



Afghanistan: The Fog at the End of the Tunnel

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When will US ground troops leave Afghanistan? Why the uncertainty? Logistical problems are not a principal cause, as often claimed. Instead, the vacillation and uncertainty is due to an ongoing, but troubled US effort to shape Afghanistan's future using the presence of US ground troops as leverage.

The date for US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is subject to change once again.(1) The Feb 2020 agreement between the USA and the Taliban had originally set 01 May 2021 as the deadline for ending the US ground troop presence in Afghanistan.(2) However, on 17 April President Biden announced his intention to breach the agreement by setting a new date almost 6 months in the future: 11 September 2021.(3) More recently, the *New York Times* reports that more than a dozen officials in the USA, Afghanistan, and Europe are confirming a possible new departure date in mid-July 2021.(4) Given the opportunity to deny the leaks, Pentagon Press Spokesman John Kirby instead demurred, saying, "I'm not going to speculate about what the exact time frame is going to end up being." (5)

In US discussion of these changes, the logistics of withdrawal have been emphasized as initially requiring the delay and then, unexpectedly, allowing some mitigation of it.(6) According to the *Times*, upon supposedly beginning withdrawal in April "military officials quickly realized that they could be out by early to mid-July." (7) But this explanation for the delay and then its partial retraction fall short, as this post will show.

First, previous troop drawdowns in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) strongly imply that the task could have been completed by May 1, if there had been a will to do so.(8) (see *Appendix 1: The Logistics Dodge*, below)

Second, arguing that ignorance of conditions on the ground led to overestimating the time needed for withdrawal begs credulity. Active planning for the move has been underway for more than a year.(9) So has the process of withdrawal. Already, 10,000 troops had withdrawn by early 2021 (counting

from January of 2020).(10) The task facing the new administration was *not* a new one, nor was the ground unknown.

An alternative explanation for breaching the 2020 deal is that it gave Washington more time to pursue “unfinished business” concerning Afghanistan’s future. In this gambit, the lingering troop presence would serve as a type of leverage. As a *Reuters* reporter found, “Some US officials and many experts fear that if US-led international forces depart before a peace deal is reached, Afghanistan could plunge into a new civil war, giving *al Qaeda* a new sanctuary.”(11) Motivating and managing that prospective peace deal was part of Washington’s unfinished agenda.

Clearly, the ~10,000 US troops and contractors serving in Afghanistan could not counter-balance the Taliban, but they could stiffen Kabul’s forces and resolve, hold NATO’s attention and concern, add to the effectiveness of US air power, keep access points open, and anchor the possibility of a revived US ground presence. Put simply, they could represent the fact that the ground game isn’t over until it’s over. And that’s the foundation of the leverage those troops have provided.

The USA has been using the time it’s gained not only to ease the pace of withdrawal, but also to improve Afghan defenses, polish plans and preparations for “fighting from afar,” and pursue dramatic new political initiatives aiming to lock the Taliban into a cease-fire, peace settlement, and nation-building plan substantially defined by the USA. (See, *Appendix 2. Unfinished Business: Shaping Afghanistan’s Future*, below.) An illustrative goal briefed to Afghan President Ghani and Chairman Abdullah by US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad was “a revised 90-day Reduction-in Violence...intended to prevent a Spring Offensive by the Taliban.”(12)

Biden’s decision to breach the agreement was a high-risk gamble. This was partly because the existing Taliban cease-fire on US forces was associated with the 2020 US-Taliban deal - now breached. That cease-fire allowed the United States more than a year without a combat casualty - a sharp drop from previous years.(13) Should the cease-fire break down and US forces suffer fatalities under Taliban attack, near-term withdrawal could become politically impossible. However, with the prospect of US withdrawal still dangling in the near future, Biden gambled that the Taliban would hold their fire and wait, while also partaking in multinational meetings that would supposedly lay the foundation for the next Afghanistan.

For Every Action...

The Taliban responded to Biden’s contravention by threatening a return to unrestricted attacks on US troops.(14) But Biden had already issued a preemptive threat on April 14 when he warned that, should the Taliban lift the cease-fire linked

to the deal and resume attacks on US troops, the latter would respond with "all the tools at (their) disposal." (15) The Taliban reiterated their threats as the May 1 deadline passes. (16) And US Army General Austin Scott Miller, commander of the NATO Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, repeated Biden's. (17)

In this exchange the potential for an escalation spiral is obvious. And should fighting once again flare, it would not admit an easy or quick resolution. Even apart from the friction generated by the breach, any delay in withdrawing troops from the Afghan imbroglio presents an opportunity for renewed conflict, which could easily add years to US ground troop combat in a conflict several US presidents had hoped to end or curb.

Taliban offensive action surged after 01 May (18) although little or none of it was intentionally directed at US forces. When attacks did seem to target US troops or their positions, US forces struck back ferociously. (19) Generally, the role of US air power in supporting Kabul's forces against the Taliban grew along with the fighting. (20) And with the increasing extent and intensity of fighting, (21) Washington increasingly worried about what NYT's informants called a "nightmare scenario": The eventuality of a US combat-related death in Afghanistan. (22) That occurrence might reconfigure US policy on withdrawal and would certainly be politically disruptive at home. The NYT informants connected these concerns to the administration's consideration of a mid-July exit.

