even under the best-case scenarios, an intra-Afghan agreement is poised to lead to further fragmentation of central authority in Afghanistan, leading to growing opportunities for al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Khorasan Province and similar outfits. Moreover, the history of the 1990s teaches us that the power vacuums in Afghanistan will be filled with proxies representing regional powers. In the case of Russia and Iran, this is already occurring. Without a military and intelligence presence, the abilities of the United States to safeguard its security would diminish greatly.

Second, under the best circumstances, a relatively stable Afghanistan free of any U.S. security presence will further enable the growing political, military, economic and even territorial reach of China and Russia as well as Iran.

MES NOTES

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Role of Afghanistan in Future of Major Power Competition

Russia initially supported the U.S. and later NATO presence in Afghanistan due to the terrorist threat to the Central Asian states as well as its own homeland. Moscow's support for the Western presence in Afghanistan allowed it to have a freer hand in its controversial war in Chechnya. The Russian security establishment, however, always remained concerned about a more enduring presence of the U.S. and NATO forces on its southern flank. In recent years, Moscow has begun direct negotiations with the Taliban while maintaining its longstanding ties with various Afghan groups and has coordinated its efforts with the China, Iran and even Pakistan to ensure a full U.S. withdrawal, notwithstanding its legitimate concerns about terrorist groups targeting Central Asian states and the unrestrained narcotics production. For Russia, an Afghanistan without U.S. presence would allow it to further expand its grip on the Central Asia states and either control or prevent the possibilities of any transportation of hydrocarbons from that region to South Asia and beyond—thus providing it further power on the flow of energy resources beyond what it is trying to achieve in Europe.

China's Belts and Roads Initiative circumvented Afghanistan, a country that represented a terrorist threat and an opportunity of mineral exploitations. As of late, Beijing has also become further involved in the post-U.S. and NATO Afghanistan, and the country is becoming more lucrative for its ambitious drive to dominate Central Asia and Pakistan through Afghanistan as part of the BRI. With China becoming the main focus of U.S. strategic concerns, abandoning an established military outpost in its southwestern proximity does not make strategic sense, despite the challenges of access that Afghanistan presents. Authorities in Beijing are already concerned that the United States would either leave an imploding Afghanistan for the regional countries to deal with or procrastinate on the full withdrawal of its forces.

Iran's Strategic Depth

Iran regards Afghanistan as part of its strategic depth and historical legacy. Should the United States exit Afghanistan without leaving any presence, Iran's role in that country would likely resemble what is happening in [Iraq and Syria](#), enabling Tehran to try to exert greater influence in Central Asia. Another factor for Iran to further increase its influence in Afghanistan has to do with water resources. Should a stable and independent government emerge in Kabul, the flow of vital water to eastern and southeastern Iran is expected to diminish and the price for the water entering Iran to increase. The more concerning issue for the United States would be Iran's burgeoning strategic relations with China. While details of the deal between Beijing and Tehran remain opaque, there is evidence that the new strategic understanding has already affected [India's potential balancing role](#) in Afghanistan. The plans by Kabul and New Delhi to allow landlocked Afghanistan a way to trade with India while circumventing Pakistan through Iranian Chabahar port has reportedly been halted with China's gaining access to the [strategic port](#).

U.S.-Taliban Agreement

The [rush to judgment](#) for negotiated exist with an untested adversary is understandable due to the growing fatigue and frustration with a fragmented government in Afghanistan and after almost two decades of war which strategically at times [seemed adrift](#) and the main reason for the war—i.e. defeat of al-Qaeda and safeguarding the homeland against any other attacked by Afghanistan-based groups. However, that initial and necessary objective of the war hangs on the balance of the condition-based withdrawal [February 20, 2020 conditions-based withdrawal agreement](#) signed in Doha. The Taliban are to provide “guarantees and enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies.”

As the saying goes, the devil is in the details. How a fragmented Taliban group politically associated with an even further divided government in Kabul after decades of fighting would provide these guarantees and enforcing mechanisms is unclear. If Afghan history of the 1990s is any indication, the intra-Afghan part of the Doha agreement cannot be assumed as a *fait accompli*.

Even if there is an intra-Afghan agreement, and in spite of the Taliban having tactically shown their opposition to ISKP and their long-term strategy lacking interest in international causes, there are no guarantees that they can form a functioning government with the majority of the stakeholders in Afghanistan to prevent disruptive and terrorist organizations from using Afghan soil. This would not only be a total failure of the initial necessary war in Afghanistan and a waste of all of the efforts hitherto taken, but almost certainly would involve neighboring states as a necessity for safeguarding their securities as well as opportunities in expanding their strategic goals in the region or beyond.

Failure in Afghanistan would not only endanger the United States and its allies, but also would severely damage the prestige and standing of the U.S. in an arena where China and Russia are expanding their influence.

