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Consequences of a Precipitous U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

On December 19, 2018, President Donald Trump directed then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis to reduce by half the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. The President gave this instruction at the same time that he ordered a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria. Given that the President has, in the past, expressed a preference for ending the Afghan mission altogether, it is prudent to consider the likely effects of an early and complete or near-complete departure unrelated to a negotiated peace settlement. We judge that the following consequences are likely:

- Other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces also leave.
- U.S. and other international civilian presence are sharply reduced.
- External economic and security assistance diminish.
- The government in Kabul begins to lose influence and legitimacy.
- Power moves from the center to the periphery.
- Responsibility for security increasingly devolves to regional militias and local warlords.

- Regional states back rival claimants to national power.
- The Taliban loses interest in negotiating peace with the United States.
- The Taliban extends its control over territory and population but encounters resistance.
- Afghanistan descends into a wider civil war.
- Civilian deaths rise sharply, and refugee flows increase.
- Extremist groups, including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, gain additional scope to organize, recruit, and initiate terrorist attacks against U.S. regional and homeland targets.

That there is no military solution to the war in Afghanistan has become a commonplace. But this is, at best, only half true. Winning may not be an available option, but losing certainly is. A precipitous departure, no matter how rationalized, will mean choosing to lose. The result would be a blow to American credibility, the weakening of deterrence and the value of U.S. reassurance elsewhere, an increased terrorist threat emanating from the Afghan region, and the distinct possibility of a necessary return there under worse conditions.

A Reversal in U.S. Strategy

In an August 21, 2017, address to the nation, President Trump announced a new strategy for Afghanistan, the core principle of which was “a shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions” (White House, 2017). He stressed that “conditions on the ground—not arbitrary timetables—will guide our strategy from now on.

America’s enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out.” America’s objectives were “obliterating [the Islamic State], crushing al-Qaeda, preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan, and stopping mass terror attacks against America before they emerge.”

Sixteen months later, Trump ordered a full U.S. military withdrawal from Syria and directed that half of the American military personnel in Afghanistan also be withdrawn. In explaining his decision, the President asserted that the military objective in Syria, defeating the Islamic State, had been achieved (Trump, 2018). He has made no such claim for Afghanistan.

Given the manner in which the decision to cut troops in Afghanistan was taken, as well as the President’s expressed skepticism about the Afghan mission, this move must be treated as a possible harbinger of further cuts to come. This will remain the case even if the President is persuaded to modify or abandon altogether this decision. U.S. allies and enemies alike have been put on notice that the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan is tenuous and could be terminated abruptly and without consultation.

How long U.S. forces should stay in Afghanistan and under what conditions they should leave has been debated inside and outside the U.S. government for years, and there remains a wide range of opinion. In contrast, there is substantial consensus among most terrorism and Afghan experts on the likely consequences of a precipitous U.S. withdrawal. These effects were considered when President Barack Obama initially set a timetable for full withdrawal in 2014, and these same considerations ultimately led him to alter that decision. We judge that an early U.S. military departure unrelated to a negotiated peace settlement would likely lead to the following developments.

Other NATO Forces Will Also Leave

As of January 2019, there are, in addition to U.S. forces, some 7,500 troops from 38 other NATO members and partners in Afghanistan. Americans lead the training and assistance mission in support of Afghan forces in the south and east of the country, Germans do the same in the north, Italians in the west, and Turks in and around Kabul. Germany and the United Kingdom have committed to significant force increases in 2019, although these are now less likely to occur. Most NATO and partner governments have committed troops to Afghanistan in solidarity with the United States. Their smaller contingents are also dependent on the United States for some functions—notably, emergency extrication. NATO force levels will accordingly follow U.S. numbers downward, eventually leaving vast areas of the country and elements of the Afghan army and police without expert training, advice, and other forms of support.

U.S. and Other International Civilian Presence Will Be Sharply Reduced

The withdrawal of U.S. and other NATO forces will be accompanied by—and likely preceded by—the departure of foreign diplomats, aid agency officers, and other civilians. Although the U.S. and other NATO military personnel do not directly provide security for the international civilian presence, such civilians rely on NATO for threat intelligence; for potential evacuation support; and for underpinning a level of stability in the country that keeps risk to civilian personnel at a tolerable level. A steep decline in the U.S. and NATO military presence will degrade these linkages and inevitably require U.S. civilian agencies, as well as other countries' civilian agencies and

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nongovernmental organizations, to reevaluate the tolerability of security risks.

