



U.S. leaders urge against withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan by May 1

Washington, D.C. (March 4, 2021) – A little more than a year ago, the United States government and the Taliban entered into an agreement that, among other provisions, called for the withdrawal of all American troops by May 1, 2021. The Biden Administration is now considering whether or not it should follow through with that withdrawal, especially as the Taliban are failing to carry out their own obligations under the deal.

A number of prominent American voices – including the Alliance in Support of the Afghan People – are strongly urging the Administration not to withdraw, or even reduce, U.S. troops by May 1. They cite concerns that the Taliban will exploit the void left by the U.S. to muscle its way back into power. Many fear that the Taliban will plunge the country back into a civil war that will shatter millions of lives, unwind social, economic and political advances of the last 20 years, destabilize the region and provide a safe haven for global terror groups to operate.

What follows is a digest of some of those voices over the last two months, as the May 1 deadline has loomed. It builds on a similar [digest](#) we compiled in November 2020 of leaders expressing alarm about the prospect of U.S. withdrawal. For ASAP's most recent views on U.S. policy on Afghanistan, see our statements in January on [core principles](#) and just a few days ago on the [anniversary of the U.S.-Taliban agreement](#). (Click the bolded lines at the beginning of each quote to hyperlink to source documents.)

Afghan Study Group, February 2021. [Co-chairs: Senator Kelly A. Ayotte, General Joseph F. Dunford Jr. (Ret.), and Ms. Nancy Lindborg] The Study Group “believes that it will be very difficult, and perhaps impossible, for [acceptable conditions on the ground] to be achieved by May 2021, when the agreement states that troops should be withdrawn. Achieving the overall objective of a negotiated stable peace that meets U.S. interests would need to begin with securing an extension of the May deadline.... Our ongoing military presence in Afghanistan, working alongside Afghan security forces, has disrupted [terrorist] groups and prevented them from attacking our homeland. A complete withdrawal of our troops would allow the threat to reemerge. In the long term, the United States must either maintain a counterterrorism force in Afghanistan or be assured that other verifiable mechanisms are in place to ensure that these groups cannot reconstitute.”

Sen. Jack Reed (R.I.-Dem), Chair, Senate Armed Services Committee, February 24. “To pull out within several months now is a very challenging and destabilizing effort.... We’ve got to be able to assure the world and the American public that Afghanistan will not be a source of planning, plotting to project terrorist attacks around the globe,” Mr. Reed said. “That’s the minimum. I’m not sure we can do that without some presence there.”

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Former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, February 26: “We implemented our side of it in good faith, but it’s fair to say the Taliban have not,” Esper said, noting the Taliban have not delivered on any of their key promises, namely a reduction in violence, good faith negotiations with the Afghan government, and a full break with al Qaeda. Esper said he would have opposed Trump’s post-election order to reduce U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan to 2,500, which he says has effectively undercut any leverage the U.S. had over the Taliban. ‘I made this clear when I was in



the administration at the end, I thought we should hold it to 4,500 until the conditions on the ground were met.”

Lt. Gen. (ret.) H.R. McMaster, former National Security Advisor, at Senate Arms Services Committee, March 2: “The negotiated agreement with the Taliban is based on the same narcissistic assumption that underpinned the complete withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011: that wars end when we decide to disengage. Except the negotiated withdrawal from Afghanistan is worse because concessions made, including failing to demand a cease fire and forcing the Afghan government to release five thousand terrorists from prison, have weakened the Afghan government on the way out. The prioritization of withdrawal is tantamount to self-defeat and jeopardizes the objective that impelled our intervention in Afghanistan in 2001: deny jihadist terrorists a safe haven and support base to plan, prepare and resource mass murder attacks against the United States and our allies. If we continue to adhere to the weak agreement that the Taliban is violating already, it is likely that our armed forces will have to return to Afghanistan and pay a much higher price than if we had sustained our support for Afghan security forces who are bearing the brunt of the fight against jihadist terrorists as part of an international coalition in which U.S. troops number less than those of our coalition partners.”

