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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 $137 billion for reconstruction 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. The fundamental objective of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan is "preventing any further attacks on the United States by terrorists enjoying safe haven or support in Afghanistan."

As of May 2020, U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan appears closer to an end, in light of the February 29, 2020, signing of a U.S.-Taliban agreement on the issues of counterterrorism and the withdrawal of U.S. and international troops, but questions remain. As part of the agreement, the United States has committed to withdraw all of its forces within 14 months, a process that is already underway. In return, the Taliban have committed to not allow other groups, including Al Qaeda, to use Afghan soil to threaten the United States or its allies, including by preventing recruiting, training, and fundraising for such activities. 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 would 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 interpret 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. The U.S.-Taliban agreement envisioned intra-Afghan talks beginning on March 10, 2020, but talks remain unscheduled amid a number of obstacles, including:

- Heightened Taliban violence. While the Taliban have refrained from attacks on U.S. personnel since February 29, they have escalated their attacks on Afghan forces.
- Disputes over an ongoing prisoner exchange. As of late April, each side has released dozens of prisoners, though not at levels envisioned by the U.S.-Taliban agreement.
- Political crisis in Afghanistan. President Ashraf Ghani was declared the winner of the September 2019 presidential election on February 18, 2020, but his chief rival (and former partner in a unity government) Abdullah Abdullah rejects the result as fraudulent and has sought to establish himself at the head of an alternate government. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, after an attempt to mediate the dispute in March 2020, announced the "immediate" suspension of $1 billion in U.S. assistance to the Afghan government due to the continued impasse.
- COVID-19, which further complicates many of the dynamics above. Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in the world, may be at particular risk due to a public health system and infrastructure undermined by decades of war and poor governance.

Observers speculate about what kind of political arrangement, if any, could satisfy both Kabul 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 Taliban holding talks with Kabul or the outcome of such talks. For now, the Taliban have maintained their refusal to engage with the Afghan government's negotiating team.

A full-scale U.S. withdrawal and/or aid cutoff could lead to the collapse of the Afghan government and perhaps even the reestablishment of Taliban control. 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 2017-2019*, by Clayton Thomas.

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Overview

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

As part of the agreement, the United States is to draw down its forces from 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days (with proportionate decreases in allied force levels) and withdraw all of its forces within 14 months. That withdrawal is under way as of May 2020. Other U.S. commitments include working to facilitate a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the Afghan government and removing U.S. sanctions on Taliban members by August 27, 2020. In exchange, the Taliban committed to not allow Taliban members or other groups, including Al Qaeda, to use Afghan soil to threaten the United States or its allies, including by preventing recruiting, training, and fundraising for such activities. The agreement was preceded by a week-long ceasefire, but violence between the Taliban and Afghan government forces has escalated significantly since February 29.

The agreement also says the Taliban "will start intra-Afghan negotiations" on March 10, 2020; as of May 2020, such talks have not been scheduled or held, despite some tentative progress. Prospective intra-Afghan talks are complicated by several obstacles, including:

- Continued Taliban violence.
- A dispute over a potential prisoner exchange between the Taliban and Afghan government.
- A political crisis stemming from the disputed results of the October 2019 presidential election.
- The COVID-19 pandemic.

It remains unclear to what extent the U.S. withdrawal is contingent upon, or otherwise related to, the Taliban holding talks with Kabul or the outcome of such talks. The Taliban have thus far refused to meet with the Afghan government's negotiating team.

The U.S.-Taliban agreement comes after a violent year in Afghanistan: the United Nations reports that over 10,000 civilians were killed or injured in fighting in 2019, down slightly from 2018. The conflict also involves an array of other armed groups, including active affiliates of both Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or *Da'esh*). U.S. operations intensified in 2019, by some measures: the United States dropped more munitions in Afghanistan in 2019 than any other year since at least 2010 and U.S. forces conducted strikes in 27 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces in the first two months of 2020 alone.[1] By some measures, the Taliban are in control of or contesting more territory today than at any point since 2001, though many once-public conflict metrics are now withheld by the U.S. military.

The United States has appropriated approximately $137 billion in various forms of reconstruction aid to Afghanistan over the past 18 years, from building up and sustaining the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) to economic development. This assistance has increased Afghan government capacity, but prospects for stability in Afghanistan appear distant. 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

[1] CRS analysis of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan monthly strike summaries.

outlook remains uncertain, if not negative, in light of ongoing hostilities and the prospective decrease in U.S. and international investment and engagement.

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. Subsequent developments, including a number of obstacles to potential Taliban-Afghan government talks, have raised questions about the agreement and broader U.S. policy in Afghanistan going forward.

