Real-World Options for Afghanistan

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It is time for the U.S. to face its real-world options in Afghanistan and to do so without false optimism or “spin.” The U.S. has not lost the war in a military situation, but it now faces a situation where there is little value in continuing it and equally little chance of creating a meaningful peace settlement or a stable peace.

The U.S. and its allies have already chosen that the most important option is protecting its withdrawal, and Afghanistan risks becoming a new case in point. They have sent in additional hundred troops to protect withdrawing units, and the U.S. has deployed additional combat aircraft to the region as well.

The key questions that affect the future, however, are not protecting the withdrawal, but what role – if any – the U.S. will play in:

- Dealing with the fact that the fighting between the Taliban and Afghan central government continues, and Taliban forces continue to make gains in many areas against the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).
- Tying final withdrawal to the success of the peace process in actually reaching some form of peace settlement.
- Ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a center for Al Qaeda, Taliban, or other extremist attacks on the U.S. and potentially its allies.
- Guaranteeing a peace agreement if the Taliban violates it or resumes the conflict.
- Continuing to train and protect the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) after the new deadline for U.S. and allied withdrawal on September 11, 2021.

So far, the answers fall short of any practical action. U.S. withdrawals now border on being unconditional and are occurring regardless of the ongoing fighting between the central government and the Taliban, the failure to define any real-world options for a viable peace agreement, and even whether a peace agreement is reached and put into force. Official reassurances lack credibility, but so do most outside proposals for any practical effort to create a real peace.

The strategic arguments for remaining in Afghanistan to either enforce a peace or support the central government and the ANDSF also ignore the scale of the military and civil failures of the Afghan government and forces. They exaggerate the threat that Afghanistan will become a center of extremist violence as well as the real options for some continuing some form of internal or external support of the ANDSF that will actually work.

The reason for continuing U.S. military support is also generally defined as a terrorist or extremist threat to the U.S., but it is far from clear that a post-withdrawal Afghanistan will be a great threat to the U.S. or major U.S. strategic interest than the threat of extremism in many other fragile or failed states. Most such movements focus on taking control of largely Islamic countries, and no clear policy has been stated as to what U.S. response – if any – would occur if an extremist or Taliban attack took place on a neighboring state.

There has, however, been no official definition of what kind of post-withdrawal Taliban support of extremism, terrorism, or action outside Afghanistan would trigger a U.S. or NATO response.
The current policy seems to be a plan for U.S. use of precision air strikes, but this has not been stated officially, and some U.S. official statements are ambiguous.

There has been no practical official discussion of what kind of peace settlement would or would not be acceptable to the U.S., of any key U.S. terms for such a settlement, of what will happen if September 11th arrives without a settlement, of meaningful U.S. security guarantees for a peace settlement, or of any post-withdrawal U.S. action to protect the Afghan central government if no formal peace agreement is reached or violated.

Some U.S. policy makers and senior military officers do advocate a continuing U.S. military role. Such proposals include the use of U.S. airpower and IS&R forces from outside Afghanistan and/or the option of retaining a small cadre of U.S. train and assist forces—sometimes arbitrarily defined as 4,000 personnel. Others include providing contractors to support the ANDSF in country, and still others involved creating some kind of rapid U.S. intervention capability. So far, however, major withdrawals continue, and the credibility of such options diminishes with each passing week.

The end result has failed to tie current U.S. and allied withdrawals to any clear goals or degree of conditionality. They have failed to set any clear goals for a peace process, an actual peace, or its enforcement. They have failed to guarantee a peace agreement if one is reached, and they have focused on what may well be an unrealistic threat that the key post withdrawal threat is an extremist attack on the U.S. or the West.

**The Best Taliban Pre-Withdrawal Strategy Is the Present War of Attrition**

The reality is that the current “peace process” is actually an ongoing civil war between the Taliban and the Afghan central government, and one that favors the Taliban. U.S. policy fails to honestly address the fact that the February 2021 peace agreement has not produced a ceasefire and that the Taliban has already made significant military gains while the U.S. and its allies reduce their forces and provide steadily less support.

