

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

Updated March 25, 2021

**Congressional Research Service**  
<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R45122



R45122

March 25, 2021

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

Afghanistan emerged 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 Afghan Taliban government that harbored and supported it. In the intervening 19 years, the United States has suffered over 22,000 military casualties (including around 2,400 fatalities) in Afghanistan and Congress has appropriated approximately \$143 billion for reconstruction and security forces there. In that time, an elected Afghan government has replaced the Taliban; improvement in most measures of human development is limited; and future prospects of gains remain mixed.

In January 2021, the Trump Administration reported that it had reduced U.S. forces in Afghanistan to 2,500, the lowest level since 2001, in advance of the potential full military withdrawal by May 2021 to which the United States committed in the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement. As part of that agreement, in return for the full withdrawal of international forces, 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 text which, according to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, contains additional Taliban commitments, including to not attack U.S. or international forces. U.S. officials contend that the Taliban have not fulfilled their commitments, and 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 toward such a settlement, a significant moment with potentially dramatic implications for the course of the ongoing Afghan conflict. Talks do not appear to have made progress and remain complicated by a number of factors, including high levels of violence.

In light of the approaching withdrawal deadline and the stalling of intra-Afghan talks, the United States appears to have intensified its efforts to broker an intra-Afghan agreement. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reportedly wrote to Afghan government officials in March 2021 to express “urgency” that they form a united front and participate in planned multilateral diplomatic efforts, including talks in Turkey in April 2021. The United States also reportedly produced a draft peace agreement to “jumpstart” negotiations that includes a variety of options, including the establishment of an interim “transitional” government, which Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has rejected. 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. Future political arrangements and/or changes in the security environment may in turn influence U.S. policymakers’ consideration of future levels and conditions of development assistance. Given the outsized role that U.S. support plays in bolstering the Afghan government, many experts warn that a 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. Some Afghan officials reportedly suspect the Taliban of remaining in negotiations long enough to secure a full U.S. withdrawal, after which the Taliban would capitalize on their advantage on the battlefield to seize control of the country by force.

Some Members of Congress have advocated keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan past May 2021, although doing so could prompt the Taliban to resume attacks against international forces and/or disrupt negotiations. President Biden said in a March 2021 interview that meeting the May 2021 deadline would be “tough,” and that reaching a decision in the ongoing Administration review of U.S. policy in Afghanistan would not take “a lot longer.”

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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, in which the United States committed to the full withdrawal of international forces by May 2021 in exchange for Taliban counterterrorism assurances.
- Intra-Afghan negotiations, which began in Doha, Qatar, in September 2020, but appear to have since stalled, prompting a renewed U.S. diplomatic effort, including a planned senior-level meeting in Turkey in April 2021 aimed at reaching a political settlement to end the war and a U.S.-drafted peace proposal.

The report also provides information on security dynamics related to the ongoing conflict and related questions about the future of the United States' military presence and U.S. investment in development and security aid to Afghanistan (which has totaled more than \$143 billion since 2001).

## 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.”<sup>1</sup> The September 2018 appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, an 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 29, 2020, Special Representative Khalilzad signed a formal agreement in Doha with Taliban deputy political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in front of a number of international observers.<sup>2</sup> In the accord, the two sides agreed to two “interconnected” guarantees: the withdrawal of all U.S. and international forces by May 2021, and unspecified Taliban action to prevent other groups (including Al Qaeda) from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States and its allies. Other U.S. commitments included facilitating a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and removing U.S. sanctions on Taliban members.

Since the agreement, U.S. officials have asserted that the Taliban are not fulfilling their commitments under the accord, especially with regard to Al Qaeda (see “U.S. Adversaries: The Taliban, the Islamic State, and Al Qaeda” below).<sup>3</sup> U.S. officials also describe increased Taliban violence as “not consistent” with the agreement. Although no provisions in the agreement address

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Department of Defense, “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The text of the agreement is available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>. Non-public annexes accompanied the agreement.