Background: U.S.-Taliban Negotiations

In President Donald Trump's August 2017 speech laying out a revised strategy for Afghanistan, he referred to a "political settlement" as an outcome of an "effective military effort," but did not elaborate on what U.S. goals or conditions might be as part of this putative political process. Less than one year later, the Trump Administration decided to enter into direct negotiations with the Taliban, without the participation of Afghan government representatives. With little to no progress on the battlefield, the Trump Administration reversed the long-standing U.S. position prioritizing an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process," and the first high-level, direct U.S.-Taliban talks occurred in Doha, Qatar, in July 2018.[2] 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 almost 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. In March 2019, Khalilzad announced that an agreement "in draft" had been reached on counterterrorism assurances and U.S. troop withdrawal. He stated that after the agreement was finalized, "the Taliban and other Afghans, including the government, will begin intra-Afghan negotiations on a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire."[3] The process appeared to be reaching its conclusion in September 2019, when President Trump called off talks after a Taliban attack killed a U.S. soldier. U.S.-Taliban negotiations resumed about three months later.

Prelude: Reduction in Violence (RiV)

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.[4] U.S. officials called the reduction in violence (sometimes referred to as "RiV") a test of the Taliban's intentions and of the group's control over its forces, given the possibility for spoilers to upend the negotiation process.

The reduction in violence went into effect on February 22, 2020. U.S. commander General Scott Miller said that he was "satisfied that the Taliban made a good-faith effort," describing episodes

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

[3] U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad, Twitter, March 12, 2019.

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

of violence as "sporadic."[5] According to U.S. and Afghan officials, attacks were down significantly across the country, by as much as 80 percent.[6]

U.S.-Taliban Agreement

After the weeklong reduction in violence, Special Representative Khalilzad signed the formal U.S.-Taliban agreement 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 Pompeo, in Doha. 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, which is about three and a half pages, 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 withdraw all of its forces within 14 months. Other U.S. commitments included working to facilitate a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the Afghan government (more below) and removing U.S. sanctions on Taliban members by August 27, 2020. The sanctions removal is contingent upon the start of intra-Afghan negotiations. In exchange, the Taliban committed to not allow members or other groups, including Al Qaeda, 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."[7] 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.[8]

Intra-Afghan Talks and Obstacles

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, which most observers assess is only possible through a negotiated political settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. The agreement states that the Taliban "will start intra-Afghan negotiations" on March 10, 2020, but no talks have been scheduled or held to date. It is unclear to what extent the U.S. withdrawal is contingent upon, or otherwise related to, the Taliban holding talks with Kabul or the outcome of such talks.[9] 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

[5] Dan Lamothe, "Inside the U.S. military's historic week in Afghanistan ahead of a peace deal with the Taliban," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2020.

[6] Mujib Mashal, "Scarred and Weary, an Afghan Force Wonders: What is Peace?" *New York Times*, February 27, 2020.

[7] Kim Dozier, "Secret Annexes, Backroom Deals: Can Zalmay Khalilzad Deliver Afghan Peace for Trump?" *Time*, February 15, 2020; Briefing with Senior Administration Officials, op. cit.

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

[9] 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 on Next Steps Toward an Agreement on Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, February 29, 2020.

consensus the Afghans are able to reach about their future political and governing arrangements."[10]

It remains unclear what kind of political arrangement could satisfy both Kabul and the Taliban to the extent that the latter abandons its armed struggle. Afghan President Ghani has promised that his government will not accept any settlement that limits Afghans' rights and has 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.[11] Afghans opposed to the Taliban doubt the group'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 an agreement, the most crucial aspect of which would arguably be concluding a comprehensive political settlement with the Afghan government.[12]

The Taliban have given contradictory signs, and generally do not describe in detail their vision for post-settlement Afghan governance beyond referring to it as a subject for intra-Afghan negotiations.[13] Many Afghans, especially women, who remember Taliban rule and oppose the group's policies and beliefs remain wary.[14] Still, a December 2019 survey reported that a "significant majority" of Afghans are both aware of (77%) and strongly or somewhat support (89%) efforts to negotiate a peace agreement with the Taliban, while opposing the group itself.[15]

In the months since the U.S.-Taliban agreement, one nascent indicator of progress has been the Afghan government's formation of a 21-member negotiating team, which was announced on March 26, 2020. The group, which includes five women, has been endorsed by the United States and, perhaps more significantly, by figures from across the Afghan political spectrum, including Abdullah and other Ghani opponents. Still, the Taliban rejected that team and have maintained their refusal to negotiate with Kabul. Potential talks also are complicated and undermined by a number of issues, outlined below.

