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COMMENTARY



Strategizing to Exit Afghanistan: From Risk

Avoidance to Risk Management

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The United States faces a “[shit sandwich](#)” of choices in Afghanistan. It can live up to its commitment in the [U.S.-Taliban deal](#) and depart on May 1, even though it’s unprepared for the [likely consequences](#) of Afghan political fragmentation and intensified, escalated civil war. Or it can stay, hoping to bolster the Afghan government to [break](#) Taliban resolve or [compel](#) it to submit to a genuine negotiated peace compromise. The downside to this approach is that it’s effectively a version of the same, costly strategy the United States has been pursuing with almost no success in Afghanistan for over two decades. The debate over staying or leaving tends to fixate on the Afghan political process. Instead, it should focus on developing a coherent risk-management strategy.

Regardless of which political route President Joe Biden chooses, violence will [likely increase](#) after May 1 and a stable Afghan political equilibrium will remain a dim and doubtful prospect. As the United States gives negotiated resolution another try, it would do well to invest in a Plan B portfolio of diplomatic and military tools that sustainably manage its interests amidst likely political instability and resumed conflict.

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The Biden administration should develop an exit strategy in Afghanistan, even as it pursues peace. Creating a coherent set of diplomatic and military measures would depart from the previous administration's approach, which involved a [race for the exits without a strategy](#). Perhaps most importantly, it should embrace an offshore counter-terrorism posture to cost-effectively manage the risk of Afghanistan's unstable future. While this posture would have costs and risks of its own, it is a better and more economical counter-terrorism strategy than continuing to deploy young Americans to a perpetually embattled Afghanistan. In addition, such visible preparations would also make America's threat to leave more credible. This approach might compel Kabul to negotiate earnestly in the coming months and incentivize the Taliban to delay its spring offensive.

Stay, Go, or Finite Extension?

Dissatisfied with the choices between [indefinite extensions](#) that would involve [raising](#) troop levels, or a speedy withdrawal by May 1 that would [likely result](#) in the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and escalated civil war, the Biden administration understandably sought a third way. The "[Hail Mary](#)," peace plan proposed by Secretary of State Antony Blinken embraces a multilateral approach and jump-starts the peace process by establishing the terms of a power-sharing arrangement, ceasefire, and an Afghan transitional government. Leaving aside the merits of the strategy – which some [praise](#) as "ambitious" and "canny" while others warn it is a dangerous [shortcut](#) – what does seem clearer is that this approach likely requires the United States to [postpone troop withdrawals](#) from Afghanistan beyond the May 1 deadline.

Before it proposed the "moonshot" plan, the administration was already considering some sort of one-time, finite [extension](#), something like the six-to-eight-month extension that several [seasoned analysts](#) and [former officials](#) have endorsed. Many different [congressional and international](#) allies have also lobbied for a delayed troop withdrawal. Recent [reporting](#) suggests that this limited extension is a likely prospect.

Such an extension may also be necessary because the diplomatic legwork and [complex logistics](#) of a military drawdown are virtually impossible to complete by May 1. The fact that there are more U.S. troops in Afghanistan than Washington originally disclosed (there are roughly 3,500 troops deployed, rather than 2,500) – as well as around [6,000 U.S. contractors](#) serving in Afghanistan – further complicates the process. Even as the Taliban [warned](#) of a "reaction" should U.S. troops remain past the May 1 deadline, there are hints that the [group](#), and its key backers in [Pakistan](#), may acquiesce to a limited extension. This would prevent a resurgence of attacks on U.S. troops, though it may require some uncomfortable [concessions](#).

Advocates of a withdrawal extension hope that more time *might* allow for progress on political negotiations, violence levels, and Taliban commitments to visibly break from terrorist organizations. The United States can still condition sanctions relief, [prisoner](#) releases, diplomatic recognition and visas, access to international financial systems, and other economic aid to broker an agreement. However, given the positions staked out by [Kabul](#) and the [Taliban](#), most experts contend that the probability of negotiated success remains [extremely low](#).

