

The implications of a US withdrawal from Afghanistan

Four scenarios

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INTRODUCTION

The new US national security strategy, launched in December 2017, includes a continued commitment to support the Afghan government and the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) in the fight against the Taliban and terrorism. The strategy also indicates a harder stance against Pakistan, insisting that Pakistan should take decisive action against the militant and terrorist groups operating from Pakistani soil. Despite their reaffirmed commitment and the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, the US desire to withdraw their troops after almost 20 years of military intervention has never been more evident, nor more pressing.

The ongoing peace talks between the US and the Taliban that began at the end of 2018 have been portrayed as a window of opportunity and a possible starting point towards peace in Afghanistan. The talks consist of four pillars: a withdrawal of troops, guarantees that Afghanistan will not become a platform for terrorism, intra-Afghan dialogue, and a comprehensive ceasefire.

The unambiguous wish of the US to withdraw, in combination with the outcome of the peace talks, will affect not only the future of international engagement in Afghanistan, including NATO's Resolute Support Mission (RSM), but the future of the country. The strong drive of the current White House administration to deliver on election campaign promises, however, has led scholars to contemplate the possibility of other outcomes, such as: an abrupt end to the talks and a subsequent withdrawal of troops; or a withdrawal that would follow in the event there was no peace deal at all.

This brief¹ outlines and considers the implications of a study of four possible scenarios related to a withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. The scenarios represent cases

¹ This study is based on interviews with official representatives from NATO and its member states and the EU, in Brussels; at the US State Department and the Pentagon, in Washington D.C.; and, with scholars at research institutes and think tanks in the US. The interviews were conducted in March and April 2019.

that, through four archetypes, reflect the wide scope of possible outcomes in a simplified manner. It thus serves as a framework for strategic thinking and planning.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS OF ACTORS INVOLVED

Since its beginning in 1979, the war in Afghanistan has had elements of proxy warfare, initially between the Soviet Union and the US. Afghanistan is characterized by tensions between the centre and the periphery; despite having a centralized government, as stipulated in the constitution, no central government has exercised control over the entire country.

The Afghan actors

The government of Afghanistan is led by Ashraf Ghani. As of late June 2019, the Taliban have refused to include the government, which it perceives to be a US puppet, in the ongoing talks.

The opposition, consisting of former members of the Northern Alliance, controls an extensive part of ANDSF, as well as a sizeable part of the country, owing to ethnic ties. The main grievance of the opposition concerns power and influence. The talks with the Taliban, within the Moscow framework, have been one effort to achieve this.

The Taliban's main quest is for the establishment of their rule in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of foreign troops. Despite the conservative base in the population, the Taliban are not considered to be popular enough to win an election. Their high-level participation in the ongoing talks may be signalling an honest effort to see what kind of peace deal they might achieve, although lessons from history portray the Taliban as using diplomacy in order to enhance military goals, rather than making peace.

The US and the NATO Resolute Support Mission

The NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) trains, advises, and assists the ANDSF. It was launched in January 2015, following the conclusion of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) mission. The US, in addition to contributing about half

of the RSM's personnel and mission-critical enablers – for example close air support and medical evacuation – also has a separate counter-terrorism (CT) combat mission in Afghanistan: Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS).

Other powers in the region

Several actors, both neighbouring states and others, have political and economic interests in the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Neighbouring states such as Iran, China, and Pakistan fear spillover effects from instability in the country: the spread of radical Islamism, terrorism, and illicit flows of drugs and refugees. Their interests are also influenced by animosity towards the US and the perceived threat of its presence in the region. For Russia, all of these, but especially the fear that radical Islamism will spread throughout Central Asia, have led to a pragmatic approach of supporting the Afghan government, the political opposition, and the Taliban.

Pakistan and India are engaged in limiting each other's influence in Afghanistan. Pakistan is trying to maintain strategic depth, while India is currently one of the main donors of international aid to Afghanistan. Pakistan has long been accused of providing safe havens for terrorists, although lately Pakistan's influence over the Afghan Taliban has been questioned by scholars.

SCENARIO ANALYSIS

One method for conducting scenario analysis is to focus on variables with strong causal implications that can change fast and in an unpredictable manner. The two main insecurities related to the future of Afghanistan are US military engagement and the ongoing peace talks between the US and the Taliban. In this study, the 2x2 matrix is used as a framework to analyse possible consequences of an American troop withdrawal and as a tool for thinking strategically about the future. Explorative scenarios are used to describe four extreme cases and, in this simplified way, portray the cornerstone scenarios that frame a vast spectrum of possible future outcomes. Within each scenario, numerous aspects related to the security situation are addressed: the Afghan regime, the presence of international military and development funding, Afghan society, and the grievances of the local population. The scenarios describe possible developments over the next couple of years, without reference to their probabilities.