<sup>3</sup> “Taliban not living up to its commitments, U.S. Defense Secretary says,” *Reuters*, May 5, 2020; Robert Burns, “US General: Taliban Not Yet Met Conditions for US Withdrawal,” *Associated Press*, June 10, 2020.

the Taliban reducing or refraining from attacks on U.S. or Afghan forces, the Taliban reportedly committed not to attack U.S. forces in non-public annexes accompanying the accord.<sup>4</sup> In March 2020 testimony, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley told a Senate Armed Services Committee panel that committee members “have all the documents associated with this agreement” and that, in them, the Taliban pledged not to attack U.S. or international forces, as well as Afghan provincial capitals and other high profile targets.<sup>5</sup> Some Members of Congress have raised questions about the executive branch’s decision to classify these annexes.<sup>6</sup>

## U.S. Military Withdrawal<sup>7</sup>

The United States began withdrawing forces before the February 2020 agreement was reached and continued to do so after, despite U.S. assertions that Taliban violence and other actions are inconsistent with the agreement.<sup>8</sup> On January 15, 2021, then-Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller announced that the number of U.S. forces had reached 2,500, the lowest level since 2001, completing a drawdown ordered by President Trump in November 2020.<sup>9</sup> In March 2021, the *New York Times* reported that there are about 3,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, due to the undisclosed presence of U.S. Special Operations forces; a Pentagon spokesman maintained, “We are still at 2,500.”<sup>10</sup>

Trump Administration officials broadly insisted that the troop reduction would not result in any major changes to the two complementary U.S. missions in Afghanistan: counterterrorism and training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces. However, some U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) officials implied at the time that the troop level order by President Trump was not ideal from their perspective and might result in some adjustments to U.S. operations and limits to U.S. options.<sup>11</sup> Some outside observers, including the congressionally-mandated Afghanistan Study Group, question the extent to which the United States can perform both the training and counterterrorism missions with acceptable risk levels with a force level below 4,500.<sup>12</sup>

The U.S. drawdown also may affect partner country forces (which now outnumber U.S. forces) and their ability to continue their training mission, in light of key logistical support that the United States provides. Some foreign officials have voiced caution regarding further withdrawal, including NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg who said that while there are risks to staying, “if

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<sup>4</sup> “Violence ‘Not Consistent’ with US-Taliban Deal: US Envoy,” *TOLOnews*, October 13, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee Holds Hearing on the Defense Budget Posture, CQ Congressional Transcripts, March 4, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Josh Rogin, “Pompeo under pressure to release Taliban deal ‘secret annexes’” (opinion), *Washington Post*, March 4, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> See CRS Report R46670, *U.S. Military Drawdown in Afghanistan: Frequently Asked Questions*, coordinated by Clayton Thomas.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, “U.S. Is Quietly Reducing Its Troop Force in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2019; Kylie Atwood and Ryan Browne, “US troop drawdown in Afghanistan running ahead of schedule,” *CNN*, April 30, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> “Statement by Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller on Troop Levels in Afghanistan,” Department of Defense, January 15, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Has 1,000 More Troops in Afghanistan Than It Disclosed,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> “General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. Defense One Interview with Katie Bo Williams,” U.S. Central Command, December 10, 2020; “Gen McKenzie and Luis Martinez On The Record Interview,” U.S. Central Command, December 22, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report*, United States Institute of Peace, February 2021.

we leave, we risk Afghanistan once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorists, and the loss of the gains made with such sacrifice.”<sup>13</sup> In mid-February 2021, Stoltenberg announced at the close of a NATO Defense Ministerial that there had been no decision made regarding “the future of our presence,” stating, “We will not leave before the time is right.”<sup>14</sup>

## Intra-Afghan Talks

The February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement envisions the end of the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan, but it does not represent a comprehensive peace settlement among Afghans. Intra-Afghan talks aimed at achieving such a settlement began in September 2020, representing 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 U.S.-Taliban agreement committed the Taliban to entering talks with the Afghan government by March, but negotiations remained unscheduled for months amid complications including 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.<sup>15</sup> The prisoner exchange was completed in early September 2020, removing the main obstacle to intra-Afghan talks, which began in Doha that month. The two sides have met intermittently in recent months, with some describing the talks as stalled.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> Khalilzad has since made numerous visits to Doha, where he has met separately with members of each negotiating team, and other regional capitals.