The U.S. embassy in Afghanistan has more than 1,000 U.S. employees, and the challenges of evacuating such a large number of personnel and the complexity of scaling down an enormous physical facility will likely require the State Department to keep its own drawdown planning and execution ahead of the curve of military withdrawal. Among the civilian personnel to be drawn down will be those of the U.S. intelligence community, whose capacity to track the activities of Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other violent extremist groups with ambitions beyond Afghanistan will be degraded. Visible moves by U.S. civilian agencies toward sharp drawdown will accelerate among Afghans a crisis of confidence in the durability of their government and security forces. Many of Afghanistan's most educated and capable citizens will also leave.

External Economic and Security Assistance Will Diminish

The withdrawal of U.S. and other NATO forces and civilian officials will eventually be followed by reductions in economic and security assistance. First, the rationale for such assistance by the United States in particular is based on U.S. security interests in Afghanistan. A sharp or complete drawdown of the U.S. military presence will signify a political judgment that U.S. security interests no longer require a significant commitment to the country's stability; this judgment will likely apply across the board to the application of all U.S. resources. Other donors will be unlikely to step in to replace U.S. spending. Second, providing substantial assistance requires sufficient in-theater personnel to manage delivery and provide oversight. Drawing down military and civilian personnel will limit accountability for the use of such funds, increase corrupt diversions, and result in legislatively required cutbacks.

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The Government in Kabul Will Begin to Lose Influence and Legitimacy

In recent years, about 50 percent of the Afghan state budget and 90 percent of its military and police costs have been borne by international donors (Byrd and Farahi, 2018; Global Security, 2018). Reductions in such funding will have a direct impact on the capacity of the government and the combat capabilities of its armed forces. Governance structures in Afghanistan consist of overlapping layers of formal, centralized de jure authorities; regional power brokers with mixed official and informal authority; and varied de facto mechanisms for organizing and regulating social behavior at the local level. The principal advantage that the central authorities possess has been access to external support, both military and economic. As a result, the central government has been able to deliver a higher level of public services (e.g., education, health and security) than would otherwise be possible. The withdrawal of U.S. and other sources of support will deprive the central government of this capacity and disrupt the equilibrium of central versus regional power that has settled into place since the U.S. intervention.

Power Will Move from the Center to the Periphery

In addition to the decline of the central government, the Afghan economy—and, with it, indigenous sources of government revenue—will also decline. In Kabul, the technocrats will staff the ministries in much the same way as they have for the past decade, but policies, military orders, and money will likely reach a far smaller part of the country than they have in the past.

Responsibility for Security Increasingly Will Devolve to Regional Militias and Local Warlords

In Pashtun-majority areas, weakening of the center will strengthen the expectation of Taliban ascendance. In predominantly non-Pashtun areas, this will lead regional power brokers to transfer fighters from the Afghan army into regional militias, establish control over police and other institutions, and divert local sources of government revenue for their own use. Many of the leaders of the old Northern Alliance remain in positions of influence, and some already control local security forces. Such dispersion of power will grow as the central government loses the capacity to fully pay or equip its armed forces. There will be a race to control strategically and economically important parts of the country, including the Shomali Plain, where Bagram Air Base is located; Sheberghan in the north; the Lapis Lazuli corridor; key nodes of the electric grid; and all of the major border crossings. The Taliban's success in recruiting non-Pashtuns into its ranks will lead to intra-ethnic conflicts over resources, and, if Taliban-backed elements prevail, those resources will cease to contribute to a legitimate national economy. Instead, major transit routes, minerals, and other valuable resources will be further co-opted into the Taliban's shadow economy.

Regional States Will Back Rival Claimants to National Power

Afghanistan is a poor, weak country surrounded by richer, more powerful neighbors, several of which have a long history of taking sides in Afghan civil wars. U.S. relations

with Afghanistan's most-important neighbors are also at their lowest point since 2001. Back then, all of the regional powers supported the American-led intervention and the resultant new Afghan government. Now, most aid to Pakistan has been stopped, Iran and Russia are under mounting American sanctions, and the United States has opened a trade war with China.

