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## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IN AFGHANISTAN? IMPLICATIONS OF INSTABILITY ON BROADER REGIONAL SECURITY

### INTRODUCTION

In April 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden announced that the U.S. would withdraw all of its remaining military forces from Afghanistan. Shortly thereafter, the conversation shifted to how the U.S. would conduct counterterrorism operations against jihadist groups that would likely regenerate in Afghanistan without a U.S. military presence on the ground<sup>1</sup>. Then in late August, in a rapid series of events, the Taliban took over the country, with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) melting away<sup>2</sup>. The U.S. and its allies then frantically began evacuating their citizens, and during a chaotic and haphazardly executed withdrawal, ISIS-K launched a suicide attack that killed 13 American servicemembers and more than 160 Afghan civilians. Now, with no U.S. troops on the ground, concerns are growing that the U.S. will struggle to collect and analyse intelligence that will present an accurate picture of the security situation on the ground in Afghanistan.

The United States spent 20 years fighting in Afghanistan, spilling blood and treasure, and is now forced to look on as new threats emerge, old threats regenerate, and Washington's adversaries swoop in, attempting to curry

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<sup>1</sup> A. Mir, C. P. Clarke, *Biden's Expensive New Problem in Afghanistan*, „Politico”, 15 April 2021 r., [www.politico.com](http://www.politico.com).

<sup>2</sup> S. George, *How Afghanistan's security forces lost the war*, „The Washington Post”, 25 September 2021 r., [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

favour with new clients. President Biden has repeatedly spoke about the need to ‘end endless wars’ and move the U.S. away from counterterrorism and toward a posture that more adequately prepares the U.S. for the great power competition. Following two decades of focusing on violent non-state actors like Al-Qaida, ISIS, and their respective affiliates and franchise groups around the world, Western countries are once again grappling with the challenge of nation-states and near-peer competitors. This essay will sketch out intelligence shortfalls and their potential implications, including an assessment of the terrorist landscape.

## INTELLIGENCE SHORTFALLS

The U.S. intelligence community assesses that both Al-Qaida and ISIS are still focused on striking the U.S. homeland. According to the 2021 Annual Threat Assessment released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), “ISIS and al-Qa‘ida remain the greatest Sunni terrorist threats to US interests overseas; they also seek to conduct attacks inside the United States, although sustained US and allied [counterterrorism] pressure has broadly degraded their capability to do so”<sup>3</sup>. William Burns, director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), acknowledged these challenges head on, suggested that the U.S. withdrawal will lead directly to a degraded ability to collect, analyse, and act on intelligence<sup>4</sup>.

Lacking a troop presence to enable intelligence collection and analysis will mean that the United States will continue to be surprised. Without troops on the ground and a willing partner like the U.S. once had with the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS), human intelligence networks will atrophy. Counterterrorism Pursuit Team (CTPT) commando units, which were tasked in part with capturing militants to be interrogated, are no longer a viable asset. Without a military and diplomatic presence, spies and clandestine operators will have no cover and will likely be forced to primarily recruit human sources while operating outside of Afghanistan. By default, the U.S. will need to rely more on signals intelligence and

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<sup>3</sup> 2021 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 13 April 2021, [www.dni.gov](http://www.dni.gov).

<sup>4</sup> P. Zengerle, J. Landay, *CIA chief highlights loss of intelligence once U.S. troops leave Afghanistan*, Reuters, 14 April 2021 r., [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

electronic surveillance from the National Security Agency<sup>5</sup>. With more Afghans using mobile phones, this remains a valuable intelligence-gathering method. Moreover, as the assassination of Qassem Soleimani demonstrates, electronic snooping can be highly effective in locating specific individuals. But a reliance solely on SIGINT without human intelligence to fix targets can lead to errant strikes that cause civilian casualties and other collateral damage.

With U.S. intelligence capabilities attenuated following the U.S. troop withdrawal—especially the ability to find, fix, and finish—groups like Al-Qaida and ISIS-K could grow stronger without much forewarning<sup>6</sup>. In 2015, the United States discovered an Al-Qaida training camp in Kandahar with hundreds of militants<sup>7</sup>. If the U.S. was caught off guard about the growth of a terrorist group it was specifically deployed to fight when the U.S. troop presence measured in the thousands, what surprises await with no forces on the ground to enable intelligence collection and analysis?

