



**Statement before the
House Armed Services Committee**

“War and Peace in Afghanistan.”

A Testimony by:

Seth G. Jones

Harold Brown Chair and Director of Transnational Threats, CSIS

November 20, 2020

2118 Rayburn Office Building

War and Peace in Afghanistan¹

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Thornberry, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House Armed Services Committee on “The U.S. Military Mission in Afghanistan and Implications of the Peace Process on U.S. Involvement.” With the transition to a Biden Administration, this is an important subject and an opportune time to discuss a way forward in Afghanistan. U.S. national security interests have evolved since 9/11. The United States is engaged in competition with countries like China and Russia, and it has to deal with the implications of Covid-19, a struggling U.S. and global economy, and numerous other national security issues. Nevertheless, the United States still has some interests in Afghanistan, such as preventing the country from becoming a sanctuary for international terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Khorasan Province; averting regional instability as Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and India compete for influence in Afghanistan; and minimizing the likelihood of a major humanitarian crisis.

U.S. policy options in Afghanistan are sub-optimal. But absent a peace deal, the further withdrawal of U.S. forces—as highlighted in the November 17, 2020, announcement to cut U.S. forces from 4,500 to 2,500 troops—will likely shift the balance-of-power in favor of the Taliban, other militant groups like al-Qaeda, and the Taliban’s outside supporters in Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and other countries. The U.S. decision was essentially a victory for the Taliban. The United States is withdrawing forces not because of successful peace talks—but in spite of them. The peace talks have stalled in Doha, Qatar. In addition, the United States did not coordinate in any meaningful way with its NATO allies, who have served alongside U.S. forces in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. The drawdown will impact the U.S.’s ability to train, advise, and assist Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in the middle of a war against the Taliban, an Islamic militant group whose goal is to establish an extreme Islamic Emirate in the country.

The rest of this testimony is divided into several sections. The first provides an overview of U.S. interests in Afghanistan, which have evolved over the past two decades. The second section highlights challenges with the current peace negotiations. The third examines the state of the war. The fourth section outlines implications for the United States.

I. U.S. Interests in Afghanistan and South Asia

The United States has more important national security priorities than Afghanistan—including competing with a rising China and an aggressive Russia. But it still has some interests in Afghanistan and South Asia, a region that includes three of the U.S.’s main competitors—China, Russia, and Iran.

First, al-Qaeda is still located in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, though it has been weakened by persistent U.S. strikes. Al-Qaeda’s local affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, continues

¹ Some of this testimony draws on the author’s publication, *A Failed Afghan Peace Deal: Contingency Planning Memorandum No. 37* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, July 1, 2020). Seth G. Jones holds the Harold Brown Chair, is director of the Transnational Threats Project, and is a senior adviser to the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He is the author of *In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan* (W.W. Norton).

to support the Taliban's insurgency and retains close links with senior and lower-level Taliban leaders. As a 2020 United Nations report concluded, "Relations between the Taliban, especially the Haqqani Network, and Al-Qaida remain close, based on friendship, a history of shared struggle, ideological sympathy and intermarriage."² A successful Taliban-led insurgency would likely allow al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups—such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Islamic State Khorasan—to increase their presence in Afghanistan.

Second, a burgeoning war could increase regional instability as India, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia support a mix of Afghan central government forces, substate militias, and insurgent groups. In addition, an intensified war—particularly if the United States withdrew its military forces without a peace deal—would likely increase the already tense balance-of-power competition between India and Pakistan. Tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad have risen recently, in part following the Indian government's 2019 decision to revoke Kashmir's autonomy under Article 370 of the Indian constitution and at least temporarily impose tight security measures across the Kashmir Valley.

Third, the United States has an interest in preventing a worsening humanitarian crisis. Pakistan, in particular, would likely experience increasing violence and refugee flows if the war in Afghanistan spills over its border, as it did in the 1980s and 1990s. A precipitous U.S. withdrawal without a peace settlement would almost certainly increase refugee flows to neighboring countries and other regions, such as Europe. With almost 2.5 million registered refugees, Afghanistan already has the second-largest refugee population in the world behind Syria, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.³

Fourth, a U.S. military departure from Afghanistan would likely foster a perception, however misplaced, that the United States is not a reliable ally. Al-Qaeda and other jihadists would likely view a withdrawal of U.S. military forces as their most important victory since the departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989.

