Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief

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SUMMARY

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Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief

Afghanistan was elevated as a significant U.S. foreign policy concern in 2001, when the United States, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban government that harbored and supported it. In the intervening 18 years, the United States has suffered around 2,400 military fatalities in Afghanistan (including four in combat in 2020 to date) and Congress has appropriated approximately $141 billion for reconstruction and security forces there. In that time, an elected Afghan government has replaced the Taliban, and most measures of human development have improved, although future prospects of those measures remain mixed. According to a June 2020 U.S. Department of Defense report, "The vital U.S. interest in Afghanistan is to prevent it from serving as a safe haven for terrorists to launch attacks against the U.S. homeland, U.S. interests, or U.S. allies."

As of November 2020, U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan appears closer to an end, with U.S. troop levels decreasing in line with the February 29, 2020, U.S.-Taliban agreement on the issues of counterterrorism and the withdrawal of U.S. and international troops. Still, questions remain. As part of the agreement, the United States committed to withdraw all of its then-12,000 forces within 14 months; troops have since been reduced by as much as two thirds. In return, the Taliban committed to preventing other groups, including Al Qaeda, from using Afghan soil to recruit, train, or fundraise toward activities that threaten the United States or its allies. The agreement is accompanied by secret annexes, raising concerns among some Members of Congress. U.S. officials describe the prospective U.S. withdrawal as "conditions-based," but have not specified exactly what conditions might halt, reverse, or otherwise alter the withdrawal timeline laid out in the agreement. Afghan government representatives were not participants in U.S.-Taliban talks, leading some observers to conclude that the United States would prioritize a military withdrawal over a complex political settlement that preserves some of the social, political, and humanitarian gains made since 2001.

After months of delays, on September 12, 2020, Afghan government and Taliban representatives officially met in Doha, Qatar to begin their first direct peace negotiations, a significant moment with potentially dramatic implications for the course of the ongoing Afghan conflict. Even as negotiations proceed, they are complicated by a number of factors, most notably high levels of violence. While the Taliban entering into talks with Kabul is a momentous step, negotiations are not necessarily guaranteed to lead to a settlement to end the war. Observers speculate about what kind of political arrangement, if any, could satisfy both the elected Afghan government and the Taliban to the extent that the latter fully abandons armed struggle. In any event, it remains unclear to what extent the U.S. withdrawal is contingent upon the outcome of talks or other contingencies, as U.S. officials give contradictory visions of the future U.S. troop presence. Alterations to the U.S. military posture in Afghanistan and related changes in the security environment may in turn influence U.S. policymakers' consideration of future levels and conditions of development assistance. Former Vice President Joseph Biden, the presumptive winner of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, has previously expressed an intention to bring home U.S. combat troops, as well as skepticism of nation building efforts.

Given the outsized role that U.S. assistance plays in supporting the Afghan government, some experts warn that a prompt, full-scale U.S. withdrawal and/or aid cutoff could lead to its collapse and perhaps even to the reestablishment of formal Taliban rule over some or all of the country. By many measures, the Taliban are in a stronger military position now than at any point since 2001, though many once-public metrics related to the conduct of the war have been classified or are no longer produced. For additional information on Afghanistan and U.S. policy there, see CRS Report R45818, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas. For background information and analysis on the history of congressional engagement with Afghanistan and U.S. policy there, as well as a summary of recent Afghanistan-related legislative proposals, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Issues for Congress and Legislation 2017-2020*, by Clayton Thomas.

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Introduction

This report provides background information and analysis on U.S. policy in Afghanistan, with a focus on two interrelated developments:

- The February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement on U.S. troop withdrawals and Taliban counterterrorism assurances.
- Ongoing intra-Afghan negotiations, which began in Doha, Qatar, in September 2020, aimed at reaching a political settlement to end the war.

The report also provides information on security dynamics related to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and related questions about the future of the United States' military presence and development and security assistance (which has totaled approximately $141 billion over the past 18 years).

Background: U.S.-Taliban Agreement

On February 29, 2020, after more than a year of official negotiations between U.S. and Taliban representatives, the two sides concluded an agreement laying the groundwork for the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from Afghanistan, and for talks between Kabul and the Taliban.

In July 2018, the Trump Administration entered into direct negotiations with the Taliban, without the participation of Afghan government representatives, reversing the long-standing U.S. position prioritizing an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process."[1] The September 2018 appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the Afghan-born former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, as Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation added momentum to this effort. For over a year, Khalilzad held a near-continuous series of meetings with Taliban officials in Doha, along with consultations with the Afghan, Pakistani, and other regional governments. On February 14, 2020, a senior U.S. official revealed that U.S. and Taliban negotiators had reached a "very specific" agreement to reduce violence across the country, including attacks against Afghan forces, after which, if U.S. military commanders assessed that the truce held, the United States and Taliban would sign a formal agreement.[2]

After the weeklong reduction in violence, Special Representative Khalilzad signed a formal agreement in Doha with Taliban deputy political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar on February 29, 2020, in front of a number of international observers, including Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. On the same day in Kabul, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper met with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to issue a joint U.S.-Afghan declaration reaffirming U.S. support for the Afghan government and reiterating the Afghan government's longstanding willingness to negotiate with the Taliban without preconditions.