Pakistan has long tolerated and facilitated use of its territory by the Taliban. In the event of a precipitous U.S. withdrawal, Pakistan will likely become more open in its backing. Since 2001, Russia and Iran have generally supported the Kabul government but, in recent years, have provided limited aid to the Taliban as a hedge. Russia and Iran, along with India and Uzbekistan, also have a history of support for Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara warlords. These relationships will likely be reinforced as the central government's financial base collapses, its writ weakens, and its cohesion erodes.

The Taliban Will Lose Interest in Negotiating Peace with the United States

The Taliban's main goal in recently energized talks with the United States is a negotiated timetable for a U.S. military withdrawal (Mashal, 2018). American leaders want the Taliban to forswear ties with extremist groups, help deny such groups access to Afghan territory, and become part of a new Afghan political and security architecture that is agreed upon among Afghans. If Taliban leaders receive or come to expect a cost-free U.S. withdrawal, they will have little incentive to bargain with the United States or with the U.S.-backed Afghan government.

Well before the Taliban could threaten the national capital, it is quite possible that a clash would develop among non-Taliban elements for control of the capital.

The Taliban Will Extend Its Control over Territory and Population but Encounter Resistance

The Taliban will consolidate its hold on the rural, Pashtun-dominated south and east; continue its current aggressive push into the non-majority-Pashtun north and west of the country; and begin concerted efforts to take and hold urban areas, particularly provincial capitals. U.S. air support, including American forward air controllers on the ground, has been critical in denying the Taliban control of major population centers. As the Afghan national armed forces lose mobility, firepower, U.S. air support, and cohesion, the population will increasingly look to local commanders and ethnic and tribal ties for protection. The Taliban will look to press its advantage, both in traditional strongholds and in non-Pashtun areas where the Taliban

has invested effort recruiting over the past decade. The growing strength of former president Hamid Karzai and his allies, which may include the Kandahar security apparatus of the recently assassinated Abdul Raziq, could make the southeast and its gateway to Kabul a more contested area than the Taliban anticipates. On the other hand, the splitting of Tajik and Uzbek communities by recent infighting and by the Taliban may mean that the north and west are significantly more contested than in the past. Thus, the future map of political control may not precisely resemble the ethnic map. A Taliban band of control may emerge that is pushed farther west than it has been historically, but that also pushes up through the center of the country with growing pockets in the north. Likewise, there may be a Pashtun resistance to the Taliban in the southeast.

Afghanistan Will Descend into a Wider Civil War

In the aftermath of a precipitous U.S. withdrawal and well before the Taliban could threaten the national capital, it is quite possible that a clash would develop among non-Taliban elements for control of the capital. Between 1992 and 1996, in what became known as the Battle of Kabul, the city was repeatedly besieged, bombarded, and fought over by multiple foreign-backed, heavily armed forces. Much of the city was destroyed by shell fire, rockets, and bombs. In one month alone, 2,000 inhabitants were killed.

As recently as 2014, an electoral dispute occasioned an attempted coup d'état and nearly led to the emergence of two rival claimants to the presidency. One side was Tajik-dominated and the other Pashtun-dominated, and both had access to elements of the army and police. A violent

schism was avoided only after the personal intervention of the U.S. President and Secretary of State, and there were then more than 30,000 American troops in the country.

In the aftermath of the troop withdrawal, Kabul will not be the only city to be contested. In such a multi-sided conflict, the fighting will become more urban than rural, more stand-and-fight than hit-and-run, and more reliant on heavy weaponry likely to cause civilian deaths and major damage to basic infrastructure, much of it financed by the United States.

No matter who ultimately prevails in this wider civil war, the major advances that Afghans have achieved in democracy, press freedom, human rights, women's emancipation, literacy, longevity, and living standards will be rolled back throughout the country.

Civilian Deaths Will Rise Sharply, and Refugee Flows Will Increase

Despite the ongoing war with the Taliban, Afghanistan has not recently experienced significant levels of intercommunal violence and ethnic cleansing. A wider civil war in Afghanistan will see a return to high levels of inter-ethnic violence redolent of the 1979–2002 period. Civilian deaths will spike, and refugee flows will increase significantly. This will, in turn, exacerbate the global refugee crisis.