1. CIVIL WAR AND CHAOS

President Donald Trump decides to withdraw all US troops from Afghanistan, resulting in an abrupt end to the peace talks between the US and the Taliban. The US troops leave Afghanistan within six months, without any coordination with allies and partners within RSM.

The Taliban assumes control, taking over vast parts of Afghanistan, either by force or through a deal with the opposition, further fragmentizing the country. The country returns to a situation similar to the one in 1994, which was characterized by Sharia rule.

The ANDSF, of which the majority is controlled by the former Northern Alliance, disintegrates into factions and the military structures erode, creating a chaotic security situation. Chaos and civil war follow. One of the warring parties invites terrorist groups back into Afghanistan to fight on their side. The country once again becomes a platform for international terrorist organizations.

Due to the security situation, all foreign military personnel are forced to leave. The US military withdrawal is followed by financial withdrawal.

Financial support from the international community stops, due to the changed political situation in Afghanistan, and it becomes more and more difficult for the international development and humanitarian sector to carry out its work. Many actors will be forced to leave, others to confine themselves to the capital. External funding of the regime and security apparatus by other actors is needed. The civil war leads to further fragmentation of Afghan society and division of ethnic groups. The gains achieved in human development and human rights are reversed, while the situation for women and ethnic minorities is aggravated, especially in the countryside.

It will become increasingly difficult for the young population to find work, further increasing the flow of refugees, as well as the brain drain and the export of the Afghan elite. Fee collection for crossing borders between ethnic areas becomes a central means of income, in addition to the illicit flow of drugs, further exasperating corruption and organised crime. As a reaction to this and the risk of Afghanistan's becoming a new front for Daesh, international regional actors and neighbouring states such as Iran, China, and Russia increase both their engagement and their support to the Taliban, while continuing to pursue their separate national agendas. The war of proxies returns.

2. COUNTER-TERRORISM AND REVERSAL OF GAINS

After a year without further progress in the peace talks and with continuous Taliban refusal to include the Afghan government in the process, a limited peace agreement involving only the first two pillars is agreed upon between the US and the Taliban.

The Taliban demands an extensive share of the power and a changed constitution. A constitution similar to the one in Iran, or Saudi Arabia, with formal and Islamic rule, procedural elements, and limited elections is adopted. The

<p>1. CIVIL WAR AND CHAOS</p> <p>Precipitant US withdrawal + No peace deal</p> <p><i>Washington runs out of patience before any formal progress in the talks between the US and the Taliban has been achieved. Consequently, all US troops are withdrawn from Afghanistan.</i></p>	<p>2. CT AND REVERSAL OF GAINS</p> <p>Precipitant US withdrawal + Peace deal</p> <p><i>The US, after allowing the Taliban to play it for time in the peace talks, and after satisfying a limited agreement with the Taliban that involves only the first two pillars, withdraws the majority of its troops. A small US counter-terrorism presence remains in Afghanistan to ensure that it does not become a safe-haven for terrorists that pose a threat to the US.</i></p>
<p>3. THE RULE OF (WAR)LORDS</p> <p>Timely US withdrawal + No peace deal</p> <p><i>The US reduces its troop presence within RSM, in dialogue with other Troop Contributing Nations (TCNs), leaving only critical enablers and a US CT presence in OFS. No peace deal is reached.</i></p>	<p>4. PEACE, BUT IS IT SUSTAINABLE?</p> <p>Timely US withdrawal + Peace deal</p> <p><i>The US conducts a phased troop withdrawal, pinning each phase to certain political milestones, agreed upon in advance, in Afghanistan. A well-designed peace deal is reached: it reflects the reality in Afghanistan through changes in the constitution, and decentralized power-sharing.</i></p>

role of the Ulama in governing Afghanistan is increased. Having secured extensive power on the central- as well as high-level positions within the ANDSF, the Taliban has no interest in decentralizing the power-sharing. The new constitution does not reflect the reality on the ground, which is comprised of local powerbrokers.

RSM ends, as a result of the absence of critical US enablers and because of the perception that the peace agreement with the Taliban has led to a lower threat level. The small counter-terrorism presence remains, but all other foreign military personnel depart, in keeping with the peace agreement. The now smaller, more concentrated, CT mission lacks the benefit of regional presence and its inherent opportunities to collect human intelligence from local allies.