As part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, the United States agreed to draw down its forces from 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days (with proportionate decreases in allied force levels) and to withdraw all of its forces within 14 months (April 2021). Other U.S. commitments included working to facilitate a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the Afghan government and removing U.S. sanctions on Taliban members. In exchange, the Taliban committed to not allow its

[1] See, for example, Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," June 2017.

[2] Conor Finnegan and Aleem Agha, "US, Taliban reach agreement to reduce violence, opening door to troop withdrawal deal," *ABC News*, February 14, 2020.

members or other groups, including Al Qaeda and the local Islamic State affiliate, to use Afghan soil to threaten the U.S. or its allies, including by preventing recruiting, training, and fundraising.

U.S. officials said that "there are parts of this agreement that aren't going to be public, but those parts don't contain any additional commitments by the United States whatsoever," describing the annexes as "confidential procedures for implementation and verification."[3] Secretary Pompeo said "every member of Congress will get a chance to see them," though some Members raised questions about the necessity of classifying these annexes.[4]

Intra-Afghan Talks

The U.S.-Taliban agreement envisions the end of the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan, but it does not represent a comprehensive peace agreement among Afghans, which most observers assess is only possible through a negotiated political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Intra-Afghan talks aimed at achieving such a settlement began in September 2020; the commencement of the long-sought talks represents a major step toward resolving the conflict. Still, the two sides appear far apart on major issues such as future governance and women's rights, and some question the Taliban's motives and intentions.

The February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement committed the Taliban to entering talks with the Afghan government by March 10, but negotiations remained unscheduled for months amid complications that included gridlock in Kabul due to the disputed September 2019 presidential election, delays to a prisoner exchange between Taliban and the Afghan government, and ongoing violence. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, Ghani's electoral opponent and former partner in a unity government, agreed in May 2020 to end their political impasse and appoint Abdullah as chairman of the newly-created High Council for National Reconciliation (HCNR) to oversee talks with the Taliban.[5] The parties to the conflict completed the prisoner exchange in early September 2020, removing the main obstacle to intra-Afghan talks, which began in Doha on September 12, 2020.

Participants

The Afghan government's 21-member negotiating team, led by former Afghan intelligence agency head and Ghani-ally Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, includes four women and represents Afghanistan's major ethnic groups.[6] The Abdullah-chaired HCNR is to oversee the negotiating

[3] Kim Dozier, "Secret Annexes, Backroom Deals: Can Zalmay Khalilzad Deliver Afghan Peace for Trump?" *Time*, February 15, 2020; Briefing with Senior Administration Officials on Next Steps Toward an Agreement on Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, February 29, 2020.

[4] Juliegrace Brufke, "House Republicans sound the alarm on Taliban deal," *The Hill*, March 3, 2020.

[5] President Ghani had been declared the victor of the September 2019 presidential election on February 18, 2020, winning just over 50% of the vote and thus avoiding a runoff with Abdullah, who won about 40%. Abdullah and his supporters rejected Ghani's narrow majority count as fraudulent and sought to establish themselves as a separate government, with Ghani and Abdullah holding separate inauguration ceremonies on March 9, 2020. Overall, the agreement ended the immediate political impasse, but one analyst argues that its ambiguities may plant the seeds of future conflict and, more importantly, that "it did not remove the underlying causes of the crisis, notably the polarization caused by the current political system." Ali Yawar Adili, "End of the Post-Election Impasse? Ghani and Abdullah's new power-sharing formula," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, May 20, 2020. For more on Afghanistan's political system, and accusations that it is overcentralized and fuels conflict, see CRS Report R45818, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas.

[6] Christine Roehrs, Ali Yawar Adili, and Sayed Asadullah Sadat, "Two Parties Too Wary for Peace? Central Questions for talks with the Taleban in Doha," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, September 11, 2020.

team's work. Abdullah initially rejected Ghani's August 2020 appointment of HCNR members and discussions reportedly continue on finalizing the group's membership.[7] These difficulties are emblematic of enduring disputes among Afghan political elites, who remain divided on ethnic and other lines.[8]

The Taliban negotiating team also comprises 21 members (all men), though the Taliban have not made the list public. On September 5, the Taliban announced as lead negotiator Mawlawi Abdul Hakim Haqqani, a senior hard-line cleric who is head of the Taliban's judiciary body and reportedly close to Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. Some analysts have speculated that the move represents an attempt by Taliban senior leadership (likely based in Pakistan) to exert more control over negotiations, which are ostensibly overseen by Doha-based Taliban deputy political head Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar (who met with Secretary of State Michael Pompeo in Doha), whom analysts view as more moderate.[9]

U.S. Special Representative Khalilzad said on September 11, 2020, that the United States will "be engaging each side," but that it would not be a direct participant in talks, with its role limited to aiding the negotiations if asked.[10] Khalilzad has since made several visits to Doha, where he has met separately with members of each negotiating team.

Major Negotiating Issues

Experts and officials expect the talks to last months and that at least two key substantive issues will be dominant—reducing violence and determining the future structure and orientation of the Afghan state.

Reducing Violence

The U.S.-Taliban agreement commits the Taliban to refrain from attacking U.S. and international forces–a commitment the Taliban reportedly is observing. It does not, however, address Taliban operations against Afghan government forces, which continue and have increased in some areas in 2020.[11] The Afghan Ministry of Defense reported Taliban attacks in 18 of the country's 34 provinces on September 12 as talks began in Doha, and violence has continued apace since, with hundreds of Afghan forces killed.[12] In October 2020, the United States called the ongoing Taliban offensive against the capital of Helmand province "inconsistent" with the U.S.-Taliban agreement and launched airstrikes in support of Afghan government forces. The United Nations reports that while the number of civilian casualties over the first nine months of 2020 was the lowest since

[7] Ali Yawar Adili, "Peace Leadership: Power Struggles, Division, and an Incomplete Council," Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 6, 2020; "President Ghani meets with Chairman of High Council for National Reconciliation," Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Presidency, November 5, 2020.