In 1980, just after the Soviet invasion, the population of Afghanistan was 13 million. More than half this number fled the country during the ensuing anti-Soviet war and ended up mostly in Pakistan and Iran. Today, the population of Afghanistan is three times larger than it was in 1980. Travel is cheaper, so more Afghans are able to afford it. Today's refugees are not stopping in poor

neighboring countries but moving on to more-prosperous lands. Already, Afghans are the second-largest source of refugees worldwide after Syria (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). As the security situation in Afghanistan worsens, these numbers could rise dramatically, further threatening social cohesion and political stability in regions as far as Europe.

Extremist Groups, Including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, Will Gain Additional Scope to Organize, Recruit, and Initiate Terrorist Attacks Against U.S. Regional and Homeland Targets

The Islamic State is active in Afghanistan, and so are several other designated terrorist groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. A widening civil war in Afghanistan will create numerous seams between governed areas into which Al Qaeda and the Islamic State can stream and even gain local control. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford has stated that, “were we not to put the pressure on Al Qaeda, [the Islamic State], and the other groups in the area that we are putting on today, it is our assessment that, in a period of time, their capability would reconstitute, and they have the intent and they, in the future, would have the capability to do what we saw on 9/11” (Dunford, 2018). If the United States loses the capacity to contribute to suppressing these groups within Afghanistan, and if it cannot rely on a trusted indigenous partner, the pressure on terrorist groups will be reduced, allowing them more time, space, and resources to organize far-flung attacks.

How Quickly Could A Collapse Come?

The United States has been talking with the Taliban about a military withdrawal, so far without any Afghan government participation. This has fed Afghan fears of abandonment, now exacerbated by reports of a removal of a significant number of U.S. troops and concerns that the rest may soon follow.

The coalition of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazara that currently governs Afghanistan was put together under U.S. pressure in 2014 in the aftermath of an indecisive election result and under the threat of civil war. It has never fully coalesced and may not survive a new presidential election, now set for July 2019. That election, like the one in 2014, will inevitably experience substantial fraud. Larger sections of the country will be unable to participate because of security conditions and Taliban opposition. The

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losers will have abundant opportunities to claim that the results were rigged. Under the best of circumstances, it will be difficult for the United States and its allies to help guide Afghanistan through this thicket. In the midst of a major U.S. military withdrawal and expectations of a full departure, it could prove impossible.

Why Americans Should Care

“So what?” is one response to this dire scenario. The United States is a big, powerful, and distant country. It survived previous debacles. It left South Vietnam in 1973, Lebanon after the 1983 attack on the Marine Corps barracks, and Somalia after the Blackhawk Down incident in 1994. All of these societies suffered years of trauma thereafter, but the United States went on to win the Cold War and emerge as the world’s sole superpower.

Two other drawdowns proved more consequential for the United States, however: the cessation of aid and all interest in Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. These departures came not in the wake of defeat but after apparent success. The United States had helped Afghan insurgents expel the Soviet Union but then turned away, neither reopening an embassy nor providing economic aid. In Iraq, the United States had finally suppressed the insurgency that arose in reaction to the 2003 invasion. In both cases, these successes did not endure, and the United States felt compelled to return under much worse conditions than those that prevailed at the time of its departure.

The United States reengaged with Afghanistan in 2001 in response to an attack that killed 2,977 Americans in a