II. The Challenges of Peace Talks

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement intended to be a first step toward an intra-Afghan peace deal. Important provisions of the deal included a U.S. commitment to eventually withdraw all U.S. and foreign troops from Afghanistan, a Taliban pledge to prevent al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups from using Afghan territory to threaten the United States and its partners, and a promise by both sides to support intra-Afghan peace negotiations. There were notable problems with the agreement, such as its failure to include the Afghan government in the negotiations. It was an attempt to make the best of a bad situation. In addition, peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban formally began on September 15, 2020, in Doha, Qatar.

² "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," United Nations Security Council, S/2020/415, May 27, 2020, p. 3.

³ "Afghanistan," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/afghanistan.html>

A peace agreement that prevents Afghanistan from once again becoming a haven for international terrorism would allow the United States to withdraw its forces and reduce its security and development assistance, which exceeded \$800 billion between 2001 and 2019.⁴ Achieving an acceptable peace agreement, however, will not be easy. Significant issues still need to be resolved. Examples include the possibility of future elections, political power-sharing arrangements (including at the national, provincial, and district levels), changes to the Afghan constitution, the role of Islam, women's rights, and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.

Peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban have stalled—and never really got going. It is unclear whether the Taliban is serious about reaching a deal or whether its leaders are negotiating simply to get U.S. troops to withdraw so that Taliban forces can overthrow the Afghan government. The Taliban—whose leadership council (or Rahbari Shura) remains in Pakistan with support from the government's premier spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate—has an extreme ideology rooted in the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence.⁵ Taliban leaders support the creation of a government by sharia (Islamic law) and the establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan.⁶ Some Taliban leaders claim they have moderated their views on some issues, such as the education of girls.⁷ But the Taliban has a well-documented record of repression, intolerance, and human rights abuses against aid workers, women, and ethnic minorities.⁸

In negotiating a peace deal, the Taliban could also face difficulties convincing skeptics in the Rahbari Shura, such as Abdul Qayyum Zakir, Mullah Ibrahim Sadar, Mullah Yaqub, and even leader Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada. Lower-level Taliban commanders or partner groups like al-Qaeda could also oppose a deal or object to how one is implemented.

Given these challenges, the risk of the peace process collapsing or stalling indefinitely is significant. After all, a peace agreement or stalemate has occurred in only one quarter of insurgencies since World War II, while three quarters of insurgencies ended because the government or insurgents won on the battlefield.⁹

⁴ Cost estimates are from “Afghanistan War: What Has the Conflict Cost the United States?” BBC, February 28, 2020. Estimates on the number of U.S. military deaths come from “Casualty Status,” U.S. Department of Defense, September 21, 2020.

⁵ On the Taliban's religious and other views, see the primary source Taliban documents in Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, eds., *The Taliban Reader: War, Islam and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁶ On the importance of an Islamic Emirate, see, for example, “Weekly Comment,” Voice of Jihad, September 19, 2020, available at “Afghan Taliban Alleges Islamic Governance is Desired by All Afghans, Not Just Itself,” SITE Intelligence Group, September 21, 2020.

⁷ See the primary source interviews with the Taliban in Clarissa Ward, Najibullah Quraishi, and Salma Abdelaziz, “36 Hours with the Taliban,” CNN, February 2019; *Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, August 11, 2020), p. 8; Sirajuddin Haqqani, “What We, the Taliban, Want,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2020.

⁸ See, for example, “*You Have No Right to Complain*”: Education, Social Restrictions, and Justice in Taliban-Held Afghanistan (New York: Human Rights Watch, June 30, 2020).

⁹ The data comes from Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 9.

III. The State of the War

The war in Afghanistan is one of nearly 200 insurgencies since World War II. Based on both the Taliban and Afghan government's need to mobilize the local population and govern territory, there are several indicators that provide a useful gauge of the war today. These indicators—population control, local support, and levels of violence—suggest that the war is roughly a stalemate. But further U.S. and international military withdrawals will likely shift the military balance-of-power in the Taliban's favor.