[8] For more on ethnicity and politics in Afghanistan, see CRS Report R45818, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Clayton Thomas.

[9] Frud Bezhan, "Why Did the Taliban Appoint a Hard-Line Chief Negotiator for Intra-Afghan Talks?" *RFE/FL*, Sept. 10, 2020.

[10] U.S. Department of State, Briefing with Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad on the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations, September 11, 2020.

[11] Susannah George and Aziz Tassel, "As Afghanistan struggles to start peace talks, violence fills the void," *Washington Post,* August 10, 2020.

[12] Anisa Shaheed, "Taliban Attack in 18 Provinces as Talks Start: MoD," *Tolo News*, September 12, 2020; Ehsanullah Amiri and Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Violence Plagues Afghanistan as Peace Talks with Taliban Struggle to Take Off," *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2020.

2012, the "harm done to civilians remains inordinate and shocking," with nearly 6,000 Afghans killed or injured in fighting this year.[13]

The Afghan government has prioritized a permanent ceasefire, which the Taliban have rejected despite two limited truces in recent years. Many observers doubt the Taliban would agree to abandon violence, arguably their main source of leverage, before a settlement, though targeted reductions in violence could pave the way for a more comprehensive ceasefire.[14]

Afghan Governance

Major differences remain in the sides' visions for the future of Afghanistan, including both the structure of the Afghan state and what rights the state recognizes for Afghan citizens, especially women.[15]

The Taliban, whose main priority has been the withdrawal of foreign forces, have not described their specific proposals on these issues in detail. In his opening remarks at the talks, Mullah Baradar said, "We seek an Afghanistan that is independent, sovereign, united, developed and free — an Afghanistan with an Islamic system in which all people of the nation can participate without discrimination."[16] Some analysts posit the Taliban are likely to push for clerical oversight of executive and legislative decision-making.[17]

Afghan leaders express a determination to preserve Afghanistan's democratic institutions and its constitution, which establishes Islam as the state religion. In an interview in Doha, HCNR Chairman Abdullah said, "For me, one person, one vote — I don't call anything a red line — but that's critical . . . and compromises on these things will not get us to peace."[18] Afghan President Ghani has promised that his government will not conclude any agreement that limits Afghans' rights and previously warned that any agreement to withdraw U.S. forces that did not include Kabul's participation could lead to "catastrophe," pointing to the 1990s-era civil strife following the fall of the Soviet-backed government that led to the rise of the Taliban.[19] The Afghan government has rejected speculation about a possible power-sharing arrangement.

Speaking at the opening of talks, Secretary of State Pompeo encouraged Afghans to preserve democratic gains while highlighting the limits of U.S. influence, saying, "the choice of your political system is of course yours to make. … the United States doesn't seek to impose its system on others."[20] He added that the U.S. government believes "firmly that protecting the rights of all Afghans is indeed the best way for you to break the cycle of violence."

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[13] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Third Quarter Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 2020.

[14] Abdul Qadir Sediqi, "Fight and talk: Facing negotiations, Taliban almost took key Afghan city," *Reuters*, September 14, 2020.

[15] See CRS In Focus IF11646, *Afghan Women and Girls: Status and Congressional Action*, by Clayton Thomas and Sarah R. Collins.

[16] Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Rivals Begin Historic Peace Talks; US Cautiously Optimistic," *Voice of America*, September 12, 2020.

[17] Frud Bezhan, "Are the Taliban Seeking A 'Sunni Afghan Version' of Iran?" *RFE/RL*, October 2, 2020.

[18] Susannah George, "The Taliban and the Afghan government are finally talking peace: What they're negotiating and what to expect," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2020.

[19] "Afghans Worry as US Makes Progress in Taliban Talks," *Voice of America*, January 29, 2019.

[20] U.S. Department of State, Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at Intra-Afghan Negotiations Opening Ceremony, Sept. 12, 2020.

Prospects

It remains unclear what kind of security and political arrangements could satisfy both Kabul and the Taliban to the extent that the latter abandons its armed struggle. Many Afghans, especially women, who remember Taliban rule and oppose the group's policies and beliefs, remain wary.[21] Those Afghans doubt the Taliban's trustworthiness and express concern that, in the absence of U.S. military pressure, the group will have little incentive to comply with the terms of any agreement reached with Kabul.[22] Some Afghan officials reportedly suspect the Taliban of trying to "run out the clock on the withdrawal of American troops," remaining in negotiations long enough to secure a full U.S. withdrawal, after which they will capitalize on their advantage on the battlefield to seize control of the country by force."[23]

U.S. officials have given differing accounts of the extent to which the U.S. military withdrawal is contingent upon, or otherwise related to, the Taliban remaining in talks with Kabul or the outcome of such talks.[24] Deputy U.S. negotiator Molly Phee said on February 18, "We will not prejudge the outcome of intra-Afghan negotiations, but we are prepared to support whatever consensus the Afghans are able to reach about their future political and governing arrangements."[25]