## THREAT ASSESSMENT

In the absence of a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, counterterrorism analysts, military leaders, government officials, and policymakers are all growing concerned that jihadist groups will further metastasise to the point of once again being able to pose a direct threat to the United States<sup>8</sup>. Ambassador Nathan Sales, former Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the U.S. Department of State, believes that Al-Qaida could potentially reconstitute its external operations capabilities within six months<sup>9</sup>. To deal with this possibility, the Biden administration has spoken repeatedly about ‘over-the-horizon’ counterterrorism capabilities. This

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<sup>5</sup> *America bombs Islamic State. Once it quits Afghanistan, can it still?*, „The Economist”, 27 August 2021 r., [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com).

<sup>6</sup> D. Hoffman, *Our Afghanistan withdrawal is complete. Here’s what the terror fight looks like now*, Fox News, 1 September 2021 r., [www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com).

<sup>7</sup> A. Stenersen, *Al-Qa`ida’s Comeback in Afghanistan and its Implications*, „CTS Sentinel”, September 2016, t. 9, nr 9, [www.ctc.usma.edu](http://www.ctc.usma.edu).

<sup>8</sup> *How the U.S. Plans to Fight From Afar After Troops Exit Afghanistan*, „The New York Times”, 15 April 2021 r., [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>9</sup> I. Ali, H. Pamuk, J. Landay, *After Taliban takeover, concerns mount over U.S. counterterrorism ability*, Reuters, 15 August 2021 r., [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

means preparing strikes from outside of Afghanistan, perhaps with bases in a Central Asian nation, or neighbouring Pakistan. But even if Washington is able to secure basing rights from Islamabad, any deal will be unable to address Pakistan's continued support for militant groups, which it sees as part of its national security strategy. If the Taliban secures political and military control of large swaths of Afghanistan, it could soon become difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate between the Taliban, Al-Qaida, and the Haqqani Network.

The Biden administration believes that the terrorist threat from Afghanistan is similar in nature to other jihadist threats in theatres where U.S. and allied counterterrorism efforts have contained or mitigated terrorist groups, including in Somalia, Yemen, and Libya. But the recent string of Taliban military victories in Afghanistan, where in several instances ANSF troops fled and abandoned their vehicles, is eerily reminiscent to scenes from Iraq in 2011 following another calendar-based withdrawal of U.S. troops, which was swiftly followed by the rise of ISIS. And once again, ISIS, through ISIS-K, could receive a much-needed boost from a U.S. military withdrawal.

Upwards of 2,000 ISIS-K members remain in prisons, including much of the group's top leadership, many of whom were arrested following the group's near collapse in 2019-2020. As of late-2021, ISIS-K is on the rebound, moving into new provinces such as Nuristan, Badghis, Sari Pul, Baghlan, Badakhshan, Kunduz, and Kabul<sup>10</sup>. It is also looking to regain influence in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces, considered among the most strategically important. ISIS-K is approaching a dual-track strategy, the first piece of which is moving away from holding territory to more clandestine activity. The group, which retains strong support among Afghanistan's Salafist community, has focused on targeting sectarian targets. If ISIS-K is afforded the opportunity to resurge, it is not inconceivable to see the group mushroom to thousands of members. Despite repeatedly having its leadership targeted and territory revoked, ISIS-K has managed to mount numerous comebacks<sup>11</sup>. Even without holding territory, ISIS-K has managed to cultivate a cadre of

<sup>10</sup> Letter dated 15 July 2021 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, United Nations Security Council, 21 lipca 2021 r., <https://undocs.org>.

<sup>11</sup> A. Jadoon, A. Mines, *Broken, but Not Defeated: An Examination of State-led Operations against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-2018)*, Combating Terrorism Center, 23 March 2020 r., <https://ctc.usma.edu>.

battle-hardened fighters who have the resources and training necessary to mount devastating terrorist attacks, including in the capital of Kabul.

## FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Foreign fighters could mobilise for Afghanistan in several ways. First, both Al-Qaida and ISIS maintain global affiliates that could seek to dispatch operatives to Afghanistan to reinforce their respective presence in South Asia. Second, there are an unknown number of ISIS foreign fighters unaccounted for in the Middle East, with many believed to be hiding out in third-party countries waiting for an opportunity to get back in the fight. Third, there are what terrorism expert Daniel Byman has labelled “professional jihadis”, foreign fighters who are not necessarily tied to a specific struggle, but who travel to various conflict zone and civil wars “looking for jihad”<sup>12</sup>.