A. Population Control or Influence: The first indicator is changes over time in population control or influence.¹⁰ Data on territorial control—including control of districts—is less helpful, since it can't distinguish between unpopulated mountain ranges or deserts and heavily-populated urban areas. Yet the Taliban gains have been almost entirely in rural areas of the country, where it enjoys some support among Afghans that have become disillusioned with the Afghan government, endorse the Taliban's religious zealotry, need a job, or support a tribe or community allied with the Taliban. The Taliban controls no major urban areas. While the Islamic State swept through Iraq in 2014, seizing key cities like Mosul, Fallujah, and Ramadi, the Taliban has done nothing of the sort in Afghanistan. In fact, the number of districts under Taliban control slightly decreased between 2019 and mid-2020.¹¹

After briefly seizing the northern city of Kunduz in September 2015, the Taliban quickly lost control of it within days. In 2017, the Taliban failed to mount a sustained threat against any provincial capital and instead engaged in high-profile attacks in Kabul and other populated areas. Even in Helmand Province, where the Taliban have made advances in rural areas, local commanders have repeatedly failed to seize and hold such cities as Lashkar Gah. In 2018, the Taliban temporarily seized the eastern city of Ghazni, though again failed to hold it. Still, Taliban and other insurgent groups have succeeded in overrunning Afghan checkpoints, destroying military bases, and—at least temporarily—seizing district centers. There are also concerns that cities like Kandahar will face a growing threat as the U.S. withdraws its military forces. As Hayatullah, a street vendor in Kandahar city, remarked in November 2020: “The city condition is bad, people are worried, the fighting is on-going in several directions of the city and the districts are falling,” he said. “We are afraid that Americans leaving will only intensify it.”¹²

B. Local Support: A second set of indicators includes analyzing changes over time in local support since both the government and Taliban need to hold and expand territorial control. The Taliban's ideology may be amenable to some Afghans, such as those living in conservative rural pockets of the south and east. But it is generally too extreme for many Afghans who adhere to a much less conservative form of Islam that permits most modern technology, sports, elections, and some women's rights. The Taliban and its ideology are deeply unpopular, even compared to the current government and its security forces. The number of Afghans with sympathy for the Taliban

¹⁰ I use “control or influence” since neither the government nor insurgents controls populations 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in all areas. In some cases, they rely on allies to coerce or co-opt locals, which is closer to “influencing” a village or city than “controlling” it.

¹¹ “Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019),” p. 11.

¹² Quoted in Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Najim Rahim, and Fatima Faizi, “Americans Troops are Packing Up, Ready or Not,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2020.

has significantly declined over the past decade, according to data from the Asia Foundation.¹³ Most support for the Taliban is concentrated in parts of southern, eastern, and western Afghanistan.

C. Levels of Violence: Violence data is not a particularly useful outcome measure since it does not explain how—if at all—violence translates into control or influence. Indeed, low levels of violence in some areas may indicate Afghan government or Taliban control, while high levels may indicate contested areas where the government and insurgents are fighting to control territory. But since violence impacts the local population, data over time is still useful to track. In 2020, the Taliban have conducted attacks in urban and rural areas across the country, including cities like Kabul, Kunduz, and Kandahar.¹⁴ In addition, Taliban fighters orchestrated attacks against Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police fixed positions, established checkpoints on major highways, and overrun district centers like Yamgan District in Badakhshan Province in March 2020.¹⁵ The Taliban are responsible for most civilian casualties, primarily because of their use of improvised explosive devices.¹⁶

The Afghan war is, at best, a draw today. But further U.S. withdrawals will continue to shift the balance-of-power in favor of the Taliban, its partner militant groups, and state backers such as Pakistan, Russia, and Iran. Afghanistan would likely become a sanctuary for international terrorist groups. In addition, the United States cannot focus solely on counterterrorism. Terrorism and insurgency are deeply intertwined in Afghanistan. The Taliban is an active host for al-Qaeda and other groups, so Taliban battlefield successes in the insurgency undermine the U.S.'s counterterrorism interests.

IV. Implications for the United States

The U.S.'s announcement on November 17, 2020, to cut U.S. forces in Afghanistan by nearly half—from 4,500 to 2,500 troops—was problematic in several ways. First, it did not occur because of successful peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban—but in spite of them. The Taliban has dragged its feet on negotiations in Qatar, which have stalled, and now appears to be rewarded with a declining U.S. footprint. The U.S. military presence should be a function, in part, of conditions on the ground and the outcome of negotiations. Second, the United States did not coordinate in any significant way with its NATO allies, who have served with the United States in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. A frustrated NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, lamented after the U.S. announcement: “The price for leaving too soon or in an uncoordinated way could be very high. Afghanistan risks becoming once again a platform for international terrorists to plan and organize attacks on our homelands. And ISIS could rebuild in Afghanistan the terror caliphate it lost in Syria and Iraq.”¹⁷ Third, the U.S. drawdown impacts its ability to train, advise, and assist Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in the middle of a war—particularly at

¹³ Asia Foundation, *A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2019* (Kabul: Asia Foundation, 2019), pp. 68-70.