Still, a December 2019 survey reported that a "significant majority" of Afghans were both aware of (77%) and strongly or somewhat supported (89%) efforts to negotiate a peace agreement with the Taliban, while opposing the group itself.[26] At least some Afghans support "peace at any cost" given the decades of conflict through which the country has suffered.[27]

Conflict Status and U.S. Military Posture

As of November 2020, the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, known as Resolute Support Mission (RSM), numbers under 12,000 troops, of which perhaps 4,000 are U.S. forces.[28] RSM has trained, advised, and assisted the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) since RSM's inception in early 2015, when Afghan forces assumed responsibility for security nationwide. Combat operations by thousands of other U.S. forces also continue. These two "complementary missions" comprise the U.S. military's Operation Freedom's Sentinel.[29]

President Trump has frequently expressed a determination to withdraw U.S. forces, reportedly stemming at least in part from his frustration with the state of the conflict, which U.S. military

[21] Pamela Constable, "The Return of a Taliban Government? Afghanistan Talks Raise Once-Unthinkable Question," *Washington Post*, January 29, 2019.

[22] "Afghans voice fears that the U.S. is undercutting them in deal with the Taliban," *Washington Post*, August 17, 2019.

[23] Mujib Mashal, "Violent attacks plague Afghanistan as peace talks in Doha slow," *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 2020.

[24] In a February 27 briefing ahead of the agreement signing, one unnamed senior U.S. official said, "If the political settlement fails, if the talks fail, there is nothing that obliges the United States to withdraw troops," while another said, "The withdrawal timeline is related to counterterrorism, not political outcomes." Briefing with Senior Administration Officials.

[25] Molly Phee, remarks at "Ending Our Endless War in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, Feb. 18, 2020.

[26] The Asia Foundation, "Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People," released December 3, 2019.

[27] Susannah George and Sharif Hassan, "Faced with the prospect of formal peace talks, Afghans consider what they're willing to concede," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2020.

[28] Jim Garamone, "Alliance United in Afghanistan Strategy," *DOD News*, October 23, 2020.

[29] Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, *Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Quarterly Report to Congress, July 1 to September 30, 2018*, November 19, 2018.

officials have assessed as a "strategic stalemate" since at least early 2017.[30] Arguably complicating that assessment, the U.S. government has withheld many once-public metrics of military progress. Notably, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported in April 2019 that the U.S. military is "no longer producing its district-level stability assessments of Afghan government and insurgent control and influence" because it "was of limited decision-making value to the [U.S.] Commander."[31] The last reported metrics from SIGAR in its January 30, 2019, report, showed that the share of districts under government control or influence fell to 53.8%, as of October 2018. This figure was the lowest recorded by SIGAR since tracking began in November 2015; 12% of districts were under insurgent control or influence, with the remaining 34% contested. Conflict dynamics in the past two years do not appear to have shifted in the Afghan government's favor.

ANDSF Development and Deployment

The effectiveness of the ANDSF is key to the security of Afghanistan, and U.S. and international support is critical to supporting the ANDSF. President Ghani has said, "[W]e will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. [financial] support."[32] Since 2014, the United States generally has provided around 75% of the estimated $5 billion to $6 billion a year required to fund the ANDSF, with the balance coming from U.S. partners ($1 billion annually) and the Afghan government ($500 million). The Pentagon reported in June 2020 that "full [financial] self-sufficiency by 2024 does not appear realistic, even if levels of violence and, with it, the ANDSF force structure, reduce significantly."[33]

In the same report, DOD assessed that although Afghan forces (particularly the Afghan air force and special forces) exhibit considerable capabilities, they will "continue to rely over the long term on contracted logistic support and on the United States for the vast majority of the funding needed to sustain combat operations."[34] Total ANDSF strength was reported at nearly 289,000 as of July 2020. Other metrics related to ANDSF strength and performance, including casualty and attrition rates, have been classified by U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) starting with the October 2017 SIGAR quarterly report, citing a request from the Afghan government, although SIGAR had previously published those metrics as part of its quarterly reports.[35]

U.S. air operations escalated considerably under the Trump Administration: the U.S. dropped more munitions in Afghanistan in 2019 than any other year since at least 2010 and in the first two months of 2020 alone, U.S. forces conducted 1,010 strikes in 27 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.[36] In May 2020, U.S. Air Forces Central Command stated it would no longer release monthly reports on the number of airstrikes and munitions released, citing "how the report could adversely impact ongoing discussions with the Taliban regarding Afghanistan peace talks."[37] U.S. air operations appear to have decreased significantly since the U.S.-Taliban agreement, though U.S. military spokesmen have highlighted periodic U.S. strikes against Taliban actions which the United States characterizes as violating the agreement (such as the October 2020 Taliban offensive in Helmand Province).

[30] Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Esper and General Milley in the Pentagon Briefing Room, December 20, 2019.

[31] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2019. This information, which was in every previous Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) quarterly report going back to January 2016, estimated the extent of Taliban control and influence in terms of both territory and population.

[32] Anwar Iqbal, "Afghan Army to Collapse in Six Months Without US Help: Ghani," *Dawn*, January 18, 2018.

[33] Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," June 2020.

[34] Ibid.

[35] "Report: US Officials Classify Crucial Metrics on Afghan Casualties, Readiness," *Military Times*, October 30, 2017.

[36] U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, monthly strike summaries.

[37] "AFCENT stops releasing airstrike information as Taliban talks continue," *Air Force Magazine*, May 4, 2020.