Prisoner Exchange

A planned prisoner exchange has emerged as the most immediate obstacle to the intra-Afghan talks seen as necessary to resolve the war in Afghanistan. Some experts point out that "the United States [used] different language in separate documents it agreed with the Taliban and the Afghan government."[16] Specifically, the U.S.-Taliban agreement reads that "up to" 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan forces held by the Taliban "will be released by March 10, 2020," while the U.S.-Afghan government joint declaration states that the Afghan government "will

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

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

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

[13] Middle East Media Research Institute, "Afghan Taliban Spokesman Suhail Shaheen On Failed U.S.-Taliban Talks," September 19, 2019. See also Frud Bezhan, "Taliban Constitution Offers Glimpe into Gropu's Vision for Afghanistan," RFE/RL, April 27, 2020

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

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

[16] Frud Bezhan, "The Historic U.S.-Taliban Deal May Already Be Unraveling Over These Two Key Issues," RFE/RL, March 3, 2020.

participate in a U.S.-facilitated discussion" with the Taliban on "the feasibility of releasing significant numbers of prisoners on both sides."

President Ghani signed a decree on March 11, 2020, that would release 1,500 prisoners within 15 days as long as they provide written assurances to remain off the battlefield, with further releases of 500 prisoners every two weeks as long as the Taliban engage in talks and reduce violence.[17] A Taliban spokesman rejected any conditions-based prisoner release as "against the peace accord that we signed" and insisted that 5,000 prisoners be released before any intra-Afghan talks.[18] Despite the Taliban not having evidently met the Afghan government's conditions, some limited releases have taken place: as of May 2020, the Afghan government has released several hundred Taliban prisoners, and the Taliban have in turn released several dozen Afghan personnel.

Renewed Violence

Another potential barrier to intra-Afghan talks is the resumption and escalation of nationwide violence. While the Taliban refrained from attacking Afghan forces during the weeklong reduction in violence preceding the agreement, they resumed operations immediately after the agreement, and violence has now reached levels comparable to prior months.

U.S. military officials have given differing interpretations of Taliban attacks. Secretary of Defense Esper said in a March 2 media availability that "our expectation is that the reduction in violence will continue, it [will] taper off until we get intra-Afghan negotiations."[19] It is not clear what the basis for that "expectation" is; there is no provision in the U.S.-Taliban agreement committing the Taliban to continue to refrain from attacking Afghan forces. CENTCOM Commander General Frank McKenzie said on March 10 that "Taliban attacks are higher than we believe are consistent with an idea to actually carry out" the U.S.-Taliban agreement.[20] Since then, U.S. officials maintain that Taliban violence is "unacceptably high," while violence has increased: according to Afghan officials, an average of 25 to 40 Afghan security personnel were killed every day in mid-April.[21]

Political Crisis and U.S. Aid Suspension

Further potentially complicating the situation is the February 18, 2020, announcement of President Ghani's victory in the September 2019 presidential election over former Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah. Abdullah and his supporters rejected the narrow result as fraudulent and have sought to establish themselves as a separate government.[22] Despite Special Representative Khalilzad's attempts to mediate, Ghani and Abdullah held separate inauguration ceremonies on March 9, 2020. It is unclear what kind of governing arrangement could satisfy Abdullah and his supporters, who argue that Ghani did not uphold the previous power-sharing

[17] Hamid Shalizi, "Exclusive: Afghan government to release 1,500 Taliban prisoners from jails-decree," Reuters, March 10, 2020.

[18] "Afghan government to free 1,500 prisoners; Taliban demands 5,000," Reuters, March 11, 2020.

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

[20] Morgan Phillips, "US Commander disappointed with Taliban peace efforts: Violence 'higher' than agreement allows," Fox News, March 10, 2020.

[21] "Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchison on NATO's Statement on Afghanistan," U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 24, 2020; Mujib Mashal, "Taliban Ramp Up Attacks Even as Coronavirus Spreads in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, April 24, 2020.

[22] "Abdullah Rejects Results, Announces Formation of 'Inclusive Govt,'" *TOLO News*, February 18, 2020.

agreement. Some critics describe Afghanistan's current political system as overly centralized, arguing that it discourages compromise and fans ethnic tensions.[23]

On March 23, Secretary Pompeo made an unannounced visit to Kabul, where he met with Ghani and Abdullah individually and together. However, Pompeo was unable to secure an agreement, and the two sides remain at odds. On his return to the United States, Pompeo released a statement criticizing the two men for their inability to come to an agreement:

> The United States is disappointed in them and what their conduct means for Afghanistan and our shared interests. Their failure has harmed U.S.-Afghan relations and, sadly, dishonors those Afghan, Americans, and Coalition partners who have sacrificed their lives and treasure in the struggle to build a new future for this country. Because this leadership failure poses a direct threat to U.S. national interests, effective immediately, the U.S. government will initiate a review of the scope of our cooperation with Afghanistan.[24]

Among other measures, the statement announced an "immediate" suspension of $1 billion in U.S. assistance in 2020, with a further $1 billion cut in 2021. It is unclear which U.S. funds are potentially impacted by the announcement; according to an April 2020 Reuters report, citing U.S. officials, it is likely to come from assistance to Afghan security forces.[25] However, Pompeo added that the United States might "revisit" the announced aid reductions if Afghan leaders were to come to an agreement. Abdullah reported progress on May 1, 2020, saying the two sides had "reached tentative agreement on a range of principles."[26]