As a result, the main impact of the February agreement has been to minimize Taliban attacks on U.S. and NATO forces as well as to focus them on fighting a carefully managed war of attrition against the Afghan central government and ANDSF forces that cannot stand on their own.

So far, the Taliban has good reasons to let the peace process and ongoing withdrawals proceed and then to exploit the post-withdrawal situation as best it can. It can make its safest gains by keeping up a constant pace of lower level attacks that weaken the ANDSF and Ghani government by using such attacks and political pressure to divide the government and opposition power brokers. It can also use these attacks to keep up pressure on the U.S. to withdraw by being careful not to threaten the U.S. or its allies at levels that might lead it to halt its withdrawals.

There are no guarantees that the Taliban will continue to show such restraint, and it might seek to win some cosmetic battles against the U.S. before final U.S. and NATO withdrawal. The Taliban may also miscalculate and seek to win control of major population centers by force or react with extreme force based on an ideological basis. Moreover, no one can predict the future level of cohesion, restraint, or effectiveness that the Taliban will show.

So far, however, the Taliban has kept its attacks on U.S. and allied forces at a minimum, and it seems uncertain that the U.S. will see more than sporadic clashes between the U.S. and the Taliban.
before a full U.S. withdrawal by September 11, 2021. Here, the timing of an accelerating U.S. withdrawal may present major problems.

The Taliban may only limit its attacks on the central government and the ANDSF until so many U.S. and NATO forces and facilities have left that any return of outside forces seems improbable even if the Taliban steps up its attacks and seizes some provincial capitals. This is a level of reductions which current U.S. plans indicate may be reached by mid-July, although some reports indicate that NATO allies have asked the U.S. to slow its pace to give them more time and security in making their withdrawals.

Some of the Taliban’s actions since March 2021 also indicate that they may seek such major victories or even try to create some kind of formal Taliban government in parts of the country. The Taliban launched serious attacks on the government and the ANDSF in the South in Lashkar Gah in Helmand province in April. It seized two districts in Baghlan in the North in May, and then the Dahla Dam in Southern Kandahar.1

More broadly, the Taliban has steadily isolated smaller army and police posts, and it has made gains in Zabul, Ghazni, Logar, and Farah – and done so with steadily dropping U.S. response in the form of air strikes and varying limited response from the Afghan Air Force.2 The Taliban also has made steady gains in other rural areas, in its efforts to isolate cities and population centers, in its attacks on officials and symbols like girls’ schools, and in its targeted attacks in the capitol in Kabul.3

An estimate by Bill Roggio of the Long War Journal in early May estimated that the Taliban already controlled 78 out Afghanistan’s 407 districts, and it is actively fighting the central government in another 193.4 It also has steadily expanded its targeted attacks in Kabul and increased its checkpoints and control over most of Afghanistan’s major roads. It may now go on to try to capture some provincial and district capitals to increase the pressure on the Afghan government and the ANDSF.

The Taliban is making these steady gains without having to actually capture and hold major towns and cities and without having to deal with the costs of protecting and serving their populations. The Taliban also has no clear reason to force a crisis with the U.S. and its NATO and other allies before they have reduced their forces to levels which make it extremely difficult or impossible to return.

This scarcely, however, creates any incentive for the Taliban to accept a real ceasefire, much less a real peace. The Taliban has good reasons to continue fighting its present war of attrition against the Ghani government and the ANDSF. It can steadily weaken the central government and the ANDSF without conducting major attacks on U.S. and NATO allied forces or on their bases in ways that might alter their pace of withdrawal. Moreover, the Taliban continues sporadic attacks on U.S. and NATO forces in ways that demonstrate its power, and then it simply accepts any limited losses to U.S. airstrikes.

It is also far from clear that more intense U.S. air attacks on Taliban forces will have any decisive effects. The loss of limited numbers of Taliban fighters as well as some key Taliban leaders and facilities will not offset the pace of their victories in the countryside or enable the central government to survive.