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Madeleine K. Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State, and Rector Federica Mogherini, former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice President of the European Commission, February 16. “Let us be clear: We believe the Taliban is terrorizing and tormenting the country's citizens into submission as part of a deliberate strategy to eliminate opposition and force surrender either on the battlefield or at the negotiating table. President

Biden is rightly reviewing the U.S.-Taliban agreement, which it must consider as part of broader strategic calculation to not only push for a real peace process, but to prevent a reckless withdrawal that leads to state collapse, a civil war, and the revival of a global terrorist haven.... [W]ith the US-Taliban agreement, President Biden **inherited** a rapid troop drawdown that is not based on conditions. The U.S. should now re-assert meaningful conditions and place its commitments on hold if they are not met. At the same time, they must continue to support professionalized, and apolitical Afghan National Defense forces, as our main security partner and the central engine of security for the Afghan people.”

Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, February 26. “My view is that I think the steps the president has taken in terms of hinting that we might not pull the rest of our troops out on the first of May is exactly right. I think that we do need to take into consideration the possibility of having a presence in Afghanistan, at roughly the current level, or maybe even slightly more, along with our NATO allies. So, the NATO allies have, I think, about twice to three times as many troops in Afghanistan as we have. They are very supportive of the mission.... [I]f I were advising... we might end up having to have a presence there on the ground, at a very low level – we have about 2,500 troops there now – at somewhere around that level for an indefinite period of time, at a minimum, until that presence forces the Taliban to realize that they can't just take all the marbles once we leave, that there is a negotiated solution that preserves, at a minimum, some of the gains for women and girls that have been achieved, and some of the human rights achievements that have been made over the last 20 years or so.”



Gen. David Patreaus (ret.), former Commander of the International Security Assistance Force, February 12:

"I'm currently very concerned that we are not only planning to draw down our forces completely by the end of April, which I think would be potentially disastrous. I'm concerned that we've drawn down our forces below the level warranted by the conditions and below the level -- half the level -- that the commander on the

ground... Gen. Scott Miller, has assessed to be the minimum.... It's pretty clear that not only have the Taliban shown no willingness to cut their ties with al Qaeda, they've also shown no willingness to reduce the level of violence to which they were committed in the agreement that they signed with the United States.... [If the U.S. withdraws by the end of April], what we will see, I think, is the Taliban go on an offensive. We would see, then, a result that would perhaps resemble the civil war that followed the collapse of the Soviet-supported regime that existed after the Soviets withdrew their forces. We would see a massive refugee crisis and so many of the tremendous achievements in Afghanistan evaporate.... You don't end endless wars by ending by ending U.S. involvement in them. All you do is end U.S. involvement."

"We believe the Taliban is terrorizing and tormenting the country's citizens into submission as part of a deliberate strategy to eliminate opposition and force surrender either on the battlefield or at the negotiating table." **Madeleine K. Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State, and Rector Federica Mogherini, former Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice President of the European Commission**

Amb. Melanne Verwee, Executive Director of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security; February 12.

"Part of the deal was to contain the violence, bring down the violence. That has not happened. And to delink the Taliban from ties with al Qaeda, that they would break those ties. That has not happened. We can't afford to hand over a victory to the Taliban with no conditions leading to prospect of worse happening."

Amb. Ryan Crocker, Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, February 12. "At this particular juncture we are now at risk of damaging critically our own security through a precipitous withdrawal, which is what these peace talks are about incidentally. This is about surrender. This is not about peace. We've seen this movie. We pulled out of Afghanistan after the Soviet defeat. We could see the civil war coming. The Taliban eventually got the upper hand, and that was the road to 9/11. So we are forewarned here. We risk tarnishing our values as Americans. We encouraged girls and women to step forward. We said, effectively, 'We've got your back.' Now we seem to be looking at our watches saying, 'Oh, my goodness, look at the time. We've got to be going. Good-bye and good luck. What do we think is going to happen to females in Afghanistan, once we're gone, once the Taliban is moving back into power by the barrels of guns? It will not be pretty. And we will be culpable.'"