COVID-19 Pandemic

Overshadowing all of the developments above is the continued spread of COVID-19 in Afghanistan, which reported over 2,300 cases as of May 1, 2020, though that figure likely understates the scale of the virus in Afghanistan due to extremely limited testing.[27] COVID-19 has impacted a number of dynamics related to the U.S.-Taliban agreement and potential intra-Afghan talks. Most notably, the United States announced on March 18 that it is pausing the movement of personnel into and out of theater due to concerns about COVID-19, leading some to question whether withdrawal plans will take place as envisioned by the agreement.[28] On the other hand, NBC News reported in April 2020 that President Trump has advocated accelerating the withdrawal of all U.S. troops out of Afghanistan because of the pandemic.[29]

Further spread of COVID-19 in Afghanistan could cause additional disruptions to the nascent peace process, or could present opportunities for compromise and intra-Afghan cooperation. For example, while the Taliban have reportedly targeted health workers in the past, a Taliban spokesman announced that the group "assures all international health organizations and WHO of

[23] See, for example, Ahmad Massoud, "What Is Missing From Afghan Peace Talks," *New York Times*, April 14, 2020.

[24] Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, "On the Political Impasse in Afghanistan," State Department, March 23, 2020.

[25] Jonathan Landay, Arshad Mohammed, and Idrees Ali, "Exclusive: Planned $1 billion U.S. aid cut would hit afghan security force funds," Reuters, April 5, 2020.

[26] "Abdullah reports progress in political negotiations," *Tolo News*, May 1, 2020.

[27] Belquis Ahmadi and Palwasha Kakar, "Coronavirus in Afghanistan: An Opportunity to Build Trust with the Taliban?" United States Institute of Peace, April 16, 2020.

[28] Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Julian Barnes, "Coronavirus Disrupts Troop Withdrawal in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, March 18, 2020.

[29] Carol E. Lee and Courtney Kube, "Trump tells advisors U.S. should pull troops as Afghanistan COVID-19 outbreak looms," NBC News, April 27, 2020.

its readiness to cooperate and coordinate with them in combatting" COVID-19.[30] Afghanistan may be at particularly high risk of a widespread outbreak, due in part to its weak public health infrastructure and its porous border with Iran, a regional epicenter of the pandemic where up to three million Afghan refugees live: over 250,000 Afghans have returned from Iran since January 1, 2020.[31]

Military and Security Situation

As of May 2020, there are approximately 12,000 U.S. forces in Afghanistan. 8,000 of these are part of the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan of 16,000 troops, known as Resolute Support Mission (RSM). RSM has trained, advised, and assisted Afghan government forces since its inception in early 2015, when Afghan forces assumed responsibility for security nationwide. Combat operations by U.S. forces also continue and have increased in number since 2017. These two "complementary missions" comprise Operation Freedom's Sentinel.[32] As mentioned above, the United States has committed to withdrawing about a third of U.S. forces by mid-July and all troops within 14 months, with commensurate drawdowns in international forces (NATO and partner country forces plan to reduce their presence from 16,000 to 12,000 by mid-July 2020).

President Trump's determination to withdraw U.S. forces reportedly stems at least in part from frustration with the state of the conflict, which U.S. military officials have assessed as a "strategic stalemate" since at least early 2017.[33] Arguably complicating that assessment, the U.S. government has withheld many once-public metrics of military progress. Notably, 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."[34] 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.

At the same time, U.S. air operations have escalated considerably under the Trump Administration, as measured by the number of munitions released; the U.S. dropped more munitions in Afghanistan in 2019 than any other year since at least 2010 (see **Figure 1**). These operations contributed to a sharp rise in civilian casualties; the U.N. reported that the third quarter of 2019 saw the highest quarterly civilian casualty toll since tracking began in 2009, with over 4,300 civilians killed or injured from July 1 to September 30, though 2019 overall saw a slight

[30] Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Orooj Hakimi, "Coronavirus makes Taliban realise they need health workers alive not dead," Reuters, March 18, 2020.

[31] International Organization on Migration, Return of Undocumented Afghans Weekly Situation Report, April 12-18, 2020. See also, Jaffer Shah, et al., "COVID-19: the current situation in Afghanistan," *The Lancet*, April 2, 2020.