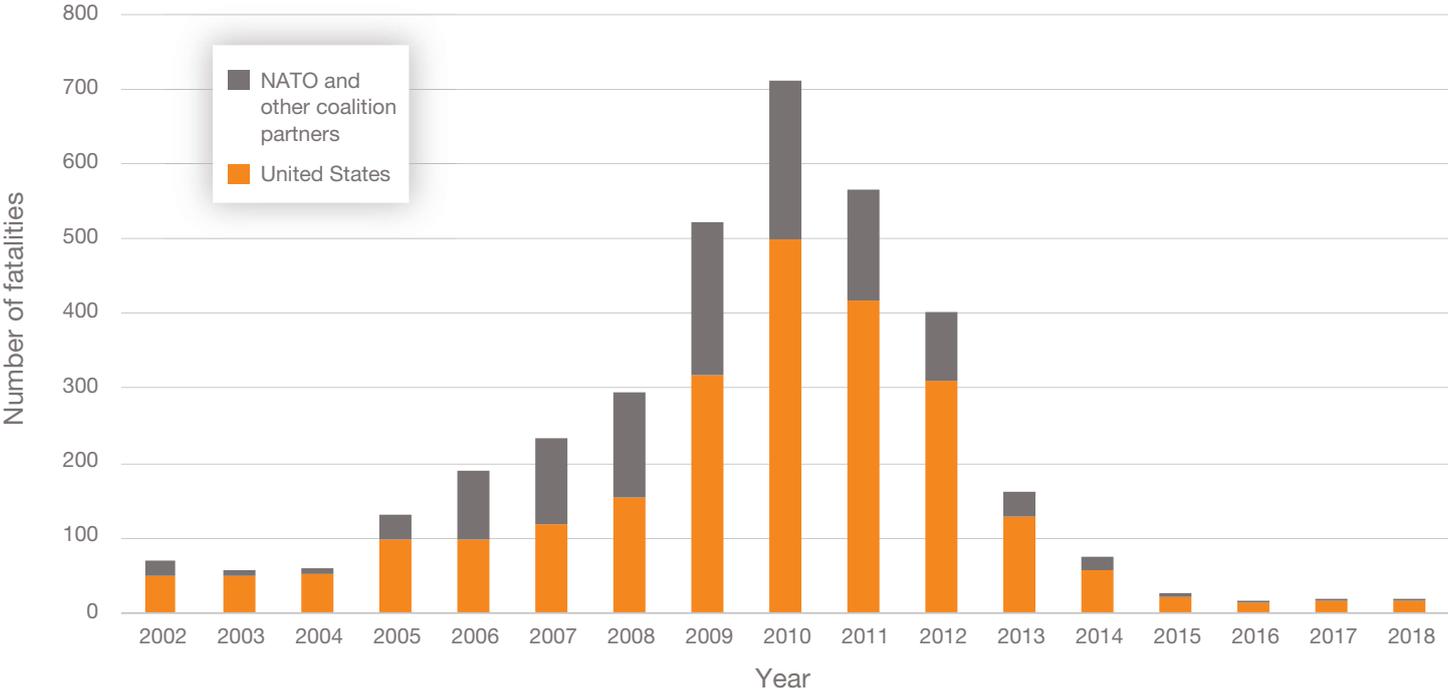
matter of hours, a number that continues to exceed all of the Americans lost in Afghanistan in the subsequent 18 years. Following the withdrawal of U.S. units from ground combat in 2014, casualty rates and overall troop levels have fallen, as have costs, as illustrated in Figures 1, 2, and 3, respectively. But U.S. engagement remains quite expensive, currently amounting to some \$47 billion per year.

Former Defense Secretary Mattis has said that “the United States doesn’t lose wars, it loses interest” (Utley,

2014). Americans have certainly tired of the Afghan war, yet ending U.S. involvement there is not among their top preoccupations. When Trump made the decision to halve the number of U.S. troops, it was not in response to any groundswell of domestic resistance. The costs of staying are significant but bearable.