James Stavridis, retired U.S. Navy admiral and former supreme allied commander of NATO, February 12.

"The case for maintaining a small yet strong military presence in Afghanistan is sound, if not popular. The U.S. doesn't want to see the country slip back into the essentially ungoverned state that existed before the 9/11 attacks, conditions that allowed al-Qaeda to take hold so strongly and launch the attacks on U.S. soil. Costs have already been reduced enormously by drawing down 95% of the U.S. forces. There are also about 5,000 non-U.S. NATO troops on the ground, more than America's commitment at this point.... Think back on the end of the war in Vietnam — helicopters lifting off the roof of the U.S. embassy compound, a chaotic finale of a long, tragic misadventure. We need to avoid a replay of that in Kabul, not just for the security of Afghanistan, but of America as well."



Rep. Jason Crow (Colo.-Dem.), February 21. “There's no way to [withdraw from Afghanistan] safely and keep faith with our allies.... If we were to pull out without consulting with [our allies], that would do major damage to our alliances. Even more, it would be an unmitigated disaster for the people of Afghanistan, women and children in particular.... The Taliban agreement is a fantasy. It has never been real. It is not based on actual facts and what's going on the ground.... So it has to be based on the facts on the ground. It has to be based on conditions that are actually met by the Taliban.”

Rep. Michael McCaul, (Tex. – Repub.), Ranking Member, of House Foreign Affairs Committee, March 2: “The Taliban would overrun Afghanistan if there were a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces, which would lead to a ‘pre-9/11-type posture’ in the country and create a ‘long term problem with terrorism. Representative McCaul said the deal should have come with certain conditions on the Taliban, including breaking all ties with al-Qaida, instead of a definite withdrawal date for foreign troops. He also said the original agreement should have included a complete cease-fire and a provision calling on the Taliban to stop the killing of innocent civilians and Afghan military forces.”

Daniel F. Runde, Senior Vice President, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 29.

“The U.S. military presence was arbitrarily and too hastily reduced from 4,500 troops in November to 2,500 troops on January 15 — the lowest number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan since 2001, and as of December, lower than NATO’s contribution. As part of a deal struck with the Taliban last February, the Trump administration pledged to

reduce U.S. troop levels to zero by May of 2021, under certain conditions. While low troop numbers in Afghanistan may sound like a U.S. victory, going to zero will only weaken the country’s fragile democratic structure and create new opportunities for terror and conflict, and make it more likely we would have to return. Now is not the time to pull the plug on Afghanistan, even though recommitting or extending troop presence in Afghanistan also has its challenges.”

“We’ve seen this movie. We pulled out of Afghanistan after the Soviet defeat. We could see the civil war coming. The Taliban eventually got the upper hand, and that was the road to 9/11. So, we are forewarned here.” **Amb. Ryan Crocker, Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan**

Vance Serchuk, adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and executive director of the KKR Global Institute, February 8.

Withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan by May 1 “would be a historic mistake. Turning a blind eye to the Taliban’s continued entanglement with terrorists would all but guarantee the return of an extremist sanctuary to Afghan soil. Before Mr. Biden’s term is out, it is a safe bet that Afghanistan will again explode, dragging Washington back in—at much greater cost than the U.S. presence there now entails. Abandoning Afghans would also send the message that despite Mr. Biden’s rhetoric on democracy and human rights, Washington can be intimidated into betraying these principles and the people for whom they are a matter of survival. The better approach is to tell the Taliban that the price of peace with the U.S. is a complete, verifiable break with al Qaeda and other terrorists—and that Washington won’t be bullied into withdrawal. Mr. Biden should further insist the U.S. won’t leave Afghanistan until there is a durable negotiated settlement between the Taliban and the rest of Afghan society.”

The Alliance in Support of the Afghan People (or ASAP) represents a cross section of American national security, military, civilian and human rights leaders who advocate for continued U.S. engagement that protects, sustains, and advances the progress the Afghan and American people have made in Afghanistan since 2001. For more information: <https://www.allianceforafghans.org/>