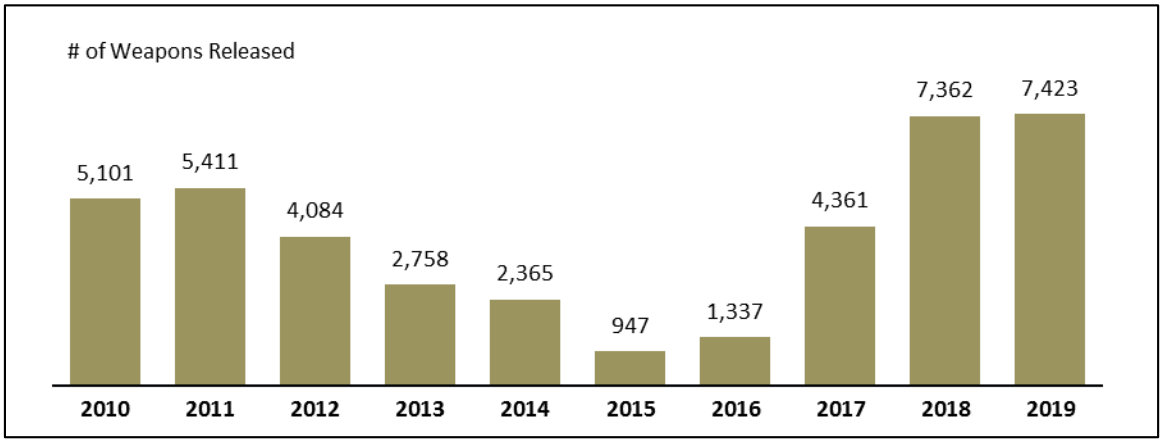
[32] Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, *Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Quarterly Report to Congress, July 1 to September 30, 2018*, November 19, 2018.

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

[34] 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.

decrease in civilian casualties.[35] In the first two months of 2020 alone, U.S. forces conducted 1,010 strikes in 27 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces (see **Appendix**).[36]

Figure 1. Number of Weapons Released (Manned and Remotely Piloted Aircraft strike assets) by year



Source: Combined Forces Air Component Commander 2013-2019 Airpower Statistics.

U.S. Adversaries: The Taliban and Islamic State

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 is generally regarded as "more of an Islamic scholar than a military tactician."[37] Still, under his 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.[38] There are an estimated 60,000 full-time Taliban fighters.

The Taliban retain the ability to conduct high-profile urban attacks while also demonstrating considerable tactical capabilities. However, SIGAR reported in April 2020 that U.S. forces are now withholding from public release data on enemy-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."[39] Insider attacks on U.S. and coalition forces by Afghan nationals are a sporadic, but persistent, problem.

[35] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Annual Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: 2019*, February 2020. Though the majority of civilian casualties are attributed to anti-government forces, the U.N. reported in October that civilian casualties from air operations (885 killed or injured) set a record in the first nine months of 2019, with 74% of those casualties resulting from operations by international forces.

[36] U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, *September 2019 Strike Summary*, October 27, 2019.

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

[38] Andrew Watkins, "Taliban Fragmentation: A Figment of Your Imagination?" *War on the Rocks*, September 4, 2019.

[39] 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.'"

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.[40] ISKP and Taliban forces have sometimes fought over control of territory or because of political or other differences.[41] Some U.S. officials have stated that ISKP aspires to conduct attacks in the West, though there is reportedly disagreement within the U.S. government about the nature of the threat.[42] ISKP also has claimed responsibility for a number of large-scale attacks, many targeting Afghanistan's Shia minority. Some have raised the prospect of Taliban hardliners defecting to ISKP in the event that Taliban leaders agree to a political settlement or to a continued U.S. counterterrorism presence.[43] The United Nations reported in January 2020 that Al Qaeda leaders were "concerned" by U.S.-Taliban talks, but that relations between Al Qaeda and the Taliban "continue to be close and mutually beneficial, with [Al Qaeda] supplying resources and training in exchange for protection."[44]

ANDSF Development and Deployment

The effectiveness of the ANDSF is key to the security of Afghanistan. Congress appropriated at least $86.4 billion for Afghan security assistance between FY2002 and FY2019, according to SIGAR.[45] 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).

Concerns about the ANDSF raised by SIGAR, the Department of Defense, and others include absenteeism, the fact that about 35% of the force does not reenlist each year, and the potential for rapid recruitment to dilute the force's quality; widespread illiteracy within the force; credible allegations of child sexual abuse and other potential human rights abuses;[46] and casualty rates often described as unsustainable.

Total ANDSF strength was reported at 281,000 as of January 2020, up about 9,000 from the previous quarter. The U.S. military attributed the increase to changes in enrollment verification processes.[47] Other metrics related to ANDSF 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.[48] In both legislation and public

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

[41] 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.

[42] Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Julian Barnes, "U.S. Military Calls ISIS in Afghanistan a Threat to the West. Intelligence Officials Disagree," *New York Times*, August 2, 2019.

[43] David Ignatius, "Uncertainty Clouds the Path Forward in Afghanistan." *Washington Post*, July 22, 2019.

[44] Twenty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, S/2020/53, January 20, 2020.