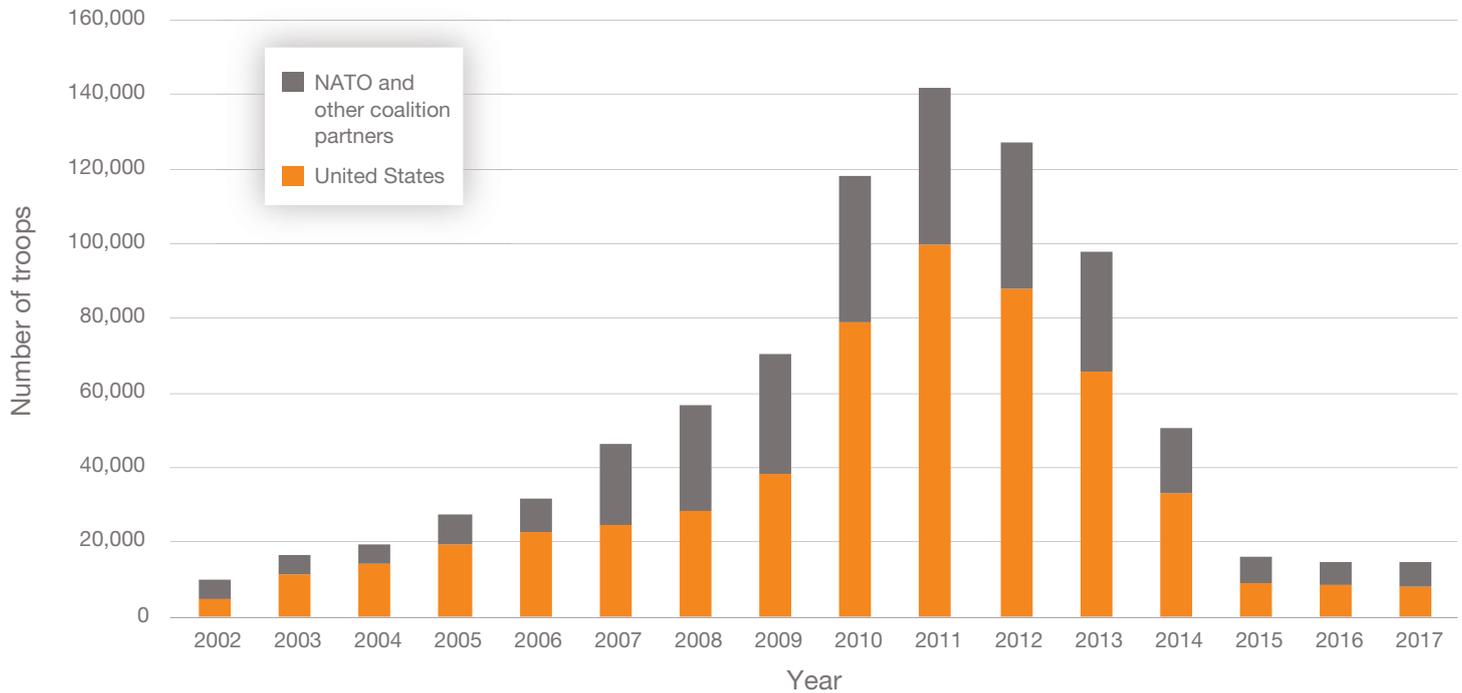
The Communist government in Kabul survived the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 until the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 and the money dried up. The Saigon government

FIGURE 1
U.S. and Partner Troop Fatalities in Afghanistan, 2002–2018



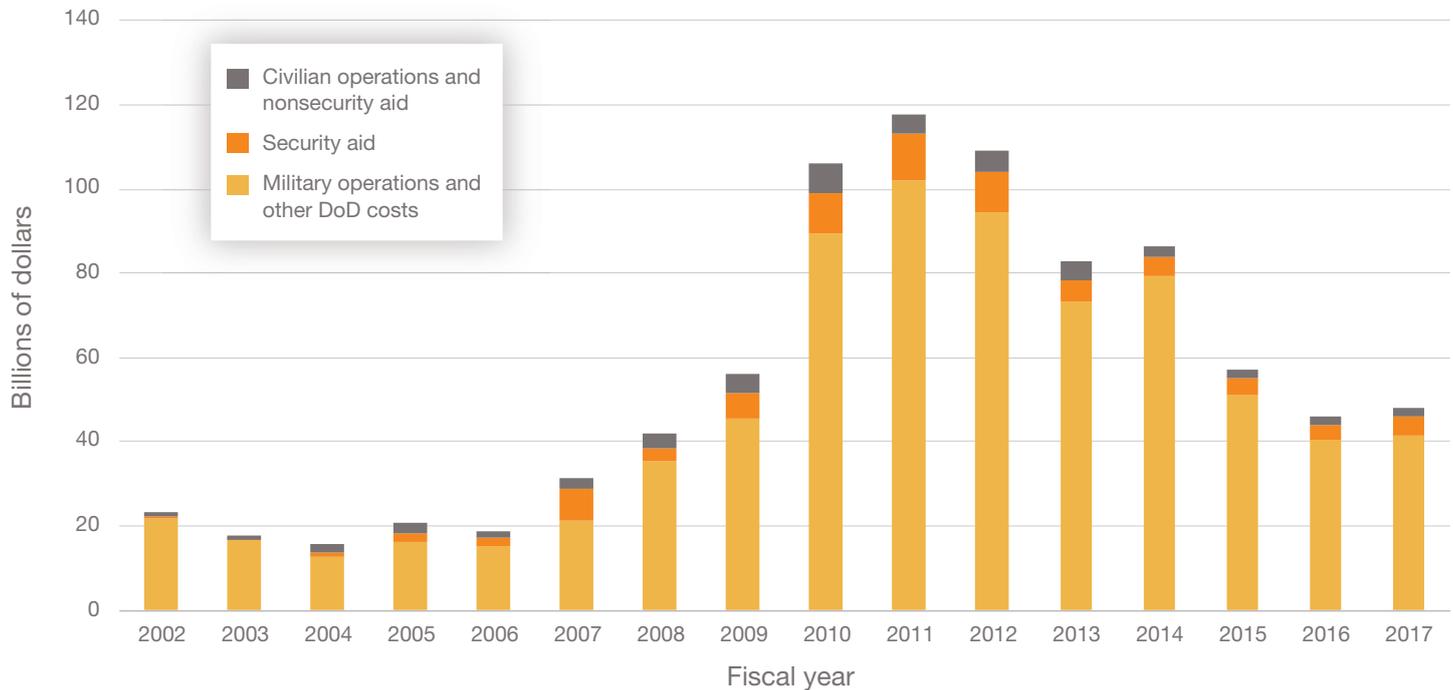
SOURCES: Data for 2001–2014 are from iCasualties, undated-b. Data for 2015–2018 are from iCasualties, undated-a.