The Taliban has also probably already reached the point where keeping some form of limited U.S. train and assist presence in Afghanistan and limited outside U.S. use of airpower would have little
effect. The Taliban can probably ride out limited U.S. training and support of the ANDSF from outside Afghanistan, as well as ride out any limited effort to continue the U.S. presence in Afghanistan – particularly if the remaining U.S. effort is the near-token 4,000 personnel referred to in many proposals and one that does not involve direct forward support of key Afghan units in combat.

As is discussed shortly, the latest reports to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), and the Lead Inspector General of the Department of Defense (LIG) all seem to make it clear that outside training, small U.S. and allied cadres, and bombing cannot ensure the survival of a forces that cannot service and maintain its key combat equipment and combat aircraft, and effectively support even its more elite combat units in the field.

**Exploiting the Fact that a Withdrawal Process Is Not a Peace Process**

The Taliban has also shown it can exploit the peace process – or lack of it. In fact, the peace process seems to have become a largely political struggle to avoid any peace agreement that could strengthen the central government relative to the Taliban as well as a following struggle over whether – and how – a peace agreement is actually implemented.

So far, the only “peace” in the peace process consists largely of the U.S. and NATO being able to leave without the Taliban launching serious attacks on their departing forces or affecting the speed with which the U.S. and its allies are now closing bases, removing or destroying their equipment, and reducing support capabilities outside Afghanistan.

The Taliban has a growing advantage in such a political and diplomatic struggle, and it would even maintain an advantage if it did eventually seem to agree to a shell of the same peace that it never really took seriously. The Ghani government remains divided, weak, and ineffective. The U.S. is not maintaining the military leverage needed to force the Taliban to accept a peace settlement it does not want. It is steadily losing any military options that could coerce the Taliban into signing an effective agreement – and actually implement it once U.S. and NATO forces are withdrawn. Moreover, it is far from clear that any credible amount of U.S. forces can now save the current central government from its own military and civil failures.

Moreover, the U.S. has so far only offered the vaguest security guarantees and promises of future military or civil aid. No senior U.S. official has explicitly stated that the U.S. would even try to intervene to deal with major violations of a peace agreement if there ever is one and it is specific enough to matter; if the Afghan central government began to lose decisively once U.S. and allied forces are actually gone; if the Taliban launched a coup and took over; or if the country fragments into Taliban, central government, ethnic/power broker, or new extremist factions – the violent or de facto equivalent of federalism.

There may be more merit in the U.S. offering enough civil aid to help push for the Taliban into making some compromises on a peace settlement. However, it is far from clear that the U.S. can make such offers politically or that they would do much more than lead the Taliban into making cosmetic changes in accepting an agreement or in its post withdrawal behavior.

**Dealing with a Hollow Peace**

Moreover, there is all too great of a prospect that U.S. and allied withdrawal will take place without a peace settlement or on the basis that it is more than a reassuring pile of scrap paper. Even if any such agreement seems to be more serious and does try to define what actually comes next in
meaningful terms, this also does not mean it will be implemented with real guarantees and some kind of enforcement effort.

Past peacemaking efforts tend to have many of the same grimly repetitive lessons as actual warfighting. History warns that many seemingly serious peace efforts failed or ended in transforming the nature and process of conflict. All too often, actual implementation of a peace agreement ended in becoming war by other means.

The resulting power struggles change the lead political and military figures, the nature of key factions on each side, and the nature of a country’s government. They open up a whole new series of political battles, power struggles, and kinds of fighting. This seems particularly likely to be the case in Afghanistan, where U.S. withdrawal is not only proceeding without a peace, but without any real peace process.

In fact, Afghanistan may already have become a case in point. The U.S. passed its original deadline for total withdrawal by May 1, 2021 without any substantive meeting taking place between the Afghan central government and the Taliban. No one has defined what a peace will be or for what new form of national, provincial, district, and urban political system and government could emerge.

There has been vague talk about new Afghan elections, but largely in ways that have exposed the deep divisions in the Afghan central government without even involving the Taliban. In short, there is zero proven progress for the entire year of the original peace process, and the new deadline for U.S. withdrawal is now September 11, 2021 – less than five months away.