## Major Negotiating Issues

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

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<sup>13</sup> Online press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, NATO, December 1, 2020. See also Nina Werkhauer and Sandra Petersmann, “German government opposes Donald Trump’s Afghan troop withdrawal,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 19, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Robin Emmott, “NATO’s Afghanistan Withdrawal Depends on Violence Levels, Stoltenberg Says,” Reuters, February 15, 2021; Robin Emmott and Sabine Siebold, “No Decision on Any NATO Withdrawal From Afghanistan, Stoltenberg Says,” Reuters, February 18, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> Kathy Gannon, “Afghan peace talks resume, but path is anything but certain,” *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2021; Alexander Cornwell, “Afghan peace talks should rotate among countries, envoy says amid stall,” Reuters, March 15, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of State, Briefing with Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad on the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations, September 11, 2020.

## Reducing Violence

The U.S.-Taliban agreement does not address Taliban operations against Afghan government forces, which continue and increased in some areas in 2020. Major Taliban operations in southern Afghanistan in late 2020 displaced tens of thousands of civilians, led Afghan forces to abandon nearly 200 checkpoints in Kandahar province in December 2020 alone, and prompted the United States to launch airstrikes in support of Afghan government forces.<sup>18</sup>

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reports that, while the number of civilian casualties in 2020 fell below 10,000 for the first time since 2013, violence against civilians spiked following the start of intra-Afghan negotiations in September 2020.<sup>19</sup> Targeted attacks have also increased in recent months.<sup>20</sup> The Taliban denied involvement in the January 2021 assassination of female Supreme Court judges in Kabul and other attacks, but the United States and other countries released a joint statement on January 31, 2021, charging that “the Taliban bears responsibility for the majority of this targeted violence.”<sup>21</sup> UNAMA attributes 45% of civilian casualties in 2020 to the Taliban, and notes that more women were killed in the conflict in 2020 than in any year since UNAMA started systematically documenting civilian casualties in 2009.<sup>22</sup>

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 any intra-Afghan political settlement, though targeted reductions in violence could pave the way for a more comprehensive ceasefire.<sup>23</sup> A Taliban spokesman said in March 2021 that the group had submitted a draft proposal for a reduction in violence by all sides in December 2020, but that agreement had not been reached.<sup>24</sup> In his letter to President Ghani (see below), Secretary Blinken said the United States had prepared a “revised proposal for a 90-day Reduction-in-Violence,” and U.S. and Taliban negotiators are reportedly discussing a pause in U.S. air operations (on which Afghan forces are still highly reliant) in return for a reduction in Taliban attacks.<sup>25</sup>

## Afghan Governance

Major differences remain in the two sides’ respective visions for the future of Afghanistan, including the structure of the Afghan state and what rights the state recognizes for Afghan citizens, especially women.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Afghan troops, police abandon nearly 200 checkpoints to Taliban,” AFP, December 30, 2020; USFOR-A Spokesman Col Sonny Leggett, Twitter, October 12, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, Annual Report 2020, February 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Saphora Smith and Ahmed Mengli, “Wave of killings target Afghan women judges, journalists, intellectuals,” *NBC*, January 24, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> “Statement on Continuation of Assassinations, Kidnapping, and Destruction of Vital Infrastructure,” U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan, January 31, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, Annual Report 2020, February 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Abdul Qadir Sediqi, “Fight and talk: Facing negotiations, Taliban almost took key Afghan city,” Reuters, September 14, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Sharif Amiry, “Taliban 3-Month RIV Plan Shared With US: Naeem,” *TOLONews*, March 22, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Text of the letter available at <https://tolonews.com/pdf/02.pdf>; David Cloud, “In Afghanistan, the U.S. weighs a pause in airstrikes to spur Taliban peace talks,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> See CRS In Focus IF11646, *Afghan Women and Girls: Status and Congressional Action*, by Clayton Thomas and