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

[46] See SIGAR Report 17-47, *Child Sexual Assault in Afghanistan: Implementation of the Leahy Laws and Reports of Assault by Afghan Security Forces*, June 2017 (released on January 23, 2018).

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

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

statements, some Members of Congress have expressed concern over the decline in the types and amount of information made public by the executive branch.

Regional Dynamics: Pakistan and Other Neighbors

Regional dynamics, and the involvement of outside powers, are central to 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.[49] 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."[50] U.S. officials have long identified militant safe havens in Pakistan as a threat to security in Afghanistan, though some Pakistani officials dispute that charge and note the Taliban's increased territorial control within Afghanistan itself.[51]

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).[52] However, instability in Afghanistan could rebound to Pakistan's detriment; Pakistan has struggled with indigenous Islamist militants of its own. Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by the presence of over a million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as well as a long-running and ethnically tinged dispute over their shared 1,600-mile border.[53] 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. Indian interest in Afghanistan stems largely from India's broader regional rivalry with Pakistan, which impedes Indian efforts to establish stronger and more direct commercial and political relations with Central Asia. 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.

Since late 2018, the Trump Administration has sought Islamabad's assistance in U.S. talks with the Taliban. One important action taken by Pakistan was the October 2018 release of Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was captured in Karachi in a joint U.S.-Pakistani operation in 2010. Khalilzad said in February 2019 that Baradar's release "was my request," and

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

[50] White House, *Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia*, August 21, 2017.

[51] Author interviews with Pakistani military officials, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, February 21, 2018.

[52] 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 among many others in Pakistan, though Pakistan's Pashtun population is considerably larger than Afghanistan's. Pakistan condemns as interference statements by President Ashraf Ghani (who is Pashtun) and other Afghan leaders about an ongoing protest campaign by Pakistani Pashtuns for greater civil and political rights. "Pakistan cautions Afghan president against 'interfering' in internal matters," *Express Tribune*, January 27, 2020.

[53] About 2 million Afghan refugees have returned from Pakistan since the Taliban fell in 2011, but 1.4 million registered refugees remain in Pakistan, according to the United Nations, along with perhaps as many as 1 million unregistered refugees. Many of these refugees are Pashtuns (see Amnesty International, *Afghanistan's Refugees: Forty Years of Dispossession*, June 20, 2019). Pakistan, the United Nations, and others recognize the Durand Line as an international boundary, but Afghanistan does not.

later thanked Pakistan for facilitating the travel of Taliban figures to talks in Doha.[54] Baradar went on to sign the U.S.-Taliban agreement alongside Khalilzad. A biannual Department of Defense report on Afghanistan released in January 2020 asserted that "Pakistan is supporting the Afghan reconciliation," describing Pakistan's role as "constructive but limited."[55]

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.[56] In the past two years, multiple U.S. commanders have warned of increased levels of assistance, and perhaps even material support, for the Taliban from Russia and Iran, both of which cite IS presence in Afghanistan to justify their activities.[57] Both nations were 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.[58]

Economy and U.S. Aid

Economic development is pivotal to Afghanistan's long-term stability, though indicators of future growth are mixed. Decades of war have stunted the development of most domestic industries, including mining.[59] The economy has also been hurt by decreases in aid provided by international donors. 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 may decline further due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social conditions in Afghanistan remain equally mixed. On issues ranging from human trafficking to religious freedom to women's rights, Afghanistan has, by some accounts, made significant progress since 2001, but future prospects in these areas are uncertain.

Congress has appropriated nearly $137 billion in aid for Afghanistan since FY2002, with about 63% for security and 26% for development (with the remainder for civilian operations and humanitarian aid).[60] The Administration's FY2021 budget requests $4 billion for the ANDSF, $250 million in Economic Support Funds, and smaller amounts to help the Afghan government with other tasks like counternarcotics.[61] These figures represent a decrease from both the FY2020 request, as well as FY2019 enacted levels. Other than ANDSF funding and other DOD contributions, these figures are not included in the cost of U.S. combat operations (including

[54] "Mullah Baradar released by Pakistan at the behest of US: Khalilzad," *The Hindu*, February 9, 2019.

[55] DOD, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, December 2019 (released January 23, 2020).

[56] 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.

[57] 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.

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

[59] Much attention has been paid to Afghanistan's potential mineral and hydrocarbon resources, which by some estimates could be considerable but have yet to be fully explored or developed. Once estimated at nearly $1 trillion, the value of Afghan mineral deposits has since been revised downward, but those deposits reportedly have attracted interest from the Trump Administration. Mark Landler and James Risen, "Trump Finds Reason for the U.S. to Remain in Afghanistan: Minerals," *New York Times*, July 25, 2017. Additionally, Afghanistan's geographic location could position it as a transit country for others' resources.

