

The U.S. Withdrawal in Afghanistan

by Michael Curtis



The area of Afghanistan, whose history can be traced back to around 500 BC and which has been ruled by a variety of kingdoms and empires, has for long been a strategically important location, a gateway to India, and close to the Silk Road that carried trade from the Mediterranean to China. However, no nation or ruler has ever unified the whole area, although Britain in the 19th century and the Soviet Union in the 20th tried and failed to gain total control.

Afghanistan became significant for the U.S. in 2001 in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, September 11, 2001, which were planned and directed from Afghanistan. The terrorist group Al Qaeda led by the charismatic Osama Bin Laden, had become an important force in Afghanistan. It set up terrorist training camps, including experimenting with poison gas on dogs, and recruited and trained about 20,000 jihadist

volunteers from around the world, and directed the attacks in August 1998 on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killing 224 people. Al Qaeda was able to operate because it was protected by the government at the time, the Taliban, which had gained control of the whole country in 1996. This group developed after the Soviet Union withdrew all its troops in February 1989, after the ten-year guerrilla war with insurgent forces, the Mujahideen, and some Maoist groups, and then a subsequent civil war.

The Taliban refused the American request to expel the Al Qaeda responsible for 9/11, and in October 2001 the U.S. and UK joined the attempt of the anti-Taliban force of Afghans, known as the Northern Alliance, to eliminate the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The U.S. and other NATO countries conducted a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban rulers that had harbored and supported the 9/11 terrorists. Since then, the U.S. was militarily active in the intervening 20 years; at its height 110,000 U.S. troops were involved. The U.S. has suffered more than 22,000 military casualties, including 2,440 fatalities, and 3,800 private contractors killed, and has spent \$ 144 billion for reconstruction and security in the area, and \$815 billion on a war fighting operation costs. Total U.S. expenses 2001-2019 were \$2.26 trillion. Afghan personnel suffered most. Over 60,000 government security forces were killed and 100,000 civilians. Over the last twenty years 150,000 of UK forces served there, of whom 457 died. All British troops have now left the country.

After twenty years, the U.S. is withdrawing from the country with no claim of victory. One positive achievement can be claimed. Al Qaeda has been reduced in significance as a terrorist threat. No successful international terrorist attack has been planned from Afghanistan since 9/11. On the other hand, Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other terrorist groups still remain in varying numbers. Above all, the Afghan

civil war not only still exists but probably will become more intense. The Taliban in July 2021, determined to eradicate Western influence, though no direct threat to the U.S. or NATO, is in control of over half of the country and has the momentum.

As a result of 9/11, President George W. Bush in April 2002 asserted that peace in Afghanistan would be achieved by helping Afghanistan develop its own stable government. Afghanistan, he said, was the ultimate nation building mission but he acknowledged that "our government was not prepared for nation building." The U.S. mission for the last twenty years has been more limited. President Donald J. Trump declared in May 2016 that "we're getting out of the nation building business." In February 2020 the Trump Administration issued a joint declaration, the Doha deal, with the Taliban to work together to reach a comprehensible peace agreement for the benefit of all Afghans and contribute to regional stability and global security. This would include a number of points: preventing the use of Afghan soil by any international terrorist groups or individuals active against the security of the U.S. and its allies; withdrawal of all troops; a political settlement and a comprehensive ceasefire. Both Trump and President Joe Biden declared that the U.S. role in combat operations would end.

Biden declared on April 14 and again on July 9, 2021, that the U.S. military mission would end by September 11, 2021, arguing that the U.S. had achieved its objectives set out two decades ago. The Biden argument is "We did not go to Afghanistan to nation build." He asserted that the U.S. did not win, but it created some stability and checked the Taliban. There is no longer any reason for U.S. forces to remain. However, the Biden policy appears to be a move to withdraw all forces without conditions, a departure from the Trump policy, and may hamper peace talks between the Afghans.

The U.S., UK and other countries have helped Afghan development; military security forces of army and police; governmental institutions, advances in human rights, women's rights, and free press, broadcast and a social media, health care, education. But the Western countries have been unable to get the two Afghan sides to agree to a peace settlement. The country is unstable, economically and politically, and for reasonable survival requires support from the international community.

For the U.S. and the UK, the main pressing political factor was troop withdrawal. On July 12, 2021, the senior U.S. commander in Afghanistan resigned his position, symbolizing the end of the U.S. role in the Afghan war. It remains unclear how and if the U.S. will continue, despite the pullout, to support the Afghan government forces to counter the increasing aggression of the Taliban.

Questions remain over the correctness and consequences of U.S. and UK withdrawal. The U.S. is unlikely to be able to alter the political and military dynamics of the region.

The main interest for the U.S. since 9/11 has been to prevent terrorist attacks planned from Afghanistan. Yet no one is likely to declare mission accomplished. Al Qaeda has been hurt, but Islamist terrorists remain in Afghanistan as well as in Somalia, Mali, and parts of the Sahel. Will the withdrawal of all troops affect the role of the U.S. as a global power, or diminish its international credibility? Was the human cost and financial expenditures worth the U.S. intervention? Can the Afghan government be able to counter the Taliban in what is really an existential fight? It is not likely to fight for every rural area. It is handicapped by the fact that Russia and Iran have closed their consulates in the north part of the country.

The country is politically unstable, with fractious, corrupt political elites as well as being a land of extreme poverty.

The Taliban has already been gaining control of an increasing number of the 400 districts in the country. It has begun to collect customs revenue in some parts of the country, especially near the border with Tajikistan.

The Taliban insurgency will grow, even if government capitulation is not inevitable. Moreover, Taliban has not ended its links, including family ties, with Al Qaeda.

Another problem is that the Doha agreement between the U.S. and Taliban will be scrapped if the U.S. and NATO forces stay beyond the withdrawal deadline in the agreement. NATO has said it is likely to continue its mission training security forces in Afghanistan. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has announced that "our presence in Afghanistan is condition-based and the Taliban has to meet their commitments, ...we will only leave when the time is right and the focus is on how we can support the peace talks." Similarly, the U.S. Congress has also recommended extending the deadline, holding that withdrawal should not be based on an inflexible timeline, but on fulfillment of commitments to peace by all parties, and that the U.S. should not simply hand a victory to the Taliban.

Another problem is that the Taliban insurgency is likely to cause a new migration wave from the East, people fleeing from the Taliban. The problem will worsen after Pakistan's decision to close a major border crossing with Afghanistan, citing the pandemic as the reason. Afghans are already crossing illegally into Lithuania.

There is no easy solution for the U.S. or the democratic West in the Afghanistan imbroglio. As a minimum the U.S. should base its policy on two factors: it should insist on the Doha process with the Taliban to prevent return of Al Qaeda; and it should support and assist the continuing talks in Doha between the Afghan government and the Taliban to bring about stability, if peace cannot be achieved. Most important, this should be a U.S. bipartisan effort.