Afghanistan: Too Much Is Enough

By Anthony H. Cordesman

Working Draft: April 13, 2021
Please provide comments to acordesman@gmail.com
Afghanistan: Too Much Is Enough

Anthony H. Cordesman

There is no good way that the U.S. can withdraw from Afghanistan. It cannot claim victory, and it cannot wait indefinitely for some cosmetic form of peace. It is all too clear from the reports to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the Lead Inspector General (LIG) for Operation Freedom Sentinel that it will take years to bring Afghan security forces to the point where they can stand on their own if peace fails.

It is equally clear from these official sources as well as from media reporting and reporting by Transparency International and the World Bank that the Taliban is still slowly winning and that the Afghan central government is hopelessly divided, corrupt, and ineffective. The IMF, World Bank, commercial risk analysts, and the media make it all too clear that the Afghan economy is in a state of collapse and that Afghanistan cannot survive without massive outside aid – aid that can only buy time, not development or Afghan forces that can stand on their own.

Pressing on with open-ended peace and security assistance efforts now offers little more than a forlorn hope, especially after President Ghani’s unwillingness to even try to move forward on a negotiable form of peace. Peace negotiations under his terms are little more than a way of extending Afghanistan’s misery and the fighting. Media report after media report makes it clear that he clearly has no mandate from either Afghanistan’s other leaders or its public.

It will be a tragedy, but the time has come for the strategic equivalent of a mercy killing. This does not mean immediately abandoning Afghanistan. Even a forlorn hope should be given for some kind of change, but it is time for an ultimatum and a ruthless, uncompromising withdrawal if Afghanistan’s leaders do not fully respond. The Biden Administration has inherited a nearly hopeless mess from both Afghan leaders and President Trump.

This does not mean abandoning Afghanistan if Afghan leaders do respond. It does mean setting clear conditions for any form of continued U.S. effort and a clear deadline for the compliance by the Afghan central government. It should be made clear that the U.S. will offer major financial aid if the central government and the Taliban can reach an agreement and implement it, and that the U.S. will delay its full withdrawal or support a UN peace keeping mission.

The Biden Administration should also recognize, however, that this is almost certainly going to be a “forlorn hope” in the classic sense of the term. At this point, it is unclear that any arrangement where Ghani stays in even titular power can work, and it is equally unclear if there is any group of Afghan leaders that can act as an alternative. It is unclear that even massive U.S. aid would persuade the Taliban to compromise or that the U.S. can credibly restore an effective military assistance and combat support effort that will do more than prolong the agony. There already have been too many lies and too much “spin.”

This means actually withdrawing if there is no credible Afghan response. It means cutting off both military and civil aid as well – unless this can buy some compromises in the Taliban’s extremism and real benefits for key humanitarian concerns like education and the rights of women. It means planning to help those Afghans that actively aided U.S. forces leave Afghanistan and developing plans to accept legitimate Afghan refugees – which should conspicuously not include a single Afghan political or military leader tied to Afghanistan’s failures and corruption.
The Biden Administration will have to take some blame for such actions, in spite of the fact that previous Administrations will actually bear over 95% of the responsibility. It seems highly likely, however, that the initial wave of partisan criticism will diminish to a ripple relatively quickly once the lessons of U.S. mistakes from 2001 onwards receive full public attention. More than that, as was the case with Vietnam, it will probably immediately become apparent that the world has already seen the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan as a failure and that it will see the reallocation of U.S. strategic resources to far more productive areas as a rise in American influence and strength.

More broadly, a U.S. withdrawal will also have major strategic benefits. At worst, Afghanistan is only one of many potential sources of threat to U.S. and allied interests. Accordingly, the first benefit is to shift the burden of Afghanistan and the focus of any extremist activity outside its borders to China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran. The second is to free U.S. resources to deal with the many centers of instability and extremism outside the region, and ones where U.S. resources can be far more effective.

The third will be the example (and hopefully lesson) set by such U.S. withdrawal. The U.S. needs to make it clear that U.S. aid and support will now be ruthlessly conditional on the competence and integrity with which it is used. Here, both advocates of U.S. military action and humanitarian action need to realize a grim lesson about strategic triage. The key issue in allocating U.S. aid is never how many people or nations need help. It is always what nations and how many people will actually benefit from U.S. help. Conditionality is the core tool in providing U.S. support, and it is the key way of sending the message that failed and corrupt governments will be treated accordingly.