FIGURE 2
U.S. and Partner Troop Levels in Afghanistan, 2002–2017



SOURCES: U.S. troop levels for 2002–2007 (March numbers) are from Belasco, 2014, pp. 81–84. U.S. troop levels for 2008–2016 (fiscal year second-quarter March numbers) are from Peters, Schwartz, and Kapp, 2017, pp. 4–5. U.S. troop levels for 2017 are from Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), 2018, p. 4-3. Coalition troop levels for FY 2002–2017 (numbers from March or month nearest March for which data were available) are from Livingston and O’Hanlon, 2017, p. 5.

FIGURE 3
U.S. Spending in Afghanistan, 2002–2017



SOURCES: Civilian operations, nonsecurity aid, and security aid data for 2002–2006 are from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2014, pp. 226–227. Related data for 2007 are from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2018a, pp. 234–235. Related data for 2008–2017 are from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2018b, pp. 202–203. Military operations and other DoD costs for 2002–2007 are from Belasco, 2014, p. 19. Related costs for 2008–2017 are from Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), 2018, p. 4-3.

NOTE: DoD = U.S. Department of Defense.

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survived the American military withdrawal in 1973 until the U.S. Congress cut off funding in 1975. The Baghdad government survived the U.S. withdrawal in 2011 until the Islamic State marched to the city's outer suburbs in 2014. In the aftermath of a precipitous military withdrawal, the decline of central authority in Afghanistan could be quite drawn out, perhaps providing what Henry Kissinger called, apropos of the Vietnam withdrawal, "a decent interval."

But for the reasons cited in this paper, a post-withdrawal collapse might come sooner.

And so might the regret. The enemies that drew the United States back into Afghanistan in 2001 and back into Iraq in 2014 are still present in Afghanistan in 2019.

Conclusion

As noted, it has become a common view that there is no military solution to the war in Afghanistan, but this is, at best, only half true. Winning may not be an available option, but losing certainly is, and a precipitous departure, no matter how rationalized, would mean choosing to lose.

It is ironic that such a choice should be posed just as peace talks have begun to achieve some traction. U.S. officials and Taliban representatives have engaged in publicly acknowledged talks for more than a year. These talks have gained additional impetus with the appointment of a senior and very experienced American envoy. If these efforts are to succeed, Taliban leaders need to be persuaded of two things: first, that U.S. forces will leave if there is a deal and, second, that they will stay if there is not. President Trump's latest move tends to confirm the first while fatally undercutting the second.

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About This Perspective

In December 2018, President Donald Trump directed the Secretary of Defense to reduce the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan by half. In this paper, the authors consider the likely effects of an early and complete or near-complete departure unrelated to a negotiated peace settlement. Among the consequences described are that the government in Kabul will begin to lose influence and legitimacy; the Taliban will lose interest in negotiating peace with the United States; and extremist groups will gain additional scope to organize, recruit, and initiate terrorist attacks. Winning in Afghanistan may not be an available option, but losing certainly is, and a precipitous departure, no matter how rationalized, would mean choosing to lose.

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