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

[61] For more, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Issues for Congress and Legislation 2017-2019*.

related regional support activities), which was estimated at a total of $776 billion since FY2002 as of September 2019, according to the DOD's Cost of War report. In its FY2021 budget request, the Pentagon included $14 billion in direct war costs in Afghanistan (down from the FY2020 request of $18.6 billion), as well as $32.5 billion in "enduring requirements" and $16 billion in Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding for "base requirements;" it is unclear how much of the latter two figures is for Afghanistan versus other theaters.

Outlook

The February 29, 2020, signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement represented a significant moment for Afghanistan and for U.S. policy there. Still, U.S. officials caution that the agreement was "just a first step," and shifts in political and/or security dynamics may change how various parties interpret the agreement and their respective commitments under it.[62] In any event, while the U.S.-Taliban agreement envisions intra-Afghan talks that nearly all observers describe as essential to bringing lasting peace to Afghanistan, concrete progress towards those talks remain elusive. Furthermore, the unfolding COVID-19 crisis could impact security and political dynamics in Afghanistan, 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.

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. President Ghani has said, "[W]e will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. [financial] support."[63] Notwithstanding direct U.S. support, Afghan political dynamics, particularly the willingness of political actors to directly challenge the legitimacy and authority of the central government, even by extralegal means, may pose a serious threat to Afghan stability in 2020 and beyond, regardless of Taliban military capabilities. Increased political instability, fueled by questions about the central government's competence, continued divisions among Afghan elites, and rising ethnic tensions, may pose as serious a threat to Afghanistan's future as the Taliban does.

A potential collapse of the Afghan military and/or the government that commands it could have significant implications for the United States, particularly given the nature of negotiated security arrangements. Regardless of how likely the Taliban would be to gain full control over all, or even most, of the country, the breakdown of social order and the fracturing of the country into fiefdoms controlled by paramilitary commanders and their respective militias may be plausible, even probable. Afghanistan experienced a similar situation nearly 30 years ago. Though Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan by February 1989, Soviet aid continued, sustaining the communist government in Kabul for nearly three years. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 ended that aid, and a coalition of mujahedin forces overturned the government in April 1992.[64] Almost immediately, mujahedin commanders turned against each other, leading to a complex civil war during which the Taliban was founded, grew, and took control of most of the country, eventually offering sanctuary to Al Qaeda. While the Taliban and Al Qaeda are still closely aligned, Taliban forces have clashed repeatedly with the Afghan Islamic State affiliate.

[62] Kathryn Wheelbarger, testimony before House Armed Service Committee, March 10, 2020.

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

[64] For more on the mujahedin, see CRS Report R45818, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*.

Under a more unstable future scenario, alliances and relationships among these and other groups could evolve, offering new opportunities to transnational terrorist groups.

The Trump Administration in 2018 described U.S. policy in Afghanistan as "grounded in the fundamental objective of preventing any further attacks on the United States by terrorists enjoying safe haven or support in Afghanistan."[65] For years, some analysts have challenged that line of reasoning, describing it as a strategic "myth" and arguing that "the safe haven fallacy is an argument for endless war based on unwarranted worst-case scenario assumptions."[66] Some of these analysts and others dismiss what they see as a disproportionate focus on the military effort, arguing that U.S. policy goals like countering narcotics and safeguarding human rights are "not objectives that the U.S. military…is well suited to addressing."[67] In any event, U.S. policymakers may be inclined to reduce U.S. investments in Afghanistan in the face of fiscal, political, or other constraints brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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 equal, inclusive, and effective governance. Congress also could seek to help shape the U.S. approach to talks with the Taliban, or to potential negotiations aimed at altering the Afghan political system, 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.[68] *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 (for more, see CRS Report R46197, *The Washington Post's "Afghanistan Papers" and U.S. Policy: Main Points and Possible Questions for Congress*, by Clayton Thomas).

[65] U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Afghanistan*, September 27, 2018.

[66] A. Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner, "Another Year of the War in Afghanistan," *Texas National Security Review*, September 11, 2018. See also Micah Zenko and Amelia Mae Wolfe, "The Myth of the Terrorist Safe Haven," *Foreign Policy*, January 26, 2015.

[67] John Glaser and John Mueller, "Afghanistan: A Failure to Tell the Truth," *LobeLog*, September 13, 2019.

[68] See, for example Jim Banks, "The Public Deserves an Afghanistan War Progress Report," *National Review*, October 23, 2018; Seth Jones, *The U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: The Perils of Withdrawal*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 26, 2018.