¹⁴ On Taliban attacks in Afghan cities and other locations, see the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

¹⁵ *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, June 2020), pp. 18-19.

¹⁶ *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Midyear Report: 1 January-30 June 2020* (Kabul: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2020).

¹⁷ Quoted in Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, “Pentagon Details Plan to Withdraw Troops,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2020.

the Army Corps and Afghan Air Force regional locations. Fourth, a reduced U.S. military footprint impacts U.S. intelligence collection efforts in Afghanistan, especially from the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency. In sum, the impact of the U.S. decision will likely be to continue shifting the battlefield initiative to the Taliban—an extreme Islamic militant group that continues to work with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

A final peace agreement and the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces remain important priorities. The United States has deployed combat forces to Afghanistan for nearly two decades and has pressing interests at home and overseas. But Americans should be aware that peace negotiations will likely be long and difficult. As tempting as it may be to withdraw U.S. forces without a deal, doing so would be a mistake—especially if the Taliban is at fault. A U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan without a peace deal would significantly increase the level of violence in Afghanistan, risk a growing regional war, trigger a humanitarian crisis, allow an extremist Islamic group to overrun Kabul, and raise serious questions among allies about U.S. reliability.

Moving forward, the United States' primary goals should be to build political consensus within Afghanistan, support intra-Afghan peace negotiations with the help of regional and international partners, and bolster Afghan security forces so that they can handle threats with limited outside involvement. To advance these goals, U.S. policymakers should take the following steps.

First, the United States should announce an agreement to provide long-term economic, military, and intelligence assistance to the Afghan government. This step should include financial support and aid to Afghan security agencies. An agreement between the United States and the Afghan government would constitute a hedge against the possibility that the Taliban's pledges are primarily designed to bring about U.S. military withdrawal. A commitment to the Afghan government would reassure its leaders and population that they were not being abandoned. Such an announcement would also be well received by U.S. partners, who have become concerned about the United States' multilateral commitments. A U.S. commitment to provide long-term military aid would also help mitigate against the possibility that the Afghan government and Taliban reach an agreement, the United States withdraws its forces, and then the Taliban reneges on the deal and attempts to overthrow the government.

Second, the United States should shape the structure and other aspects of intra-Afghan negotiations in ways that decrease the possibility of stalled negotiations. Examples include choosing a third-party mediator, agreeing on an approximate timeline and structure for the negotiations, and establishing a "Friends of the Peace Process" forum that includes major donors and neighbors of Afghanistan.

Third, the United States should maintain forces in Afghanistan if Taliban leaders renege on their commitment to a peace deal. The United States should keep several thousand U.S. military forces and CIA personnel in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future if Taliban intransigence is a major cause of collapsed or stalled intra-Afghan negotiations. A U.S. presence would be important as long as there are serious threats to U.S. national security, such as the presence of international terrorist groups. The United States should also be prepared to temporarily halt the withdrawal of forces if the implementation of a deal breaks down.

Fourth, the United States should develop credible threats to punish the Taliban from reneging on its commitment to a peace deal. A weakness of some past negotiated settlements has been the lack of a credible guarantee to punish parties that repudiate their pledges. If the Taliban reneges on its commitments to support a peace deal, the United States should reimpose sanctions against the Taliban and its members; ramp up the targeting of Taliban leaders in Afghanistan and possibly in Pakistan; and enlist Pakistan to pressure Taliban leaders who undermine the peace process, including by possibly banishing Taliban leaders (and their families) from Pakistan who have undermined the prospects for peace. Research on the end of civil wars and insurgencies indicates that the absence of a credible threat of punishment leaves settlements vulnerable either to outright cheating or to tactical cease-fires in which one or all parties simply use the respite to rearm.

Fifth, the United States should provide incentives to both sides to reach a final settlement. The United States and its partners should offer concrete benefits to achieving a peace deal. For example, the United States should consider an amnesty to most Taliban leaders and fighters—except those involved in major human rights abuses—who lay down their arms, provide long-term assistance to the government after a peace deal, and help integrate the Taliban and Afghan army and police forces into a new national security structure. The United States and its partners should also make a portion of international assistance contingent on the parties reaching a final settlement.

The United States should have learned a lesson from Iraq in 2011 when it pulled forces out, even though the war continued and terrorist groups remained in Iraq and neighboring countries, such as Syria. By 2014, U.S. forces were back in Iraq to fight an Islamic State that eventually controlled territory the size of England, attracting foreign fighters from across the globe. The United States is now inching closer to making the same mistake in Afghanistan.