Even as the Biden administration uses this extension for a bold political gambit, it should also use this time to hedge its bets by building a [Plan B](#) that doesn't involve just "leaving its forces in place" indefinitely. Specifically, it would be wise to set up the architecture of post-withdrawal risk management. These diplomatic and military tools would afford the United States some ability to shape events and protect its limited interests in the region in the most likely event that Afghan politics lapses back into violent disorder. Even if the process collapses, allied and regional coordination, counter-terrorism planning, and issuance of credible threats could still position the administration to protect minimal U.S. interests in a post-withdrawal Afghanistan.

Diplomatic Coordination

The United States could first leverage its diplomatic efforts for dual purposes – to rejuvenate the peace process but also to prepare for its shortcomings. This would involve jointly strategizing drawdowns with NATO allies; contingency planning with key regional partners like India, Pakistan, and Gulf allies; and even coordinating with competitors like China, Russia, and Iran to shape Afghanistan's external environment.

Logistics will be [key](#) to any extension. At present, NATO forces – which amount to [three times](#) the U.S. troop presence – are [unprepared](#) to withdraw on a May 1 deadline. A unilateral U.S. withdrawal would leave NATO allies vulnerable to Taliban attacks. NATO's secretary general has [warned](#) that an "uncoordinated" departure could do serious damage to the transatlantic alliance, even as the United States seeks to help NATO [retool](#) against Russia and start to [reorient](#) the alliance for a bigger strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, alongside Afghan negotiations, the United States should use this time to privately synchronize assessments and [jointly plan](#) with NATO forces under what timelines and thresholds to withdraw together.

Washington could also [develop](#) information-sharing mechanisms and a coordinated strategy with all countries in the region, including Russia and China, for post-withdrawal regional stability. These efforts would seek to mitigate [fears](#) of long-term U.S. basing and build on shared interests, like a sustainable peace process, a coalition government within which the Taliban is "[constrained](#)," and

the economic and political development of Afghanistan. The diplomatic agenda could seek to [strengthen](#) the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and potentially even the [Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#) to assume greater responsibility for facilitating a modicum of political cohesion and coordinating international assistance and development.

While it's important to work with NATO partners in Afghanistan to withdraw safely from the country, concerns that "losing" to the Taliban will hurt U.S. credibility are overwrought. Allies like Japan, for instance, will not lose sleep over the supposed hit to U.S. [credibility](#). They would be only too happy to see China, Russia, and Iran having to assume greater responsibility for security liabilities deep within continental Eurasia while the United States is freed to devote more energy to the Indo-Pacific.

"[Regionaliz\[ing\]](#)" U.S. strategy was ostensibly one plank of the Donald Trump administration's 2017 approach, but experts inside and [outside](#) government argue that this was never truly taken forward as new animosities emerged against nearly all of the regional parties. The new proposal by Blinken appears to embrace this idea of coordinating diplomatic efforts, particularly with [Beijing](#). The effort should aim to develop resilient regional engagements that deliver consistent messages to all Afghan parties and shape the country's external environment even if the peace process collapses, violence escalates, or the Taliban takes over. For instance, a Taliban leadership that has grown accustomed to foreign engagements could face severe coordinated travel restrictions constraining its political and economic relations. As others have [noted](#), such diplomacy would naturally beget mechanisms for intelligence sharing and contingency planning with certain partners in the event that civil war breaks out again or transnational terrorist organizations regroup.

Plan Through and Around Afghan Forces

The Department of Defense could make use of an extension to prepare for an actual exit from Afghanistan by planning options to work through and around America's Afghan partners. U.S. security assistance could focus on readying the current Afghan security forces as best as possible for what may be an imminent fight. At the same time, U.S. security agencies could lay the groundwork for a suite of offshore or over-the-horizon counter-terrorism options that are viable regardless of the constellation of political forces in Afghanistan and America's relationship to them. As with places like Somalia, Yemen, and Mindanao, the United States will have to devise a cost-effective approach to cope with a [violent political order](#).