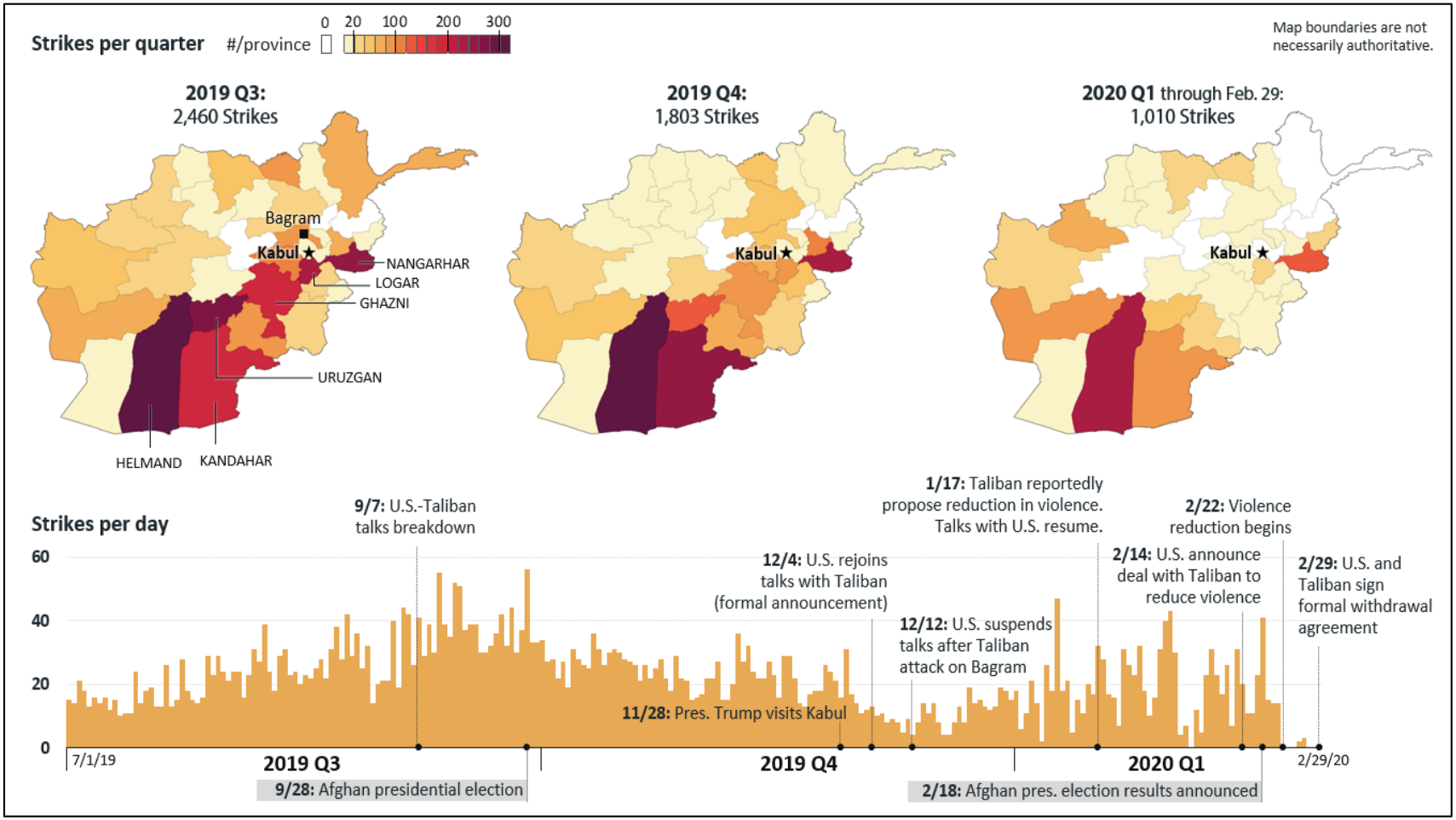
How Afghanistan fits into broader U.S. strategy is another issue on which Members might engage, especially given competing fiscal priorities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the Administration's focus on strategic competition with other great powers.[69] Some analysts recognize fatigue over "endless wars" like that in Afghanistan but argue against a potential U.S. retrenchment that could create a vacuum Russia or China might fill.[70] Others describe the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan as a "peripheral war," and suggest that "the billions being spent on overseas contingency operation funding would be better spent on force modernization and training for future contingencies."[71]

[69] See CRS In Focus IF11139, *Evaluating DOD Strategy: Key Findings of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, by Kathleen J. McInnis.

[70] *The US Role In The Middle East In An Era Of Renewed Great Power Competition*, Hoover Institution, April 2, 2019.

[71] Benjamin Denison, "Confusion in the Pivot: The Muddled Shift from Peripheral War to Great Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, February 12, 2019.

Appendix. U.S. Strikes, July 2019-February 2020



Source: Created by CRS. Data from NATO Resolute Support Strike Summaries; boundaries from GADM.

Note: Resolute Support defines a strike as "one or more kinetic engagements that occur in roughly the same geographic location to produce a single, sometimes cumulative effect in that location" against the Taliban and other armed groups. Data for March 2020 strikes is unavailable as of May 1, 2020.

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