The Ghani government clearly remains deeply divided at the top and in the ways that it approaches peace negotiations and the Taliban. The central government does not control many rural areas and district governments; is extremely corrupt; is highly dysfunctional; and depends almost completely on outside aid from the U.S. to function, subsidize its civil role, and fund the ANDSF.

There has been no planning for a new justice system and police force to define the legal status and nature of an “Islamic” state or to plan how the economy will function. There is no evidence of a plan for how the security forces will be reshaped and potentially include the Taliban or on any other practical aspect of a working peace.

**How Long Can Afghan Forces Survive Without the Past Levels of U.S. and NATO Aid**

The uncertain ability of the ANDSF to survive U.S. and NATO withdrawal is disguised by favorable official spin about success in the ANDSF force development process, reporting on meaningless data on independent operations,” and the classification of data that might reveal the full extent of Afghan weaknesses.\(^5\)

This makes it difficult to estimate how bad things will get for the ANDSF as the last remnants of U.S. and allied forces disappear. The main official U.S. exception has been SIGAR. And, the SIGAR Quarterly Report to Congress for the first quarter of 2021 provides some key indications that many critical aspects of the Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan Air Force (AAF), and Afghan National Police (ANP) forces have left them all too weak and that key force improvements are well behind schedule.
Some warning signals did emerge in the SIGAR report, however, that came all too close to warning about the problems in the ANDSF before their collapse, and they were assessments made before the September 11th deadline was imposed and major reduction of contractors were accelerated:

DOD contractors provide maintenance services for ANDSF ground vehicles and train ANDSF technicians under the 2018 National Maintenance Strategy-Ground Vehicle Support (NMS-GVS) contract. The contractors also develop ANA and ANP maintenance capacity through a work-share plan intended to have the ANA and ANP performing 90% and 65%, respectively, of their maintenance by the end of the five-year contract in 2023. CSTC-A reported this quarter that although the ANDSF dramatically improved its share of the work, it is still falling well below benchmarks for its share of the maintenance work orders they—rather than contractors—are supposed to perform. According to CSTC-A, the ANA filled on average just over 46% of maintenance work orders from January through March 2021, which more than doubled the average from last quarter (20%). Their goal for the period, however, was to complete 80% of maintenance work orders. Similarly, the ANP filled an average of more than 26% of maintenance work orders during this same time period, more than double last quarter’s 12%, but also well below its 35% goal.

… most AAF airframes had nowhere near the number of qualified personnel (instructor pilots, copilots, mission system operators, etc.) needed to man the aircrew positions each airframe requires. Only the C-130 had more than half of its aircrew positions filled (four of seven) with the required number of qualified personnel. The AC-208 fared worst with only two of seven positions filled with the required number of qualified personnel (p. 78).

… the AAF is limited in the amount of aircrew it can train due to the number of personnel in its training pipeline, a lack of qualified pilot candidates, and COVID-19 impacts throughout Afghanistan. The latter issue has caused a “bubble” of pilots who received aircraft training but have not been able to complete mission training. Additionally, they said that trained pilots have not had sufficient time to gain experience to qualify them as instructor and evaluator pilots (p. 79).

… For its ongoing Police in Conflict report, SIGAR found that after two decades of international support, Afghanistan currently has a small number of highly trained specialized police forces that have emerged under the tutelage of international advisors. At the same time, the Afghan government still lacks a police force that can legitimately enforce the rule of law on a day-to-day basis. The Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP), responsible for this civilian policing mission, are largely illiterate and poorly trained. Further, many AUP are considered abusive, predatory, and corrupt (p. 82).

It is equally important to note just how large the U.S. and NATO force levels supporting the ANDSF still were during the last quarter of 2020 that is covered in the SIGAR report and before President Biden set a new September deadline for U.S. withdrawals.