Though the Afghan security forces have [fared poorly](#) against the Taliban, they could continue to be a useful partner in combatting and [containing](#) particular terrorist organizations like the Islamic State. Conditioning future military aid on Afghan security force implementation of feasible but rapid [reforms](#) could optimize its structure for greater efficacy and sustainability, and to operate

without U.S.-provided enabler support like intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and medevac. While the Afghan government may resist and the probability of success is still very low, the rare cases of [successful military reform](#) have occurred only when a government, facing intrusive and conditional assistance, stares into the abyss of defeat as South Korea did in the 1950s.

If some semblance of an Afghan security force is expected to endure, the United States could make preparations for a long-term [remote advising capacity](#), as some [veteran analysts](#) have argued. U.S. and NATO forces have gained valuable experience doing this during the [pandemic](#), so it is plausible that it can be scaled up and conducted by troops based out of theater. Although there are limitations compared to in-person advising, this allows the United States to square the circle of providing training, advising, and assistance to Afghan forces if they want it post-withdrawal.

Counter-Terrorism After Withdrawal

Regardless of whether Afghan security forces perform effectively, a final step would be the preparation of a range of [counter-terrorism options](#) that are not dependent on a permanent U.S. military presence on Afghan soil. This would require planning around offshore counter-terrorism capabilities against any resurgent terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland or interests. Relying on offshore capabilities requires the Biden administration to work through three problems – intelligence, geography, and selectivity.

[Critics](#) worry that the withdrawal of U.S. troops will limit the quality of intelligence necessary for effective counter-terrorism, but this is a surmountable problem. As Austin Long [observed](#) over a decade ago, “The United States gains actionable intelligence against targets in even very dangerous areas in which it has essentially no ground forces.” He cites a number of examples including Somalia, Iraq, and Pakistan, while more contemporary examples might be found in Yemen and the Horn of Africa based on close collaboration with local partners.

A decade later, the U.S. military’s [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance system](#) is capable of conducting target acquisition and long-range strikes from [distant U.S. bases](#) using manned or unmanned platforms. There are many new tools that can be employed to aid his capacity, like advanced but cheap ground sensors for [persistent surveillance](#) and [long-range stealth drones](#) capable of operating in contested environments.

If the United States has been able to cultivate human [intelligence assets](#) in a highly securitized environment like Iran to get targeting information on an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander, it seems highly likely it can find willing informants on terrorist organizations in a porous and divided environment in Afghanistan. [Clandestine operations](#), including working with [proxy forces](#) or

supporting [local resistance](#) or the [Taliban](#) on certain counter-terror missions, could also be planned. While renewed Afghan civil war would undoubtedly complicate the intelligence picture, it might also create a more fluid environment that opens opportunities for [defection and collaboration](#).

The geography problem comes down to the question of how to conduct counter-terrorism strikes from greater distance outside Afghanistan. Technically, airstrikes do not need to be run out of Afghan territory and can be conducted offshore from [carrier strike groups](#) or even from U.S. bases in the [Persian Gulf](#).

Distance does increase the time-to-target problem, which may reduce sortie rates, increase missed opportunities, enhance uncertainty and civilian casualties, and generate greater overall risk. This problem could be mitigated or even resolved if the United States seeks out regional counter-terrorism [basing arrangements](#) as it has in the past with neighbors like Pakistan, Uzbekistan, or even new partners like India. These countries could potentially facilitate arrangements for intelligence gathering or hosting over-the-horizon rapid-reaction U.S. military capabilities that could be deployed in an emergency, as two senior Biden administration officials once [proposed](#). This of course would have to be accompanied by new political agreements that come with familiar headaches and policy constraints in other domains that the United States would rather avoid, but the point is that they are plausible, likely safer, and more economical than keeping forces in Afghanistan.