U.S. Military Drawdown: Questions about Timing and Conditionality

While arguing that the withdrawal would be conditions-based, Administration officials have given conflicting signals about the extent to which the ongoing U.S. military withdrawal would be contingent upon various developments.[38] They also have rejected claims that withdrawal decisions are motivated by U.S. domestic political concerns and that the U.S. military withdrawal reduces the Taliban's incentives to remain in, and conclude, intra-Afghan negotiations. It is unclear whether the United States would halt or reverse its withdrawal if intra-Afghan talks collapse. Some Members of Congress have proposed limiting funding for U.S. military withdrawals unless the Administration certifies that withdrawals will not compromise U.S. national security or Afghan social and political gains made since 2001 (see H.R. 7343).

Confusion about the United States' future military posture appears to have grown in October 2020 due to contradictory visions expressed by senior Administration officials. On October 7, National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said that the number of U.S. troops would reach 2,500 by "early next year."[39] Later that day, President Trump tweeted, "We should have the small remaining number of our BRAVE Men and Women serving in Afghanistan home by Christmas!"[40] It is unclear what prompted the President's tweet, and whether he was conveying an official change in U.S. policy. The Taliban released a statement welcoming the President's statement as a "positive step."[41] Afghan officials reportedly characterized the tweet as "a big blow" that "dampened the national mood."[42]

Asked about the President's tweet, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley said,

> ... I default back to 'we have a plan.' It's a conditions-based plan, and right now, the only number that's publicly out there that I am aware of in terms of any sort of official number is 4,500 in the not-too-distant future by November. And that's the plan. And we're continuing to monitor those conditions. And as further decisions that the President makes based on those conditions, then we'll execute those decisions.[43]

In the same interview, General Milley identified entering intra-Afghan talks, reducing violence, and severing ties with Al Qaeda (see below) as some of the Taliban actions on which the U.S. withdrawal is conditioned. While the Taliban have commenced talks with the Afghan government, violence has remained steady, as mentioned above. U.S. military officials have given differing interpretations of Taliban attacks. Then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said in a March 2 media availability that "our expectation is that the reduction in violence will continue, it

[38] In a February 27 briefing ahead of the agreement signing, one unnamed senior U.S. official said, "if the political settlement fails, if the talks fail, there is nothing that obliges the United States to withdraw troops;" another said, "the withdrawal timeline is related to counterterrorism, not political outcomes. Office of the Spokesperson, "Briefing with Senior Administration Officials on Next Steps Toward an Agreement on Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," U.S. Department of State, February 29, 2020.

[39] Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Seeks to Draw Down Its Troops in Afghanistan to 2,500 by Early 2021," *New York Times*, October 7, 2020.

[40] President Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter, October 7, 2020, 7:28 PM.

[41] Mohammad Naeem (@IeaOfficial), Twitter, October 8, 2020, 6:40 AM.

[42] Pamela Constable and Sharif Hassan, "Afghans stunned, worried by Trump tweet to bring U.S. troops home early," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2020.

[43] "Transcript: NPR's Full Interview with Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley," *NPR*, October 11, 2020.

[will] taper off until we get intra-Afghan negotiations."[44] It is not clear what the basis for that expectation was; there is no provision in the U.S.-Taliban agreement committing the Taliban to refrain from attacking Afghan forces, a fact that Khalilzad acknowledged in a May 15, 2020 media briefing.[45] U.S. officials have stated consistently since the agreement that Taliban violence is "unacceptably high."[46] In October 2020, Special Representative Khalilzad announced after a meeting with Taliban officials in Doha that the sides had agreed to a "reset" and that "we expect that number [of Afghans dying] to drop significantly."[47]

Former Vice President Joseph Biden, the presumptive winner of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, reportedly opposed the Obama Administration's decision to increase U.S. force levels in 2009 and expressed skepticism about both U.S. development assistance and troop levels during the 2020 primary campaign.[48] On a number of occasions in 2019 and 2020, he declared his intention to bring home U.S. combat troops if elected, leaving a small force focused solely on counterterrorism operations.[49]

U.S. Adversaries: The Taliban, the Islamic State, and Al Qaeda[50]

The leader of the Taliban is Haibatullah Akhundzada, who is known as e*mir al-mu'minin*, or commander of the faithful; the Taliban style themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Haibatullah succeeded Mullah Mansoor, who was killed in a 2016 U.S. airstrike in Pakistan; Mansoor had succeeded Taliban founder Mullah Omar, who died of natural causes in April 2013. Formerly a figure in Taliban religious courts, Haibatullah has been regarded as "more of an Islamic scholar than a military tactician."[51] Still, under his consensus-oriented leadership the Taliban have achieved some notable military successes and the group is seen as more cohesive and less susceptible to fragmentation than in the past.[52]

The Taliban, whose strength has been estimated at 60,000 full-time fighters, have consistently demonstrated considerable tactical capabilities. U.S. officials generally say that the Taliban do not pose an existential threat to the Afghan government, given the current military balance. That dynamic could change if the United States alters the level or nature of its troop deployments in Afghanistan (per the U.S.-Taliban agreement) or reduces funding for the ANDSF. SIGAR reported in April 2020 that U.S. forces are now withholding from public release data on enemy-

[44] Defense Secretary Esper and Joint Chiefs of Staff Milley Hold Media Availability, March 2, 2020.