Blinken's diplomatic and government-shaping program made little progress during the period April to June even though it was arguably the main reason for extending America's ground force presence beyond the agreed May deadline. Obviously, Blinken's cease-fire proposal did not take hold. Also failing to gain traction were efforts to draw the Taliban into an Istanbul-based international meeting that might formulate an Afghan settlement with features favored by Washington. (See *Appendix 2. Unfinished Business: Shaping Afghanistan's Future*)

Throughout April 2021, the Taliban steadfastly refused to participate in any meetings that addressed substantive settlement issues before foreign troops left Afghan soil. This prompted Turkey, Pakistan, and the Kabul government to issue joint statements accusing the Taliban of failing in its responsibility to seek an inclusive negotiated settlement. Not wishing to be portrayed internationally as a spoiler, the Taliban responded in early May with a counter-offer: It would participate in the US arranged meetings if the United States would agree to a July exit date. Reportedly, the USA and Taliban subsequently conferred over the option. More recently, as rumors of a possible July exit circulated, the Taliban agreed in principle to participate in the US proposed meeting, although the terms of the meeting are still under discussion. (For more detail see *Appendix 2*)

Indicative of the remaining distance between the two parties and the emphasis the Taliban place on indigenous authority is their response to the Biden proposal to have a Turkey - a NATO country that is also Muslim - assume responsibility for keeping the Kabul International Airport open and secure.(23) The Taliban's response was categorical:

"Every inch of Afghan soil, its airports and security of foreign embassies and diplomatic offices is the responsibility of the Afghans, consequently no one should hold out hope of keeping military or security presence in our country."(24)

Hubris goes before a fall

In a net assessment, Biden's gambit has involved more risk than gain. The Taliban have continued their rapid advance, refused to renew a cease-fire with Kabul, and so-far rebuffed efforts to draw them into substantive settlement negotiations prior to the withdrawal of foreign troops. This outcome should not be surprising. It corresponds to Afghanistan's internal balance of power and to the manifest limits on what outside players can accomplish by means of force and funding. The commitment of outside powers, now twenty years along, has substantially receded in recent years, as is obvious to all the contestants

In the United States, public support for withdrawal now stands above 2:1, not surprisingly.(25) What has twenty-years, \$2 trillion, and as many as 6,000 US military and contractor lives gained? A dysfunctional kleptocratic warlord state that cannot stand on its own against ill-equipped insurgents. (26)

Without substantial permanent foreign military support the Kabul government will soon crumble and a Taliban coalition will become the predominant political force in Afghanistan. (27) Appreciating this, the Taliban will not be co-opted by Washington's recent raft of peace and governance meetings and proposals. Why cannot Washington see this? Why pursue a policy that risks prolonging the war and US ground force intervention with little hope of gain?

Hubris, voluntarism, institutional interests, and partisan politics all play a role in shaping Washington's appreciation of strategic realities and in limiting the range of options thought feasible. The recent debate over withdrawal shows that, contrary to the evidence of 20 years, confidence in progress if not victory remains alive in some corners.(28) Given this, building a leadership coalition supportive of a given policy can requires compromise on specifics. Thus, past efforts to reduce deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq have come wrapped paradoxically in troop surges or "one last

shot,” often extending rather than ending commitments. Paradoxical action is often the price of “consensus.” (29)

Today, in Afghanistan, “mission accomplished” turns out not to have meant exiting ASAP. Nor did it exclude a sudden surge of new policy initiatives, anchored by military presence and action. This suggests that the administration was divided internally. Certainly, the broader Democratic Party leadership was divided on the wisdom of straight-forward “withdrawal.” (30) And some key military leaders made no secret of their disapproval while nonetheless retaining their positions.(31)

What remains to be seen is how the principal players respond to each other's initiatives during this tense interregnum between ground combat and withdrawal. To be sure, every day the USA prolongs its ground presence involves new opportunities for US troops to be killed. Every day presents an opportunity to re-enter a cycle of violence, making it more difficult to exit. Similarly, every new US plan, every new or renewed commitment is an anchor, a snare, increasing America's political investment in advancing its vision(s) of Afghanistan's future. And when we take into consideration air power, special operations raids, military aid, diplomatic support, and financial assistance, it's clear that US withdrawal from this conflict, in any full sense, is not on the horizon.

Appendix 1: The Logistics Dodge

Among the broad public the most persuasive reason to delay the long-awaited, majority-supported troop withdrawal involves safety and logistical limits. However, taking historical precedent into account, neither of these concerns makes much sense given the size of the US contingent: about 3,500 troops and 16,000 contractors. Relatively speaking, the United States has managed much greater logistical challenges in a more timely fashion in the recent past - including in Afghanistan: (32)

Without doubt there are a variety of tough transportation problems in the current Afghanistan case - such as the rugged terrain and poor transportation net.(33) Some of the challenges have been exaggerated, however. For instance, the number of sites hosting US personnel numbered in the hundreds some few years ago, but only dozens more recently.(34) More relevant than enumerating the types of obstacle possibly facing Afghanistan withdrawal is weighing this case against other US withdrawal efforts. How do different cases and experiences stack up?

