

## COMMENT 210 - Out of sight, out of mind? Biden's calamitous decision on Afghanistan

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Despite severe concerns by members of his own military top brass and security circles, on 14 April, 2021, US President Joe Biden [announced](#) the unconditional withdrawal of *all* combat troops by 11 September of the same year. The US does not only thereby relinquish the opportunity to conduct counter-insurgency campaigns against the Taliban, it will also lose any capacity to conduct counter-terrorism operations against al-Qaeda and other international terrorist groups present on the ground.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this stands in sharp contrast to his own earlier points of view, particularly those held as Vice-President (2009-2017), when under President Obama he advocated for a less troop-intensive but [more engaged counter-terrorism presence in Afghanistan](#). Despite much disenchantment regarding nation-building efforts, endemic corruption, and the inability to bring stability to the country despite a massive troop surge, Biden was then not willing to abandon Afghanistan. President Biden obviously changed his opinion – to the disadvantage of the Afghan state and society.

Biden followed the patterns by his predecessor Donald Trump when implementing the [February 2020 peace agreement](#) between the US and the Taliban. Nevertheless, Biden's decision marks a departure from the Trump-Taliban deal for several reasons. The [US will not meet](#) the agreed 1 May, 2021 deadline due to '[tactical difficulties](#)' - a pull-out that '[would not be subject to further conditions](#)'. The Biden

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<sup>1</sup> [According to observers](#), the pull-out of combat troops 'will necessitate the unravelling of U.S. intelligence networks built up over two decades'. Consequently, it will be even harder to conduct counter-terrorism measures.

administration is hence ignoring the fact that the Taliban do not comply (which does not come by surprise to most Afghan experts) with any of the conditions set in the agreement made with the former Trump administration: The Taliban did not cut their ties with international terrorist organisations, especially not with al-Qaeda<sup>2</sup>; they did not enter into any serious negotiations with the Afghan government; nor did their leadership prevent attacks from their own rank and files (or restive factions) which conduct hostile measures (including armed attacks) [against US and Coalition personnel](#) in Afghanistan. Biden did [promise](#) that the US will continue its ‘diplomatic and humanitarian work’, ‘to support the government of Afghanistan’, and that it ‘will keep providing assistance to the Afghan National Defences and Security Forces’. As regards the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, besides pledging ongoing support, the US administration is clearly shifting the responsibilities towards the UN and regional actors such as Pakistan, Russia, China, India, and Turkey. That the [Taliban did not take part](#) in the US-backed and [UN-sponsored](#) (together with Turkey and Qatar) high-level conference in Turkey (planned for the end of April) on Afghanistan is much relevant. It not only indicates that the larger international track of the Afghan peace talks (foremost the Doha process) failed, but also lends a grim perspective for the ongoing regional tracking by neighbouring countries with India. Considering the [lack of interest](#) the Taliban showed during the Doha talks, as well as their active role in the dramatic [increase in violence](#) in Afghanistan during the last year, one must state that the militant group is neither interested in creating a ‘conducive atmosphere’ for peace negotiations nor to play a constructive role in the process. Moreover, one must wonder whether the Taliban will participate in the [postponed](#) conference in Turkey (supposed to fast-track an agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government) [after the end](#) of Ramadan at all – as announced by Turkey, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> The foreign ministers of all three countries [called on](#)

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<sup>2</sup> Here, [Reuters refers](#) to a UN report written in January 2021 which states that ‘there were as many as 500 al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan and that the Taliban maintained a close relationship with the Islamist extremist group’. The Taliban’s political leadership ‘denies al-Qaeda has a presence in Afghanistan’. On 4 January, 2021, the U.S. Department of Treasury [reported](#) that ‘as of 2020, al-Qaeda is gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under the Taliban’s protection.’

<sup>3</sup> Since the Taliban [refused](#) to attend any summits until all foreign forces were withdrawn from Afghanistan, one must question the willingness of the Taliban to take part in a conference before September 11, 2021. Concretely, Taliban spokesperson Mohammad Naeem stated via Twitter: ‘[Until all foreign forces completely withdraw from our homeland, the Islamic Emirate will not participate in any conference that shall make decisions about Afghanistan](#)’.

the Taliban to ‘reaffirm its commitment to achieving a negotiated settlement for lasting peace in Afghanistan’. However, key actors such as US General Kenneth McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, expressed ‘[grave doubts](#)’ regarding the Taliban’s reliability as a negotiation partner for the US and the Afghan government. [According to General Austin Scott Miller](#), NATO Resolute Support and United States Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) Commander, the Taliban ‘are using violence and they are trying to put themselves in a position, if the things they want are not met ... to force decisions in the political space’.