[45] U.S Department of State, Briefing with Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, May 15, 2020.

[46] See, for example, Morgan Phillips, "US Commander disappointed with Taliban peace efforts: Violence 'higher' than agreement allows," *Fox News*, March 10, 2020; "Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchison on NATO's Statement on Afghanistan," U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 24, 2020; "As Afghan peace talks stutter, U.S. says violence levels too high," *Reuters*, September 22, 2020.

[47] U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad (@US4AfghanPeace), Twitter, October 15, 2020, 9:21 AM.

[48] Steve Coll, "Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan" (Penguin Press, 2018), pp. 353-354, 367.

[49] See "Candidates Answer CFR's Questions: Joe Biden," Council on Foreign Relations, August 1, 2019; "Joe Biden – Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, February 2020.

[50] For more, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

[51] "Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, iss. 1, January 2018.

[52] Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction, and Future," U.S. Institute of Peace, March 2020.

initiated attacks, which SIGAR called "one of the last remaining metrics SIGAR was able to use to report publicly on the security situation in Afghanistan."[53]

Beyond the Taliban, a significant share of U.S. operations have been aimed at the local Islamic State affiliate, known as Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, also known as ISIS-K). Estimates of ISKP strength generally ranged from 2,000 to 4,000 fighters until ISKP "collapsed" in late 2019 due to offensives by U.S. and Afghan forces and, separately, the Taliban.[54] ISKP and Taliban forces have sometimes fought over control of territory or because of political or other differences.[55] A number of ISKP leaders have been killed in U.S. strikes since 2016, and Afghan forces arrested and captured two successive ISKP leaders in the spring of 2020. U.S. officials caution that ISKP remains a threat, pointing to several high profile attacks attributed to the group in 2020 (including a May 2020 assault on a maternity ward in Kabul and a November 2020 attack on a university in Kabul), but the United Nations reports that casualties from ISKP attacks have dropped considerably in 2020 compared to 2019.

Senior Al Qaeda (AQ) leaders, along with fighters of the regional AQ affiliate Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, are also assessed to operate in Afghanistan. In May 2020, the United Nations reported that senior Taliban leaders "regularly consulted" with their AQ counterparts during negotiations with the United States. [56] Al Qaeda has welcomed the U.S.-Taliban agreement, "celebrating it as a victory for the Taliban's cause and thus for global militancy."[57]

U.S. officials have differed on the extent to which the Taliban are fulfilling its counterterrorism commitments with regard to Al Qaeda, with which the Taliban have had close ties. Secretary Pompeo said on July 1 that he had seen indications that the Taliban are actively combatting Al Qaeda, while General McKenzie said on July 15 that "right now, it is simply unclear to me that the Taliban has taken any positive steps" with regard to Al Qaeda.[58]

It is uncertain what verification mechanisms might be in place to ensure Taliban compliance with the commitment to prevent Al Qaeda from operating in Afghanistan, and to what extent the U.S. withdrawal might be paused or reversed based on Taliban action with regard to Al Qaeda. Afghan forces' killing of a high-ranking AQ operative in Afghanistan's Ghazni province, where he reportedly was living and working with Taliban forces, further underscores questions about Taliban intentions with regard to Al Qaeda.[59]

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[53] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2020. SIGAR reports that the U.S. military "explained its decision by saying 'EIA are now a critical part of deliberative interagency discussions regarding ongoing political negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban.'"

[54] "ISIS Is Losing Afghan Territory. That Means Little for Its Victims," *New York Times*, December 2, 2019.

[55] See, for example, "Heavy fighting flares between Taliban, Islamic State in Afghanistan," *Reuters*, April 24, 2019; Shawn Snow, "ISIS loses more than half its fighters from US airstrikes and Taliban ground operations," *Military Times*, February 27, 2020.

[56] Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2501 (2019) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan, S/2020/415, released May 27, 2020.

[57] Ibid.

[58] U.S. Department of State, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo with Bret Baier of Fox News Special Report, July 1, 2020; Carla Babb, "VOA Exclusive: CENTCOM chief says US can do job in Iraq with fewer forces," Voice of America, July 15, 2020.

[59] Jeff Seldin, "US Calls Death of al-Qaida Official a Major Setback for Terror Group," Voice of America, October 26, 2020.

Regional Dynamics: Pakistan and Other Neighbors

Regional dynamics, and the involvement of outside powers, directly affect the conflict in Afghanistan. The neighboring state widely considered most important in this regard is Pakistan, which has played an active, and by many accounts negative, role in Afghan affairs for decades. Pakistan's security services maintain ties to Afghan insurgent groups, most notably the Haqqani Network.[60] Afghan leaders, along with U.S. military commanders, attribute much of the insurgency's power and longevity either directly or indirectly to Pakistani support; President Trump has accused Pakistan of "housing the very terrorists that we are fighting."[61] Since late 2018, the Trump Administration has sought Islamabad's assistance in U.S. talks with the Taliban, and Khalilzad thanked Pakistan for releasing Baradar from custody in October 2018 and for facilitating the travel of Taliban figures to talks in Doha.[62] A biannual Department of Defense report on Afghanistan released in July 2020 asserted that Pakistan has demonstrated "strong support to facilitating peace in Afghanistan."[63]

Pakistan may view a weak and destabilized Afghanistan as preferable to a strong, unified Afghan state (particularly one led by an ethnic Pashtun-dominated government in Kabul; Pakistan has a large and restive Pashtun minority).[64] Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by the presence of over one million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as well as a long-running and ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile border.[65] Pakistan's security establishment, fearful of strategic encirclement by India, apparently continues to view the Afghan Taliban as a relatively friendly and reliably anti-India element in Afghanistan. India's diplomatic and commercial presence in Afghanistan—and U.S. rhetorical support for it—exacerbates Pakistani fears of encirclement. India has been the largest regional contributor to Afghan reconstruction, but New Delhi has not shown an inclination to pursue a deeper defense relationship with Kabul.