The 1990-1991 Gulf War offers one standard for judging the challenge now facing America in Afghanistan.(35) Operation Desert Storm (ODS) involved more than 500,000 US troops “in theater”. This posed a redeployment challenge orders of

magnitude greater than what Washington today faces in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, following the ODS cease-fire, troops were exiting the war zone at rates up to 5,000 personnel per day. Assets took longer, of course. All told, redeployment of people and materiel from the theater took 10 months.

Applied to the present Afghanistan case, this standard might suggest that withdrawal could be accomplished in less than a few weeks! That calculation is faulty, of course. The relationship between the two cases - the Gulf and Afghanistan wars - is not linear.⁽³⁶⁾ The Gulf states offer an exceptional infrastructure and environment for deployment and redeployment. In the case of Afghanistan, countervailing factors include an especially poor transportation network, limited airport capacity, lack of nearby seaports, severe weather, mountainous terrain, and possible harassing attacks by violent actors.⁽³⁷⁾ On the other hand, facilitating the current effort is that planning has been already underway for a year.⁽³⁸⁾ Also expeditious was the consolidation of US personnel and assets in fewer, more secure locations - a process similarly underway for a year.

Another - and perhaps more relevant - standard was set during the 2013-2015 US military drawdown in Afghanistan.⁽³⁹⁾ This followed the 2009 Obama surge. In the space of two years, 60,000 troops were redeployed. The lion's share of their equipment was removed, destroyed, or transferred to the Afghan Armed Forces.⁽⁴⁰⁾ And, unlike today, that was a period of active combat. Indeed, during 2013 and 2014, over 120 US soldiers were killed in action.⁽⁴¹⁾

Looking forward from February 2021, in light of the above, could the United States have withdrawn all its troops and assets by May 1. Personnel, yes; Assets, probably not. Despite almost a year of specific planning, the delay in execution had precluded it. However, while the administration might reasonably argue that logistical challenges impose some delay in full withdrawal, the planned five months exceeds what's reasonable. Supporting this conclusion is not only the example of the 1990-1991 Gulf War (adjusted for size), but the adjusted examples of the Vietnam War, the 1983 Grenada intervention, the 1999 Kosovo War, and the multiple surges and recessions in US troop levels during both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to date.⁽⁴²⁾ (These comparisons assume the need to evacuate a total of ~20,000 US and allied troops, civilian government personnel, and contractors from Afghanistan.)

The Taliban would certainly have negotiated a short delay in America's exit - had they been asked. Indeed, some sources report they are now in the process of belatedly negotiating a possible July 2021 exit date.⁽⁴³⁾ Looking back to April, the key to having effectively met the terms of the 2020 agreement would have been negotiating a short delay, declaring an end to the operation on 01 May, making substantial withdrawals within weeks of April 14, and completing withdrawal by mid-June.

That's a practicable option that would not have risked disrupting the process of disengagement and withdrawal.

Appendix 2. Unfinished Business: Shaping Afghanistan's Future

In early March 2021 US Secretary of State Antony Blinken summarized ambitious new US proposals for Afghanistan's near future in letters (44) and documents (45) shared with Afghanistan's President Ghani and Chairman Abdullah.(46) These documents outlined in some detail (i) a possible roadmap to a permanent cease-fire, (ii) the structure of a temporary unity government, (iii) the principles of a new constitution, and (iv) a future permanent government structure.(47) In essence, they constituted a "shake-and-bake" peace settlement concocted in Washington DC and reflecting its ongoing vision for Afghanistan. There's little doubt that this eleventh-hour effort to gain substantial influence over the Kabul-Taliban negotiations would shape the Taliban's reaction (48) to Biden's eleventh-hour breach of the 2020 US-Taliban "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan."(49)

For the immediate future the United States had prepared "a revised 90-day Reduction-in Violence, which is intended to prevent a Spring Offensive by the Taliban."(50) Blinken also asked the UN to convene a meeting of representatives from Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India, and the United States to discuss a joint approach to shaping a new order in Afghanistan.(51) Similarly, the USA pushed to accelerate settlement negotiations between the Kabul and the Taliban. To this end, the UN, USA, Turkey, and Qatar proposed a session to be held under their auspices on 24 April in Istanbul, but this had to be postponed due to the Taliban's long-standing refusal to attend such multinational summits until foreign troops leave the country, as promised in 2020. (52)

The Taliban see these machinations as an effort to overturn the 2020 agreement, strengthen the political and military position of Kabul, and revive some elements of earlier Western nation-building plans. Washington had hoped to significantly advance this program before the end of the revised troop withdrawal schedule. Should the Kabul government and a varied assembly of world powers coalesce around Blinken's proposals, international pressure on the Taliban might intensify. But there is no good reason to believe that this imperious approach would succeed now anymore than before. It could, however, prolong the conflict and America's involvement in it.

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