As such, the unconditional, complete withdrawal by the US (especially the choice of such a highly symbolic date<sup>4</sup> as deadline) and subsequently by NATO is a calamitous decision for Afghanistan’s state’s institutional-administrative structure as well as for society. It will further contribute to the declining morale of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF), which is translated in high numbers of [desertions](#) and defections to the Taliban and other militant groups. The morale and cohesion of the ANDSF is already under heavy pressure due to a massive increase in casualties and insider attacks since the beginning of this year.<sup>5</sup> The available, concrete data on ANDSF losses [remain classified](#) by USFOR-A at the request of the Afghan government. Moreover, [according to John Sopko](#), the independent Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), ‘Afghan security forces are nowhere near achieving self-sufficiency, as they cannot maintain their equipment, manage their supply chains or train new soldiers, pilots and policemen’. An assessment echoed by General McKenzie [stating](#) that the ANDSF “‘will certainly collapse” without the maintenance of US support after the troop withdrawal.’<sup>6</sup> There is a common understanding among experts that the ANDSF’s decline will irrevocably lead to the downfall of the Afghan government under President Ashraf Ghani and subsequently the abolishment of the Republic

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<sup>4</sup> The date for completion of the US ‘[withdrawal coincides with the 20th anniversary of the al-Qaida terror attack on the U.S. that had triggered the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan](#)’.

<sup>5</sup> It is [reported](#) that from 1 January to 31 March, 2021, the casualties by the ANDSF ‘were substantially higher compared to the same period last year’ and that the insider attacks on ANDSF personnel also increased by 82% this quarter compared to the same period last year (resulting in more than double the casualties from insider attacks).

<sup>6</sup> General Miller [warned](#) that ‘a U.S. withdrawal would leave the Afghan armed forces without vital support, especially for its fledgling air force, which relies on contractors to maintain its planes and helicopters’.

along with its constitution<sup>7</sup>. In brief, Biden’s decision means the end of the attempt to introduce parliamentary democracy in Afghanistan.

Moreover, Biden’s ‘[cut and run](#)’ decision not only will [encourage](#) the Taliban to continue their military campaign<sup>8</sup> against the ANDSF but also sends the [wrong signal](#) to other terrorist groups within and beyond Afghanistan (particularly in Africa). Concretely, it sends the message that resisting against the US and its allies [pays off in the long-run](#). Furthermore, one should expect that critics of the US and its intervention in Afghanistan will describe the troop pull-out as another showcase of how the [US is abandoning its allies](#). This will provide the Taliban with further [political legitimacy](#).

With no troops on the ground, the US and NATO are risking their opportunity<sup>9</sup> to restrain the Taliban from a “military victory” – considering their persistently growing numerical strength<sup>10</sup>, military capabilities, and improved equipment. Despite large territorial gains the Taliban were able to achieve during the last years, the ANDSF with the support of the US/NATO were able to maintain a ‘[strategic stalemate](#)’ to protect the government in Kabul and keep the Taliban at bay from major populated urban areas. With the unconditional withdrawal by the US/NATO, this strategic stalemate becomes at severe risk. In fact, it makes it easier for the Taliban [to achieve more control](#) over territories and cities or create ungoverned spaces. The latter are ‘[the greatest asset for extremism to flourish](#)’ which ‘[could allow a resurgence](#)’ by al-Qaeda and other international terrorist groups that could create bases in Afghanistan for exporting terror. According to former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker, ‘[Biden is engaged in “magical thinking” about Afghanistan—especially if he believes Washington has any leverage left with the Taliban](#)’ – especially when it comes to forcing global Jihadists out of the country.

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<sup>7</sup> Sapko [alerted](#) the US Congress that a ‘withdrawal without a peace deal in place would be “a disaster” and mean government collapse’.

<sup>8</sup> Sapko [stressed](#) that ‘there is little evidence in recent months that the Taliban fighters are prepared to lay down their arms and take up diplomatic posts with the new government instead’.

<sup>9</sup> CIA director William Burns [testified](#) during a Senate Select Committee on Intelligence ‘when the time comes for the U.S. military to withdraw, the U.S. government’s ability to collect and act on threats will diminish. That’s simply a fact.’

<sup>10</sup> The UN, based on estimations by Member States, [highlighted](#) that in March 2020, that the number of ‘Taliban fighters ranged from 55,000 to 85,000’, and that ‘Taliban facilitators and non-combatants could bring the total figure to 100,000’.

In sum, Biden's promises that Washington is maintaining its support for Afghanistan barely disguises the reality that the US is abandoning the Afghan people for a second time. In fact, it appears that Afghanistan is no longer a priority in the US strategic calculus – which seems to shift towards the Middle East and [China](#). Biden seems to be repeating the strategic mistake from the 1990s when the US abandoned Afghanistan to the imbroglio that turned the country into a hub for international terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda. Additionally, it [proves the argument](#) by Jihadists, especially Osama bin Laden, that the US in longer conflicts always 'cut and run'. Here, one should be also aware that one of the most crucial values of both US and Coalition combat troops presence ensured that the international community kept '[signing the foreign aid checks](#)'. In consequence, the [achieved gains](#) over the last two decades in health, education and women's rights will face a double threat – as the Taliban draconic regime returns while the support by the US and other international actors dries-up over time, thus cutting the Afghan people's most-essential life line. With the withdrawal of its troops, vague promises, and no immediate plan for Afghanistan, Biden is redirecting the US attention away to other world regions. Once again, it might be said for the Afghans – *out of sight out of mind*.

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