While U.S. military spokespersons implied the ANDSF only had the support of some 2,500 U.S. troops in April 2021, SIGAR reported that the full level of U.S. and NATO support was close to ten times higher. It reported that there were “approximately 2,500 U.S. service members and 7,092 non-U.S. Coalition forces,” and noted that,7

As of April 2021, there are 16,832 DOD contractor personnel supporting agency operations in Afghanistan. This includes 6,147 U.S. citizens, 6,399 third-country nationals, and 4,286 Afghan nationals. These contractors continue to provide an array of functions, including logistics and maintenance support and training for ANDSF ground vehicles and aircraft, security, base support, and transportation services… Although General McKenzie testified to Congress on April 20 that all U.S. defense contractors will also depart Afghanistan as part of the withdrawal, it is unclear who, if anyone, will replace them or perform their work after their withdrawal…

The same SIGAR Quarterly Report to Congress provided indicators that the ANDSF might not survive any post U.S. withdrawal fighting against the Taliban if the Taliban attempted a military takeover. The SIGAR Report warned that,8

The complete withdrawal of U.S. troops and U.S. defense contractors from Afghanistan will test whether the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) can sustain themselves and defend the Afghan
government without direct U.S. and Coalition military support. Defense officials expressed concern about these issues throughout the quarter.

…On February 20, 2021, General Kenneth F. McKenzie, in a meeting with Pakistani officials, warned that an early U.S. pullout could risk the collapse of the Afghan government… On March 13, the commander of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan, General Austin Scott Miller, warned that a U.S. withdrawal would leave the Afghan security forces without vital support, especially for its air force, which relies on contractors to maintain its planes and helicopters. “When you start talking about removing our presence… certain things like air, air support, and maintenance of that air support become more and more problematic,” he added.

…As recently as February 20, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said that an end to the U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan must be linked to a reduction in Taliban attacks. “The violence must decrease now,” he said, stressing that the level of violence was too high in Afghanistan and that more progress was needed in the Afghan peace negotiations…

While violence is typically low in Afghanistan in the first quarter of the calendar year (January–March), enemy-initiated attacks from January 1 to March 31, 2021, increased nearly 37% compared to the same quarter last year… Both NATO Resolute Support (RS) and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) also recorded strikingly high civilian casualties during January–March 2021, compared to the same period last year…

Removing U.S. troops from Afghanistan also impacts the United States’ primary mission there—to ensure that terrorists in the country cannot threaten the U.S. homeland. In a hearing on April 14, CIA Director William Burns told lawmakers, “Our ability to keep that threat in Afghanistan in check … has benefitted greatly from the presence of U.S. and Coalition militaries on the ground.” He added, “When the time comes for the U.S. military to with-draw, the U.S. government’s ability to collect and act on threats will diminish. … That is simply a fact.” Burns said the CIA will “retain a suite of capabilities” in Afghanistan once troops leave, with some already in place and others to be developed, to help provide threat warnings to U.S. officials.

…The Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, issued April 9, 2021, states that prospects for a peace deal between the Afghan government and the Taliban “will remain low during the next year,” and that “the Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the Coalition withdraws support.” The assessment also concludes that the ANDSF “continues to face setbacks on the battlefield, and the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory.”

Dealing with Terrorist and Extremist Threat

The U.S. may not face any serious post-withdrawal Afghan support of extremist threats to the United States, even if the Taliban does take over. It is all too true that the Taliban continues to talk to the remnants of Al Qaeda, as do elements of the Pakistani military. It is unclear, however, that these remnants of Al Qaeda focus on attacks on the U.S., and the Taliban does seem to oppose ISIS. It is also unclear that the Taliban will host other extremist movements that focus on attacking the U.S. or states outside the region.

It is unclear that any key element of the Taliban has an interest in such attacks on the United States. Even Al Qaeda now focuses largely on objectives inside Islamic countries, and it is unclear that some other major extremist force will emerge in Afghanistan that do not focus on regional threats and on taking over vulnerable, largely Islamic states.

At the same time, one needs to be careful about the assumption that the U.S. can defeat any such threats by launching precision air and missile strikes against extremist targets. It is unclear that the forces in Afghanistan involved in any small covert attacks on the U.S. will be easy to target and cripple if they do emerge. The Taliban is unlikely to tolerate major training camps and facilities for extremist forces, and any such strikes will present major problems for the U.S. if the extremist
threat consists of scattered small facilities and small expert cadres that shelter among the Afghan population.