The Taliban, who have focused on securing the withdrawal of foreign forces, have not detailed their proposals on governance issues. In remarks at the opening of intra-Afghan talks, Taliban deputy political leader Mullah Abdul Ghani 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.”<sup>27</sup> In a February 2021 open letter to the American people, Baradar wrote that the group committed to protecting certain rights with conditions, such as “all rights of women afforded to them by Islamic law” and “freedom of speech within the framework of Islamic principles and national interests.”<sup>28</sup> Some analysts posit the Taliban are likely to push for clerical oversight of executive and legislative decision-making as a “hybrid” of their 1996-2001 emirate and a more Western-style state.<sup>29</sup>

Afghan leaders express a determination to preserve Afghanistan’s democratic institutions and its constitution, which establishes Islam as the state religion but does not tie legislation and national policymaking to religious jurisprudence. In a September 2020 interview, HCNR Chairman Abdullah 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.”<sup>30</sup> President Ghani has stated 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.<sup>31</sup>

Some Afghans and other international observers have proposed the formation of an interim government, arguing that the Taliban’s continued refusal to recognize the Afghan government might make such a step necessary. A member of the Afghan government’s negotiating team said in January 2021, “An interim government is an undeniable topic of discussion, because we want a cease-fire and the Taliban aren’t ready to agree to one with the current government.”<sup>32</sup> President Ghani and other Afghan officials have rejected such proposals, including from the United States (see below).<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> 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

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Sarah R. Collins.

<sup>27</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Afghan Rivals Begin Historic Peace Talks; US Cautiously Optimistic,” *Voice of America*, September 12, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> “Open letter to the people of the United States of America,” February 16, 2021. Available at <http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=42767>.

<sup>29</sup> Frud Bezhan, “Are the Taliban Seeking A ‘Sunni Afghan Version’ of Iran?” *RFE/RL*, October 2, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> Phillip Walter Wellman, “Ghani tells Afghans peace deal with Taliban will not compromise basic rights,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 27, 2019; “Afghans Worry as US Makes Progress in Taliban Talks,” *Voice of America*, January 29, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Frud Bezhan, “Would an Afghan Interim Government Help or Hinder Peace Efforts?” *Gandhara*, January 14, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Pamela Constable, “Peace talks are faltering, violence has surged, and U.S. troops are pulling out. Can the Afghan government withstand the pressure?” *Washington Post*, January 13, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Pamela Constable, “The Return of a Taliban Government? Afghanistan Talks Raise Once-Unthinkable Question,” *Washington Post*, January 29, 2019.

agreement reached with Kabul.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> At least some Afghans reportedly support “peace at any cost” given the decades of conflict through which the country has suffered.<sup>38</sup>

## Accelerated U.S. Diplomatic Efforts

In March 2021, with talks in Doha having made no evident progress, several reports indicate an intensified U.S. diplomatic push is under way to broker an intra-Afghan agreement.

