



The Afghanistan Withdrawal: Military and Defense Implications

August 17, 2021

After a rapid Taliban campaign to capture cities and territories formerly controlled by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), on August 15, 2021, the Taliban took Kabul and the President of GIROA, Ashraf Ghani, fled the country.

Information regarding the situation on the ground in Afghanistan and U.S. troop numbers is fluid and should be treated with caution. This Insight, which may be updated as circumstances warrant, is intended to assist Congress as it considers the military and defense implications of the withdrawal while events unfold.

Current Military Footprint and Mission

[Operation Allies Refuge](#) (OAR) was initiated on July 17, 2021, to support relocation flights for Afghan nationals and their families eligible for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs). On August 12, 2021, in light of the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken [informed Ghani](#) the United States would begin reducing its civilian footprint in Kabul, and would accelerate Special Immigration Visa (SIV) flights previously undertaken as part of [OAR](#). The rapid collapse of GIROA and subsequent Taliban takeover of Kabul has, to many observers, underscored that plans to evacuate U.S. personnel and Afghan partners needed to be accelerated.

In support of OAR and U.S. withdrawal operations, the Department of Defense (DOD) [has announced that](#) at least the following actions will, or have been, taken:

- Three infantry battalions—two Marine Corps, one U.S. Army—would deploy to Hamid Karzai International Airport.
- [A joint U.S. Army/Air Force support element of around 1,000 personnel](#) would be sent to Qatar, and possibly to Afghanistan (or to other areas where the Afghans will be processed), to facilitate the processing of SIV applicants.
- Two battalions of the 82nd Airborne Division would be deployed to Afghanistan. It was [previously announced that](#) one of these battalions would be sent to [Kuwait](#) as a quick reaction force. [The deployment of a second battalion](#) was announced on August 16, 2021.

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DOD officials have further noted:

- As of August 17, 2021, [approximately 4,000 troops](#) had arrived in Kabul as part of the surge of support for OAR and withdrawal operations.
- Between [650 and 1,000 U.S. troops were already on the ground](#) conducting withdrawal operations.
- As in all cases, U.S. service members have the right to self-defense if attacked.
- DOD still plans to complete the ongoing troop drawdown in Afghanistan by the end of August 2021.

Questions and Considerations

The rapid collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Force (ANDSF), as well as GIRoA itself, has [challenged](#) some of the central premises of post-September 11, 2001, national security policies and raised questions about local and regional Afghan security dynamics that are currently being debated by scholars and practitioners and that Congress may explore in its own deliberations. These include the following:

What were U.S. military options?

The Trump Administration concluded a withdrawal deal with the Taliban in February 2020, stipulating that U.S. forces would withdraw from Afghanistan by May 31, 2021, in return for some counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban. The Biden Administration chose to delay the withdrawal date to August 31, 2021. Some observers contend that the Biden Administration [could have chosen to ignore the agreement and retained a small](#) footprint in the country comprising several thousand troops in order to facilitate a better peace agreement. According to this view, the costs of retaining such a force would have been minimal compared with the security risks associated with Afghanistan's collapse. By contrast, President Biden contended [that retaining such a presence would have been unfeasible](#); the small number of troops would not have been sufficient to deter Taliban forces and a [reescalation of forces and capabilities in Afghanistan](#) would ultimately have been required. Still others contend that even assuming a minimal footprint could have been feasible, doing so was not worth [risking further U.S. resources and lives](#).

What might this mean for security cooperation efforts?

[A central aspect of the U.S. and coalition campaign in Afghanistan](#) was training and equipping a sustainable ANDSF. Yet some observers, looking to [long-standing deficiencies in some components of the ANDSF](#), might [question the efficacy of U.S. efforts to build the security capacity of allies and partners](#) writ large. According to this logic, recent events in Afghanistan could suggest to some that such capacity-building efforts are strategically problematic and that the U.S. should exercise caution when trying to build foreign militaries. Others might counter that the situation in Afghanistan was unique, [particularly as such efforts were being conducted during wartime](#), and that there were [myriad other factors leading to the collapse](#)—including the withdrawal of U.S. support—that are not always present in other security cooperation endeavors.

What was the U.S. exit strategy?

There are at least two separate but related aspects to questions regarding the U.S. exit strategy. At a strategic level, some observers contend that the collapse of GIRoA and the ANDSF was [ultimately inevitable](#), given that over time the [U.S. had built an Afghan security apparatus](#)

largely dependent upon U.S. forces and capabilities, and overseen by unitary political structures that were inappropriate in an Afghan context alongside endemic corruption. Others contend that the U.S. never fully factored effective war termination into its Afghanistan campaign strategies and force designs, resulting in a military effort that did not enable a satisfactory conclusion to the war. At an operational level, some observers question the robustness of the plan to withdraw U.S. troops and key Afghan partners from Afghanistan. Congress may scrutinize whether, and how, military campaign planning could have contained these significant strategic and operational flaws.

What new threats might emerge as a result of this withdrawal?

The initial purpose of the war in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, was ostensibly to depose the Taliban and ensure that Al Qaeda could never again mount an attack against the United States or its allies. Almost 20 years later, the Taliban control more of Afghanistan than they did prior to the U.S. intervention. Some express concern that U.S.-provided ANDSF equipment has fallen into Taliban hands and that thousands of Afghan government prisoners—some of whom may be affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State—have been released. Some observers may also question the extent to which the Taliban’s victory might energize jihadist movements in other theaters.

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