A continuing U.S. ability to target and kill some key Taliban leaders and fighters also does not mean that the risk of such strikes will deter future Taliban willingness to let small, extremist strike groups conduct well-focused, well-planned strikes on U.S. or allied territory, especially if such groups in Afghanistan sponsor attacks on the U.S. or its strategic partner by strike units or cadres based in other countries.

At the same time, it does seem more likely that the Taliban, and/or any independent extremist groups, will focus largely on Iran, Pakistan, Russia, China, and the other “-Stans.” In any case, it is far from clear that keeping small amounts of U.S. military and intelligence cadres in Afghanistan – or U.S. air forces outside Afghanistan – will be able to offer decisive help.

**The Civil Realities that Undermine the Afghan Central Government and Change the Future Nature of the Struggle**

The civil realities in Afghanistan present another – and equally critical – set of problems. In many ways, the Afghan central government is as much a threat to a successful peace as the Taliban. Civil issues are less important when a conflict has a clear winner that either maintains or inherits an existing system that is workable on a national basis. However, this is not the case in Afghanistan.

Worse, media reporting – and reporting by the IMF; World Bank; UN; Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR); and the Lead Inspector Generals (LIG) of DoD, State, and USAID – make it all too clear that the failures of the current central government do pose a major threat to the Afghan people.

Such reports show that the central government is extremely corrupt and has failed to bring employment and decent living conditions. They also show that many Afghans do fear the Taliban’s extreme conservatism and interpretation of Islam. Others do not, and Afghans in rural areas turn to the Taliban for justice – and they see no difference between paying off the Taliban and paying off the central government.⁹

The central government has issued many civil reform plans since 2001, but development has failed, and the government gets some 60% of its civil and security revenues from outside aid. More broadly, Afghanistan is effectively bankrupt as a result of Covid-19, failed past reform efforts, war, and major population increases in spite of decades of war.

Afghanistan has seen its percentage of the population below the poverty level of income increase from a low of around 39% to well over 65%.¹⁰ The CIA World Factbook estimates that 13.2 million Afghans have severe food insecurity, 8.5 million of which live in a humanitarian crisis, and 4.3 million of which live under emergency conditions.

Afghanistan is also a nation under acute population pressure and has massive unemployment. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the population has grown from 8.3 million in 1950 to 22.6 million in 2001, to 37.5 million in 2021. It projects it will be 45.5 million in 2030 and 62.3 million in 2050.¹¹

Any real peace will have to cope with an extremely young population (41% is 14 years of age or younger) that is desperate for real jobs and where youth unemployment was well over 18% even before Covid-19. Afghanistan has no major sector of economic growth other than drug exports,
and it now is 26% urbanized with the rate rising at 3.3% a year. Even before the Covid-19 crisis, imports total some ten times the value of exports.

The World Bank *Overview* for Afghanistan cannot as of yet take full account of the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, but it summarized the state of the Afghan economy on March 30, 2021 as follows:12

Afghanistan’s economy is shaped by fragility and aid dependence. The private sector is extremely narrow, with employment concentrated in low-productivity agriculture (44 percent of the total workforce works in agriculture and 60 percent of households derive some income from agriculture). Private sector development and diversification is constrained by insecurity, political instability, weak institutions, inadequate infrastructure, widespread corruption, and a difficult business environment (Afghanistan was ranked 173rd of 190 countries in the 2020 Doing Business Survey). Weak institutions and property rights constrain financial inclusion and access to finance, with credit to the private sector equal to only three percent of GDP. Weak competitiveness drives a structural trade deficit, equal to around 30 percent of GDP, financed almost entirely from grant inflows. Grants continue to finance around 75 percent of public spending. Security expenditures (national security and police) are high at around 28 percent of GDP in 2019, compared to the low-income country average of around three percent of GDP, driving total public spending of around 57 percent of GDP. The illicit economy accounts for a significant share of production, exports, and employment, and includes opium production, smuggling, and illegal mining.