The Taliban receives financial support from the US, to impose costs on any divergence from the agreement. Development funding organizations become more dependent on Afghan partners to carry out their work and many actors will be forced to leave. The return to Taliban rule does not address the grievances of the Afghan people. The Taliban, rather than Daesh or terrorism, are the local population's main concern, a residue of memories of the consequences of Taliban rule in the 1990s.

The negative impact will be most prominent in the countryside, where the access to education and healthcare will be prone to local solutions dependent on the ability of humanitarian organisations to negotiate with local actors. Women's freedom of movement will decrease.

Confusion arises regarding which services are provided by the Taliban and which by the international community. The Taliban reap the benefits of this confusion in order to portray themselves as legitimate actors that provide for the people of Afghanistan.

3. THE RULE OF (WAR)LORDS

The US reduces its troop presence within RSM, in dialogue with other TCNs; within a year, only critical enablers and a US CT presence in OFS remain in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, having benefitted from the Doha talks and emerged as legitimate political actors, make a deal with the opposition, resulting in a fragmented government. Political leaders and warlords from all ethnic groups are willing to support Taliban rule, based on sharia law, in exchange for power and resources. The Kabul government controls the major cities, while the Taliban control large parts of the countryside. The warlords are strengthened on



the regional level, further increasing the tension between centre and periphery and the risk of civil war.

The US continues to fight Daesh and Al-Qaeda remnants within the OFS mission presence. Some Troop Contributing Nations (TCN) decide to follow the US withdrawal within RSM, while others increase their presence slightly in order to fill some of the gaps. The regional layout of the mission is restructured. The smaller RSM, with a regional presence in the northern, western, and central provinces, continues to train, advise, and assist ANDSF. With the more limited regional mission presence and increased threat level, RSM struggles to improve the insufficient capacity of the ANDSF. There is a huge risk that the losses within the ANDSF outpace the inflow of new recruits.

Because of the new political reality in Afghanistan, it becomes increasingly difficult for development organisations to work in the country and for parliaments to justify funding. Women, minorities, and the population in the countryside are most severely affected by the decreased inflow of funding. A shift from development aid to humanitarian aid is necessary. The deal on the central level empowers local leaders and warlords, further fragmenting Afghanistan and increasing the differences between regions. Sharia law is enforced in regions with Taliban rule, primarily in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. Neighbouring powers continue to support their local beneficiaries in Afghanistan, maintaining a situation of stable instability in the power balance.

4. PEACE, BUT IS IT SUSTAINABLE?

After two years of negotiations, a peace deal is reached. The US initiates a phased troop withdrawal, pinning each phase to certain political milestones agreed upon in advance.

A coalition government with Taliban representation eliminates the Daesh presence in Afghanistan, an outcome most likely achieved through negotiation. An amended constitution, with decentralized rule that reflects the role of local powerbrokers, is agreed upon.

RSM and OFS end gradually, and are replaced by an international monitoring and enforcing mission that focuses on disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR). The process of integrating the Taliban fighters begins.

Development funding from international donors continues. The integration of the Taliban into government and security structures raises the issues of impunity and accountability among the population.

The viability of a sustainable peace settlement depends on the support of regional actors, especially Pakistan, and development of the Afghan economy. Regional actors need to increase investments, for example by including Afghanistan in China's Belt and Road Initiative, in order to increase the independence of the Afghan economy. The issue is raised of whether the regional powers are basing their engagement in Afghanistan on their local interests within the region, or on their geopolitical interests towards the US. The commitment and priorities of neighbouring states and international regional powers such as Iran, Pakistan, and Russia greatly depend on the ability of the US to communicate the long-term plan for commitment.

Moreover, the viability of the peace depends on the government's capability to handle numerous challenges: endemic corruption; organized crime that specialises in the opium trade; human rights abuses; and the patron-client system that marginalises the majority of the Afghan population.

CONCLUSIONS

US troop withdrawal, whether timely or precipitant, will render consequences for international engagement in Afghanistan. Peace in Afghanistan, through a limited, well-designed agreement, will neither automatically end corruption nor the patron-client system.

As portrayed via the four simplified examples of possible futures presented above, different scenarios will impose different levels of difficulty. These will in turn necessitate different approaches from the international community in its future relations with Afghanistan, and in safeguarding its interests, especially the gains that have been achieved over the years.

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