On March 7, the Afghan media outlet *TOLONews* published an undated letter from Secretary Blinken to President Ghani (a similar letter reportedly also was sent to Abdullah). In the letter, Secretary Blinken asked President Ghani to exercise “urgent leadership” in forming a “united front” with other Afghan political leaders. Secretary Blinken said that all U.S. policy options, including a full military withdrawal by May 1, remain under consideration and asked President Ghani to “understand the urgency of my tone regarding the collective work outlined in this letter.”<sup>39</sup> Ghani ally and First Vice President Amrullah Saleh said in response that his government would “never accept a coerced or imposed peace.”<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, in meetings with Afghan political leaders in early March 2021, Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad reportedly provided a draft proposal for a “participatory government” that would include the Taliban and be formed after an international meeting similar to the 2001 Bonn Conference that created the first post-Taliban Afghan government.<sup>41</sup> The text of that proposal (eight pages, dated February 28, 2021) was also published by *TOLONews* on March 7.<sup>42</sup> The document, which is described as “intended to jumpstart” negotiations by providing concrete power-sharing alternatives, proposes the formation of a “transitional peace government.”

The culmination of these U.S. diplomatic efforts appears to be a planned “senior-level meeting” to be held in Turkey in April 2021 “to finalize an agreement,” per Secretary Blinken’s letter. It is not clear how the meeting would differ from, complement, or otherwise relate to intra-Afghan talks in Doha. According to the chief Afghan government negotiator, President Ghani will only attend if Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada (who has been in hiding for years) does so.<sup>43</sup> President Ghani reportedly also intends to propose a presidential election within six months as a

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<sup>35</sup> “Afghans voice fears that the U.S. is undercutting them in deal with the Taliban,” *Washington Post*, August 17, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Mujib Mashal, “Violent attacks plague Afghanistan as peace talks in Doha slow,” *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> The Asia Foundation, “Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People,” released December 3, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff, David Zucchino, and Lara Jakes, “U.S. Pushes U.N.-led Conference in Letter to Afghan Leader,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2021. Text of the letter available at <https://tolonews.com/pdf/02.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> “Blinken’s Letter Will Not Change Govt Stance on Peace: Saleh,” *TOLONews*, March 8, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Sharif Amiry, “Khalilzad Pitched ‘Participatory Government’ to Afghan Leaders: Sources,” *TOLONews*, March 3, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Text of the draft: <https://tolonews.com/pdf/pdf.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Haseeba Atakpal, “Ghani to Attend Turkey Summit ‘If Taliban Leader Does,’” *TOLONews*, March 20, 2021.

counter-offer to the U.S. proposal; in response to those reports, the Taliban rejected such a plan, pointing to previous elections that had “pushed the country to the verge of crisis.”<sup>44</sup>

## Conflict Status

As of March 2021, the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, known as Resolute Support Mission (RSM), numbers around 10,000 troops, of which 2,500-3,500 are U.S. forces.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> Since 2001, the United States has suffered over 22,000 military casualties (including around 2,400 fatalities) in Afghanistan.<sup>47</sup>

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.<sup>48</sup> Such 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. 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.”<sup>49</sup>

The U.S. government has withheld many once-public metrics of military progress, arguably complicating assessments of the conflict’s status and trajectory. 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.”<sup>50</sup> The last reported metrics (in the January 30, 2019, SIGAR report) showed that the share of districts under government control or influence fell to 548% 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.

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<sup>44</sup> Hamid Shalizi, “Exclusive: Afghan president, rejecting US peace plan, to offer election in six months, officials say,” Reuters, March 23, 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs, March 23, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, *Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, Quarterly Report to Congress, July 1 to September 30, 2018*, November 19, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> “Casualty Status,” U.S. Department of Defense, March 22, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, monthly strike summaries.

<sup>49</sup> “AFCENT stops releasing airstrike information as Taliban talks continue,” *Air Force Magazine*, May 4, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> 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.