Proposed Strategic Military Presence in Afghanistan

The United States can much better guard against the return of Afghanistan to a potential operational zone for terrorists by negotiating to maintain two bases from among those already in the country. The bases can be part of a transactional arrangement or a strategic understanding with Kabul. The main purpose of these bases will not be for training or even routine military assistance to Afghanistan's National Security Forces, but rather for intelligence gathering and sharing with the Afghan partners and securing an option to act should terrorist outfits manage to organize themselves in ungoverned parts of the country. The U.S. could negotiate a measure to keep the Afghan authorities informed of terrorist activities and only act if the potential threat has an international or U.S. dimension and after the Afghan authorities have tried to manage the situation unsuccessfully or have procrastinated. In the former case, the United States could increase its assistance for needed operational or intelligence backing while on the latter case, some sort of punitive measure could be taken. The bases would be self-sustaining, not open to locals with U.S. forces and personnel refraining from mixing with the general public. Only specific liaisons would be designated between the Afghan and U.S. sides who could coordinate the exchange of information and, in case of need, military action. The future U.S. military and financial assistance to Afghanistan could be linked to the lease of these bases and the overflight rights and other arrangements.

We are under no illusion on the monetary costs associated with sustaining these outposts as well as the political and diplomatic challenges in making these bases part of the overall peace agreement with the Afghan and regional players. The Taliban's fundamental demand for signing the peace agreement with the United States has been the complete withdrawal of foreign forces, and it would take herculean efforts to bring them to accept a foreign military footprint, however isolated and small that may be. However, the United States agreement to withdraw from Afghanistan is predicated on a "guarantee" that the Taliban can ensure against the use of Afghan soil for terrorist threats against the United States and its allies. The agreement does not even mention the Afghan government by name. This point could be an example for a long and arduous negotiation. Our arguments are based on the understanding that all Afghan sides, except the Taliban, most Central Asian and Gulf states, and India would welcome the continuation of a small U.S. footprint in Afghanistan and that the Taliban, or a part thereof, could be persuaded to see the benefits of a limited and isolated U.S. presence.

Contestations and Competitions

Our arguments for thinking about the option of trying to maintain a small footprint in Afghanistan are not centered on that country, while there are valid reasons not to abandon the gains made there in the last nineteen years. Our invitation for braver and broader thinking is based on the investments for years to come to compete and, when necessary, counter the ambitions of China and Russia and destructive and the disruptive goals of states such as Iran. The future relationship of the United States and its allies with China and Russia may rarely rise to the level of conflict but is increasingly becoming confrontational. This is a long-term competition that requires

long-term solutions and presence. Afghanistan's location, despite its geopolitical difficulties, is worth a try for forging a security partnership.

Beyond the security dimensions of keeping a footprint in Afghanistan, the United States and its allies have a legacy and investment there, abandoning of which would not only create a very negative image of both U.S. and NATO resolve and determination but also has the potential of empowering one or more of the West's competitors.

After two decades of involvement of the US and its allies, Afghanistan is marred by a fragmented political system, bickering power elite, unbridled corruption and myriad of other social ills. However, there are many positives that seem to be overlooked in the myopic quest for getting all of the U.S. troops out of that country in a deal with an untested and fragmented foe. Since 2001 Afghanistan has not solved its political problems in the ballots—however imperfect those have been, through shaky political compromises, or by sheer violence. The most important achievement in Afghanistan has been the rise of an educated and sophisticated youth—the backbone of civil society—throughout the country, not only concentrated in the capital and a few large cities. Afghan media is freer than that of any country to its west with the exception of Israel. The majority of modern Afghans continues to look at the United States and the West as the model to be emulated. On the popular level, few countries in the region can qualify as such. These hearts and minds and our allies will be central to the competition with China, Russia and their allies.

On the positive side, both China and Russia, while wanting the U.S. and its allies to leave Afghanistan, are worried about further instability in Afghanistan leading to the empowerment of Islamist organizations that are targeting their countries and Central Asia as well as an increase in the trade of opium. A deal with Beijing and Moscow on sharing responsibilities for Afghanistan's security could be a blueprint for solving some of the contestations with China and Russia more amicably. In any case, once the United States has abandoned Afghanistan, there is no return.

Conclusion

This short essay is by no means meant to be comprehensive, nor are we unaware of the long list of challenges that revisiting the ongoing peace negotiations between the United States and the Taliban would present. Our argument is an invitation for greater debate on the merits of keeping a small and isolated footprint in Afghanistan, both as a guarantor of the initial reasons for the United States military intervention in Afghanistan and as part of the long-term competition with China and Russia. Peace is the desire of the public in the United States and its allies. Afghans more than anyone have suffered from the ongoing conflict in their country that began in 1978 and was exacerbated with the Soviet invasion a year later. They want and deserve peace and also independence, dignity and a chance to build a brighter future for themselves. The United States can partner with them, in a nonintrusive manner, safeguarding their independence and its own security. The playbook of the relationship between Afghanistan and the United States has to change fundamentally, but the legacy of the countries bleeding together can lead to a genuine partnership for the good of both parties. Of course, there is also no guarantees that the ongoing intra-Afghan talks will prevail amicably. The recent increase in violence perpetrated by the Taliban should be a clear warning that the group is bent on using violence to achieve its goals of full domination of the Afghan government, regardless of their temporary promises. In that case, the idea of a reduced U.S. military presence may have a very different and necessary dimension. Planning for such, the two bases (or an alternative version thereof) cannot but increase the political maneuverability of the United States.

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