Afghanistan largely maintains cordial ties with its other neighbors, notably the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, whose role in Afghanistan has been relatively limited but could increase.[66] In the past two years, multiple U.S. commanders have warned of increased levels of support for the Taliban from Russia and Iran, both of which have cited the Islamic State affiliate presence in Afghanistan to justify their activities. Both were reported in 2020 to have been more directly involved, including possibly supporting Taliban attacks against U.S. forces.[67] Both nations were

[60] For more, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

[61] White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, August 21, 2017. Some Pakistani officials disputed that charge and noted the Taliban's increased territorial control within Afghanistan itself. Author interviews with Pakistani military officials, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, February 21, 2018.

[62] "Mullah Baradar released by Pakistan at the behest of US: Khalilzad," *The Hindu*, February 9, 2019. Baradar had been imprisoned in Pakistan since his capture in Karachi in a joint U.S.-Pakistani operation in 2010.

[63] DOD, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, June 2020 (released July 1, 2020).

[64] Pashtuns are an ethnic group that makes up about 40% of Afghanistan's 35 million people and 15% of Pakistan's 215 million; they thus represent a plurality in Afghanistan but are a relatively small minority in Pakistan, though Pakistan's Pashtun population is considerably larger than Afghanistan's.

[65] Pakistan, the United Nations, and others recognize the 1893 Durand Line as an international boundary, but Afghanistan does not. See Vinay Kaura, "The Durand Line: A British Legacy Plaguing Afghan-Pakistani Relations," Middle East Institute, June 27, 2017.

[66] Humayun Hamidzada and Richard Ponzio, *Central Asia's Growing Role in Building Peace and Regional Connectivity with Afghanistan*, United States Institute of Peace, August 2019.

[67] In October 2018, the Trump Administration sanctioned several Iranian military officials for providing support to the Taliban. U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Treasury and the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center Partners Sanction Taliban Facilitators and their Iranian Supporters*, October 23, 2018.

opposed to the Taliban government of the late 1990s, but reportedly see the Taliban as a useful point of leverage vis-a-vis the United States. Afghanistan may also represent a growing priority for China in the context of broader Chinese aspirations in Asia and globally.[68]

Reports of Foreign Payments for Taliban Attacks

Since at least 2016, U.S. officials have indicated that Russia has been providing some measure of political and potentially material support to the Taliban. Media reports in June-July 2020, however, alleged the existence of a more specific connection than was previously reported publicly. Specifically, media reports indicate that U.S. intelligence officials concluded that Russia's military intelligence agency (commonly known as the GRU) has offered payments to Taliban-linked militants in exchange for attacks on U.S. and international troops in Afghanistan.[69] Administration officials rejected the accuracy of the reporting and decried intelligence leaks, without denying the existence of related intelligence reporting or assessments. U.S. intelligence agencies have not verified the claims. A Taliban spokesman denied "any such relations with any intelligence agency" and stated that "target killings and assassinations were ongoing in years before, and we did it on our own resources."[70] Russia also denied the allegations as "lies."[71] The reports prompted statements and proposed legislation (see H.R. 7553) from some Members of Congress.

Separately, in August 2020, CNN reported that U.S. intelligence had concluded that Iran had similarly paid Taliban fighters associated with the Haqqani network for attacks against U.S. personnel, which Iranian officials denied.[72]

Economy and U.S. Aid

In addition to its longstanding military presence, the United States has provided a considerable amount of development assistance to Afghanistan. Since FY2002, Congress has appropriated over $141 billion in overall aid for Afghanistan, with about 61% for security and 26% for development (with the remaining 13% for civilian operations and humanitarian aid).[73] The Administration's FY2021 budget requests $4 billion for Afghan forces, $250 million in Economic Support Funds, and smaller amounts to help the Afghan government with efforts like counternarcotics.[74] DOD's Cost of War report estimated the cost of U.S. combat operations (including related regional support activities and support for Afghan forces) as of September 2019 at $805.8 billion since FY2002.

A U.S. military withdrawal could affect the level and types of assistance the United States may provide to Afghanistan. Some Members have raised concerns that a withdrawal might impair the United States' ability to monitor the distribution and effectiveness of U.S. aid, a longstanding U.S. concern.[75] Relatedly, the number of personnel present in Afghanistan under Chief of Mission

[68] See, for example, Barbara Kelemen, "China's Economic Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan: A New Party to the Table?" Middle East Institute, January 21, 2020.

[69] Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt and Michael Schwirtz, "Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says," *New York Times*, June 26, 2020.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Interfax (Russia), "Reports Russia Offered Bounties to Taliban Militants to Attack U.S. Troops in Afghanistan Lies – Peskov," June 29, 2020; Brendan Cole, "How Russia Reacted to the U.S. Troop Bounty Claims," *Newsweek*, July 1, 2020.