### 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.”<sup>51</sup> 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.”<sup>52</sup>

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.”<sup>53</sup> Total ANDSF strength was reported at over 305,000 as of October 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.<sup>54</sup>

### U.S. Adversaries: The Taliban, the Islamic State, and Al Qaeda<sup>55</sup>

The leader of the Taliban is Haibatullah Akhundzada, who is known as *emir 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 2013. Formerly a figure in Taliban religious courts, Haibatullah has been regarded as “more of an Islamic scholar than a military tactician.”<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup>

The Taliban, whose strength has been estimated at 60,000 full-time fighters, have consistently demonstrated considerable tactical capabilities. U.S. officials describe the current dynamic between the Afghan government and the Taliban as a “strategic stalemate” that is likely to persist, but only with U.S. support. In December 2020, General Milley described the stalemate as a situation “where the government of Afghanistan was never going to militarily defeat the Taliban and the Taliban, as long as we were supporting the government of Afghanistan, was never going to militarily defeat the regime.”<sup>58</sup> 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. In his March 2021 letter to President Ghani, Secretary Blinken stated, “Even with the continuation of financial assistance from the United States to your forces after an American military withdrawal, I am concerned that the security situation will worsen and the Taliban could make rapid territorial gains.”

<sup>51</sup> Anwar Iqbal, “Afghan Army to Collapse in Six Months Without US Help: Ghani,” *Dawn*, January 18, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> Department of Defense, “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” June 2020.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> “Report: US Officials Classify Crucial Metrics on Afghan Casualties, Readiness,” *Military Times*, October 30, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> For more, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

<sup>56</sup> “Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan’s Intra-Insurgency Violence,” *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, iss. 1, January 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Watkins, “Taliban Fragmentation: Fact, Fiction, and Future,” U.S. Institute of Peace, March 2020.

<sup>58</sup> “A Conversation with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley,” Brookings Institution, December 2, 2020.

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.<sup>59</sup> ISKP and Taliban forces have sometimes fought over control of territory or because of political or other differences.<sup>60</sup> 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, but the United Nations reports that casualties from ISKP attacks in 2020 decreased 45% from 2019.<sup>61</sup> Some suggest that the Taliban’s participation in peace talks or a putative political settlement could prompt disaffected (or newly unemployed) fighters to join ISKP.<sup>62</sup>

Al Qaeda (AQ) is still assessed to have a presence in Afghanistan and its decades-long ties with the Taliban appear to have remained strong in recent years: in May 2020, U.N. sanctions monitors reported that senior Taliban leaders “regularly consulted” with their AQ counterparts during negotiations with the United States.<sup>63</sup> In October 2020, Afghan forces killed a senior AQ operative in Afghanistan’s Ghazni province, where he reportedly was living and working with Taliban forces, further underscoring questions about AQ-Taliban links and Taliban intentions with regard to Al Qaeda.<sup>64</sup>

U.S. officials’ statements have varied on the extent to which the Taliban are fulfilling their counterterrorism commitments concerning Al Qaeda. In July 2020, then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo said in a press interview that he had seen indications that the Taliban were actively combatting Al Qaeda, while later that month the Commander of United States Central Command, General McKenzie, said, “right now, it is simply unclear to me that the Taliban has taken any positive steps.”<sup>65</sup> More recent U.S. public assessments align with General McKenzie’s analysis: the U.S. Treasury reported in a January 4, 2021, letter that “as of 2020, al-Qaeda is gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under the Taliban’s protection.”<sup>66</sup> On February 25, 2021, Edmund Fitton-Brown, coordinator of the U.N. monitoring team for Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban remarked that “we have not seen any evidence” that the Taliban have taken serious steps to suppress a potential future threat from AQ to the international community.<sup>67</sup> The U.S.-Taliban accord is silent on what verification mechanisms

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<sup>59</sup> “ISIS Is Losing Afghan Territory. That Means Little for Its Victims,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2019.

<sup>60</sup> 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.

<sup>61</sup> UNAMA, *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*, op. cit.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Zabihullah Ghazi, “Foes in Afghan War See Common Threat of Islamic State’s Return,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> 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, U.N. Document S/2020/415, released May 27, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Jeff Seldin, “US Calls Death of al-Qaida Official a Major Setback for Terror Group,” *Voice of America*, October 26, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> 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.