… A range of factors have since slowed economic and social progress, with the economy growing by only 2.5 percent per annum between 2015-2020, and gains against development indicators slowing or – in some cases – reversing. Aid flows decreased from around 100 percent of GDP in 2009 to 42.9 percent of GDP in 2020 (with the number of international troops declining from more than 130,000 in 2011, to around 15,000 by end-2014, to around 10,000 today). Declining grants led to a protracted contraction of the services sector, with an associated deterioration in employment and incomes. The security situation deteriorated, with the Taliban insurgency gaining control over increased territory and intensifying attacks on military and civilian targets, with civilian casualties totaling more than 10,000 per year between 2014 and 2019. The impacts of declining grants and worsening security were exacerbated by political instability following the disputed outcome of the 2014 presidential elections. The formation of the National Unity Government under an extra-constitutional power-sharing agreement led to administrative disruptions and slowed reform progress.

… At the Geneva conference held in November 2020, donors renewed their commitment to aid support to Afghanistan for 2021-2024. However, several major donors provided only single-year pledges, with future support made conditional upon the government achieving accelerated progress in efforts to combat corruption, reduce poverty, and advance ongoing peace talks. Aid support is now expected to decline by around 20 percent from the previous pledging period (US$15.2 billion over 2016-2020) but could fall even lower if conditions are not met or if major donors further reduce commitment levels amid domestic fiscal pressures. Afghanistan now faces daunting challenges in sustaining recent development gains in the face of mounting political uncertainties, declining international grant support, and continued insecurity. Policy options are narrowed by the weak implementation capacity of government agencies, reflecting governance constraints, and tightly constrained macroeconomic policy options in the context of narrowing fiscal space and weak monetary transmission mechanisms.

The tragedy is that the Taliban may well impose approaches to social and economic development that are even worse that today’s divided and corrupt central government. Once again, however, it is also all too clear that no amount of U.S. military aid will prevent massive civil unrest and possible conflict in the face of these challenges.

Moreover, Afghanistan now faces the challenge of coping with security and stability in the face of ongoing cuts in aid and the near certainty of far more serious cuts in aid if some effective government and peace do not emerge. It may be possible to bomb a country back to the stone age, but it is clearly not possible to bomb one into development, unity, and stability.
**The Bottom Line**

Put bluntly, it is probably too late to salvage either the civil or military situation in Afghanistan. It almost certainly is too late to salvage it with limited in-country U.S. forces, outside U.S. airpower and intelligence assets, and with no real peace agreement or functional peace process. Limited military measures are not the answer, and neither is simply reinforcing the past processes of failure. Tragic as it may be, withdrawal may not solve anything and may well make conditions worse for millions of Afghans, but reinforcing failure is not a meaningful strategy.

2 For a summary review as of May 9, 2021, see Susannah George and Aziz Tassal, “Taliban exploits the coalition’s exit,” Washington Post, May 9, 2021.

3 Targeted killings range from police and local officials at the village level and relatives of ANDSF personnel in rural areas; to killings of officials, journalists, and important figures in Kabul, and to the bombing of a girls’ school outside Kabul on May 9, 2021, that killed 30 girls. See Susannah George and Sharif Hassan, “At least 30 are killed in bomb outside Kabul school for girls,” Washington Post, May 9, 2021.


5 See, SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, April 30, 2021, 56-58, which noted that “United States Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) continued to classify or otherwise restrict from public release the following types of data due to Afghan government classification guidelines or other restrictions (mostly since October 2017):

- Enemy-initiated attacks and effective enemy-initiated attacks
- ANDSF casualties, by force element and total unit-level Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) authorized and assigned strength
- Detailed ANDSF performance assessments
- Detailed Afghan security ministry performance assessments
- Some Special Mission Wing (SMW) information, including the number of pilots and aircrew, aircraft inventory, the operational readiness (and associated benchmarks) of SMW airframes, and the cost of the SMW’s aircraft maintenance being paid by the United States or other countries.

It also notes that the Department has classified all data on Taliban vs. government control of the countryside and cities, although Congressional action will enforce such reporting in June…. USFOR-A continued to classify detailed ANDSF attrition information this quarter because the Afghan government classifies it (69)…USFOR-A continues to classify all ANDSF casualty data because the Afghan government classifies it. (70)… USFOR-A continued to classify some ministry performance assessment information this quarter. (71)…