[72] Zachary Cohen, "US intelligence indicates Iran paid bounties to Taliban for targeting American troops in Afghanistan," *CNN*, August 17, 2020.

[73] SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,* April 30, 2020.

[74] For more, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Issues for Congress and Legislation 2017-2020*.

[75] See Senator Reed's remarks at Senate Armed Service Committee Hearing on U.S. Central Command, February 5, 2019.

authority (the vast majority of which are State Department or USAID personnel) has declined steadily under the Trump Administration and significantly since the onset of the pandemic.

Furthermore, U.S. assistance may affect, and in turn be affected by, intra-Afghan talks and a potential settlement. Special Representative Khalilzad said in September 2020 congressional testimony that "we are committed for the long term in terms of providing assistance to Afghanistan," but that U.S. decisions would depend on the outcome of Afghan negotiations, as other U.S. officials have emphasized.[76] The appropriation of assistance funding remains a congressional prerogative. It is unclear to what extent (if at all) the prospect of changes to U.S. and international financial assistance might put pressure on or create U.S. leverage over the behavior and policies of the Taliban or the Afghan government.[77]

U.S. and international development assistance could become more critical if a U.S. and allied military withdrawal further weakens Afghanistan's already shaky economy. Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP) has grown an average of 7% per year since 2003, but growth rates averaged between 2% and 3% in recent years and decades of war have stunted the development of most domestic industries. The withdrawal of a U.S. force much smaller than that of a decade ago would seem to have less dramatic second-order economic effects for Afghanistan than the post-2012 drawdown, which helped spur a "drastic economic decline."[78] Still, the proposed withdrawal could pose risks for an Afghan economy suffering the effects of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which has infected tens of thousands of Afghans (a figure likely understates the scale of the virus in Afghanistan due to extremely limited testing).[79]

Social conditions in Afghanistan remain challenging as well. On issues ranging from human trafficking to religious freedom to women's rights, development assistance has helped Afghanistan make limited progress since 2001, but prospects in these areas are uncertain, especially under more unstable future scenarios. Afghanistan's largely underdeveloped natural resources and/or geographic position at the crossroads of future global trade routes could improve the economic life of the country, and, by extension, its social and political dynamics. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's economic and political outlook remains uncertain, if not negative, in light of the prospective decrease in U.S. and international investment and engagement.

Outlook and Issues for Congress

The September 12, 2020, commencement of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban represented a significant moment for Afghanistan and for U.S. policy there. As negotiators continue their work, U.S. officials, including Members of Congress, are expected to closely follow the negotiations, given the impact that a settlement could have on U.S. interests such as human rights and counterterrorism.

Still, U.S. officials caution that challenges remain and that "there is no guarantee that the Afghans will capitalize on their opportunity."[80] Shifts in political and/or security dynamics may change

[76] House Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on National Security Holds Hearing on Afghanistan Strategy, September 22, 2020. For example, Secretary Pompeo told intra-Afghan negotiators in Doha that their "choices and conduct will affect both the size and scope of United States future assistance."

[77] For more, see Live Event: What Does the Taliban Want?, Wilson Center, October 6, 2020.

[78] "The Economic Disaster Behind Afghanistan's Mounting Human Crisis," International Crisis Group, October 3, 2016.

[79] World Health Organization, "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," November 9, 2020.

[80] Zalmay Khalilzad, remarks at "The Beginning of an End to Afghanistan's Conflict?" United States Institute of Peace,

how various parties view both the U.S.-Taliban agreement and the pursuit of intra-Afghan talks and what their respective commitments and interests are. Furthermore, the unfolding COVID-19 crisis could also affect those dynamics, as well as the capacity and/or willingness of the United States and other international partners to maintain their engagement, both military and financial, with Afghanistan. Former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive winner of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, has repeatedly committed to withdraw U.S. combat troops and said that the use of U.S. military force to pursue goals in Afghanistan other than counterterrorism is not in the United States' vital interests.[81]

Core issues for Congress in Afghanistan include Congress's role in authorizing, appropriating funds for, and overseeing U.S. military activities, aid, and regional policy implementation. Additionally, Members of Congress may examine how the United States can leverage its assets, influence, and experience in Afghanistan, as well as those of Afghanistan's neighbors and international organizations, to encourage more inclusive and effective governance. Congress also could seek to shape the U.S. approach to the Taliban and/or intra-Afghan talks through oversight, legislation, and public statements.

In light of the U.S.-Taliban agreement, Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers may reassess notions of what success in Afghanistan looks like, examining how potential outcomes might harm or benefit U.S. interests, and the relative levels of U.S. engagement and investment required to attain them.[82] How Afghanistan fits into broader U.S. strategy is another issue on which Members might engage, especially given competing fiscal priorities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the Administration's focus on strategic competition with other great powers.[83]

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[81] "Transcript: Joe Biden on Face the Nation," CBS News, February 23, 2020.

[82] The *Washington Post*'s December 2019 publication of the "Afghanistan Papers" (largely records of SIGAR interviews conducted as part of a lessons learned project) ignited debate, including reactions from some Members of Congress, on these very issues.

[83] See, for example, CRS In Focus IF11139, *Evaluating DOD Strategy: Key Findings of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, by Kathleen J. McInnis; *The US Role In The Middle East In An Era Of Renewed Great Power Competition*, Hoover Institution, April 2, 2019; and Benjamin Denison, "Confusion in the Pivot: The Muddled Shift from Peripheral War to Great Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, February 12, 2019.

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