<sup>66</sup> “Memorandum for Department of Defense Lead Inspector General, Department of the Treasury,” January 4, 2021. Available at <https://oig.treasury.gov/sites/oig/files/2021-01/OIG-CA-21-012.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Edmund Fitton-Brown, “Panel II: Countering Terrorism since 9/11: International Perspectives,” Middle East

might be in place to ensure Taliban compliance, and to what extent the U.S. withdrawal might be paused or reversed based on Taliban action (or inaction) with regard to Al Qaeda.

## 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.<sup>68</sup> Afghan leaders, along with U.S. military commanders, have attributed much of the insurgency's power and longevity either directly or indirectly to Pakistani support.<sup>69</sup> The Trump Administration sought Islamabad's assistance in U.S. talks with the Taliban after 2018, and U.S. assessments of Taliban's role have generally been more positive since. For example, Khalilzad thanked Pakistan for releasing Baradar from custody in October 2018 and for facilitating the travel of Taliban figures to talks in Doha, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin "expressed gratitude" to his Pakistani counterpart in March 2021 for Pakistan's "continued support for the Afghan peace process."<sup>70</sup>

Despite official Pakistani leadership's statements to the contrary, Islamabad 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).<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup> 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 maintains mostly 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.<sup>73</sup> 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

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Institute, Annual Counterterrorism Conference, February 25, 2021.

<sup>68</sup> For more, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

<sup>69</sup> 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.

<sup>70</sup> "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. Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Pentagon chief praises Pakistan's role in Afghan peace process," *Dawn*, March 23, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> 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.

<sup>72</sup> 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.

<sup>73</sup> 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.

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.<sup>74</sup> Both nations were opposed to the Taliban government of the late 1990s, but reportedly see the Taliban as a useful point of leverage vis-à-vis the United States. Afghanistan may also represent a growing priority for China in the context of broader Chinese aspirations in Asia and globally.<sup>75</sup>

## Economy and U.S. Aid

In addition to its long-standing military presence, the United States has provided considerable development assistance to Afghanistan. Since FY2002, Congress has appropriated over \$143 billion in overall aid for Afghanistan, with about 62% for security and 25% for governance and development (with the remaining 13% for civilian operations and humanitarian aid).<sup>76</sup> DOD's quarterly Cost of War report estimated the cost of U.S. combat operations (including related regional support activities and support for Afghan forces) as of December 2020 at \$824.9 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 long-standing U.S. concern.<sup>77</sup> For FY2021, Congress appropriated just over \$3 billion for the ANDSF, the lowest annual appropriation since FY2008.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, the number of personnel present in Afghanistan under Chief of Mission authority (mostly State Department or USAID personnel) declined steadily during the Trump Administration and significantly after the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic began.

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.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt and Michael Schwartz, "Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says," *New York Times*, June 26, 2020. Additionally, 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.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Barbara Kelemen, "China's Economic Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan: A New Party to the Table?" Middle East Institute, January 21, 2020.

<sup>76</sup> SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, April 30, 2020.

<sup>77</sup> See Senator Reed's remarks at Senate Armed Service Committee Hearing on U.S. Central Command, February 5, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Congress also rescinded \$1.1 billion in FY2020 ASFF funding. For more, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Issues for Congress and Legislation 2017-2020*.

<sup>79</sup> 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."

<sup>80</sup> For more, see Live Event: What Does the Taliban Want?, Wilson Center, October 6, 2020.

U.S. and international development assistance could become more critical if a U.S. and allied military withdrawal further weakens Afghanistan's economy, already among the world's smallest. 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. President Ghani said in July 2020 that 90% of Afghans live below the government-determined poverty level of two dollars a day.<sup>81</sup> 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 did the post-2012 drawdown, which helped spur a "drastic economic decline."<sup>82</sup> Still, the proposed withdrawal could pose risks for an Afghan economy suffering the effects of the 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).<sup>83</sup>

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

As the May 2021 deadline for the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan approaches, the Biden Administration appears to be intensifying its efforts to broker an intra-Afghan agreement that would reduce violence and provide a pathway to a political settlement. In any event, it appears increasingly unlikely that the United States will be able to meet that deadline, raising questions about how the Taliban might react and for how long, and under what conditions, U.S. troops will remain.