The problem of selectivity requires Washington to make choices about risk and to prioritize counter-terrorism objectives. The government should decide if the country's goal is disrupting specific plots against U.S. interests or suppressing entire organizations like [al-Qaeda](#) or the Islamic State from ever reconstituting. The former would be less demanding but requires accepting some risk. The latter requires continuous but costly U.S. military pressure. Moreover, it would likely result in moving towards a never-ending pursuit of individuals or groups with highly localized and [material interests](#) that affiliate with or are denounced by rivals as transnational organizations, a [common feature](#) of civil wars.

It is ultimately in America's national interest to design a cost-efficient offshore counter-terrorism plan that creatively sources intelligence, leverages existing over-the-horizon platforms, and narrows the objective to disrupting and punishing plots rather than wholesale groups. Alongside this, the United States could also use this time to [communicate](#) to the Taliban its responsibility if it harbors organizations that plot against the U.S. homeland and clarify U.S. deterrent threats to hold at risk that which the Taliban most values.

Finally, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan might cause jihadists to divert their attention from the United States to their “near enemies.” This might force some of the regional neighbors that have been free-riding or [exploiting](#) America’s presence in Afghanistan to recognize that counter-terrorism is a public good, not just a U.S. concern. It may also force them to reckon with the contradictions of their policies [harboring](#) or [indirectly supporting](#) terrorism in the region while remaining [vulnerable](#) to it. [In other words](#), “the U.S. should stop solving security problems for those states that are eager to create problems for us. And if getting out of Afghanistan creates a few headaches for them, so much the better.”

The Best of Bad Options to Manage Risk

A limited troop withdrawal extension to give political resolution one last effort in Afghanistan is understandable. The United States has invested a tremendous amount of [blood](#), [treasure](#), and time in Afghanistan; key NATO allies are deployed alongside U.S. troops; and the domestic political cost of a perceived hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan could be high. Nevertheless, one should maintain no illusions about fundamental breakthroughs in Afghan capabilities, the Taliban’s worldview, or a perpetual U.S. presence. The extension time could be well spent working out the logistics of withdrawal with allies, truly regionalizing responsibility for Afghanistan whether political processes succeed or fail, and readying counter-terrorism options, through Afghan security forces and also independently via operations offshore. Lastly, the White House needs to level with American politicians and citizens about the non-zero but manageable risk that this would involve.

A visible construction of such a Plan B could yield several additional benefits. These would include securing Taliban agreement to an extension (or at least limiting the scale of their reaction), compelling Kabul to make the concessions necessary for a significant political breakthrough, and equipping the United States with contingency plans to actually exit after six to eight months rather than reprise another grueling internal policy review.

Proponents of indefinite extension as a [reasonably priced](#) counter-terrorism “insurance policy” misestimate the true cost. The insurance rates appear low at present due to the negotiated agreement with the Taliban, but after May 1 the Taliban will [escalate](#) its offensive and resume targeting U.S. and NATO troops, so costs will spike again. Resumed Taliban targeting will not only claim more U.S. lives, but also drive troop increases for force protection, inevitably [expand](#) an indefinite counter-terrorism mission to endless counter-insurgency, and the insurance policy’s annual costs can easily return to [\\$40 billion](#) or more. This would occur as the Department of Defense sounds the [alarm](#) on military threats in East Asia and faces a [uphill battle](#) to find an annual \$5 billion for the [Pacific Deterrence Initiative](#). As one longtime analyst and adviser [put it](#), “spending billions in Afghanistan is a luxury, a high-end insurance policy against an exaggerated risk.”

Ultimately, the U.S. strategic and political community should use this extension time to ready diplomatic and military tools, and come to terms with the fact that the United States is actively moving out of the business of conflict resolution and into the [uncomfortable](#) realm of risk management.

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