President Biden, as Vice President, reportedly opposed the Obama Administration's decision to increase U.S. force levels in 2009, and expressed skepticism about troop levels in Afghanistan as a candidate during the 2020 primary campaign.<sup>84</sup> As President, he has not made extensive comments about Afghanistan, but said in a March 16, 2021, interview that the U.S.-Taliban agreement was "not a very solidly negotiated deal" and that meeting its May 1 withdrawal deadline "could happen" but would be "tough."<sup>85</sup> He also said an ongoing Administration review of U.S. policy in Afghanistan was "in process" and that reaching a decision would not take "a lot longer." At a March 25, 2021, press conference, he said "I can't picture" U.S. troops in Afghanistan next year.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Anisa Shaheed, "Ghani's Afghan Poverty Estimate 'Catastrophic': Analysts," *TOLOnews*, July 20, 2020.

<sup>82</sup> "The Economic Disaster Behind Afghanistan's Mounting Human Crisis," International Crisis Group, October 3, 2016.

<sup>83</sup> World Health Organization, "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," March 23, 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Penguin Press, 2018), pp. 353-354, 367; "Transcript: Joe Biden on Face the Nation," *CBS News*, February 23, 2020.

<sup>85</sup> "TRANSCRIPT: ABC News' George Stephanopoulos interviews President Joe Biden," ABC News, March 17, 2021.

<sup>86</sup> "President Biden Holds News Conference," C-SPAN, March 25, 2021.

Experts have laid out a number of approaches that the Biden Administration might take in light of the U.S. troop drawdown, of which the most common is to pursue a conditions-based approach to further alterations to U.S. troop levels.<sup>87</sup> That might entail the presence of international troops past May 2021. This, in turn, could spur the Taliban to retarget foreign forces and possibly prompt the Taliban to abandon talks with the Afghan government and the United States. One longtime Afghanistan observer, in surveying the policy landscape that the new Administration confronts in Afghanistan, has said “there are no good or easy options—only less bad ones.”<sup>88</sup>

In the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, some Members have expressed a range of views about the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. A number of lawmakers, including the chairmen of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees, have called on the Administration to “reconsider” the pullout, describing it as potentially “destabilizing.”<sup>89</sup> Others have called on the Administration to meet the May 1 deadline for a full U.S. military withdrawal (citing the recently published Interim National Security Guidance, which states “the United States should not, and will not, engage in ‘forever wars’”),<sup>90</sup> or negotiate an extension.<sup>91</sup>

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 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 and subsequent developments, 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.<sup>92</sup> 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 competing U.S. policy priorities.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Madiha Afzal, “May 2021 should not be seen as a unilateral deadline for the United States to leave Afghanistan,” Brookings Institution, February 10, 2021; *Afghanistan Study Group Final Report*, op. cit.

<sup>88</sup> Steve Coll, “Joe Biden Will Have to Address the War in Afghanistan—Again,” *New Yorker*, January 20, 2021.

<sup>89</sup> Eric Schmitt, “A Top Democrat Warns Against a Hasty Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2021; “Key U.S. lawmaker questions May deadline for troop pullout from Afghanistan,” Reuters, March 9, 2021.

<sup>90</sup> “Reps. Lee and Buck Urge President Biden to Uphold Deadline for Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Afghanistan,” Office of Congresswoman Barbara Lee, March 19, 2021.

<sup>91</sup> Jared Golden, “I Fought in Afghanistan. It’s Time to Bring the Troops Home,” *Newsweek*, March 23, 2021.

<sup>92</sup> 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.

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, CRS Report R43838, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O’Rourke.

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