Given the presence of as many as 10,000 fighters from Xinjiang, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Pakistan already in Afghanistan, a Taliban-Al-Qaida alliance could destabilise large swaths of the region<sup>13</sup>. Prison breaks during the Taliban’s storming of the country in August also led to the release of dangerous jihadists who will be eager to re-join cadres of violent extremist organisations. There is also the possibility that the Taliban splinters into regional offshoots, further complicating the situation in Afghanistan and leading to a protracted civil war<sup>14</sup>.

If Afghanistan again becomes a major global hub for foreign terrorist fighters, there will be serious international security ramifications. Since the rise of ISIS in 2014, Western nations have dedicated significant resources to preventing an outflow of their citizens to combat zones in order to join terrorist groups and curtail the impact of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). Many of the laws and policies put in place over the past seven years targeting FTFs would likely prevent a similar migration of European citizens to Afghanistan, although the issue of so-called “frustrated” foreign fighters—those prevented from leaving but who subsequently seek to conduct attacks at home—will remain a pressing issue for policymakers and intelligence services. And while

<sup>12</sup> D. Byman, *Road Warriors: Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> *After Decades of War, ISIS and Al Qaeda Can Still Wreak Havoc*, „The New York Times”, 26 August 2021 r., [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>14</sup> R. Synovitz, *Will The Taliban Stay United To Govern, Or Splinter Into Regional Fiefdoms?*, Gandhara, 25 August 2021 r., <https://gandhara.rferl.org>.

any outflow of foreign fighters from Europe and other Western countries to Afghanistan would likely be far smaller than what occurred with the rise of ISIS, many of Afghanistan's neighbours and other countries in the region are either unable or unwilling to enact similar laws to prevent their citizens from seeking out new conflicts.

## REGIONAL DIMENSION

A resulting power vacuum will inevitably draw in regional powers, each seeking to cultivate proxy forces to work through. Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, India, Russia, and China all have their own designs on the future of Afghanistan. Each country will seek to increase its influence and reach within Afghanistan, directly as a result of the U.S. departure. However, while many of these countries are happy to see Washington withdraw, the resulting power vacuum is a cause for concern, from Moscow to Islamabad and beyond. An unstable Afghanistan is not in the interest of any country in the region. Furthermore, while Iran, Russia, and China are relieved that Western militaries are no longer deployed in their neighbourhood, each understood that the U.S. was spending considerable resources to remain bogged down in what many considered an unwinnable quagmire.

Iran maintains longstanding connections to Shia groups in Afghanistan, and throughout the conflict, has provided varying levels of support to the Taliban, including training and weapons. Iran is concerned about its border, and a civil war that spirals out of control. As insurance, Tehran may seek to deploy its own foreign fighter brigade, the Liwa Fatemiyoun, comprised of Afghan Shia and fighters battle hardened from combat in Syria for the past several years<sup>15</sup>. Iran has a complicated history with the Taliban, and while strategic priorities for each may overlap at times, Tehran may also look to support anti-Taliban groups as a way of hedging bets and gaining leverage<sup>16</sup>. But overall, Iran seeks a stable Afghanistan that does not lead to spillover violence and attacks on Iranian soil<sup>17</sup>. Iran is also concerned about

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<sup>15</sup> C. P. Clarke, A. M. Tabatabai, *What Iran Wants in Afghanistan And What U.S. Withdrawal Means for Tehran*, „Foreign Affairs”, 8 July 2020 r., [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com).

<sup>16</sup> *IntelBrief: Iran Warily Engages Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan*, The Soufan Center, 26 August 2021 r., <https://thesoufancenter.org>.

<sup>17</sup> S. E. Rasmussen, *Taliban's Return in Afghanistan Poses a Balancing Act for Iran*, „The Wall Street Journal”, 19 April 2021 r., [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com).



the potential for large numbers of refugees to seek shelter in Iran, further pressuring a government still struggling to deal with its economy and the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Turkey maintains longstanding cultural ties to Afghanistan and maintained a non-combat role in the country as part of the NATO coalition<sup>18</sup>. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has focused on increasing its influence throughout South Asia and highlighting its Islamic identity. It has engaged in a blitz of soft-power initiatives, including media, cultural, and education projects. Turkey's approach to Afghanistan and the region is in line with Erdoğan's desire to position Ankara as the leader of the Sunni Muslim world, juxtaposed to Saudi Arabia. Similar to Iran, Turkey is also concerned about refugee outflows from Afghanistan, since Turkey is already overburdened attempting to care for refugees, and the country lies at the centre of irregular migration routes connecting to Europe<sup>19</sup>.

Pakistan has been dubbed "the winner" of the conflict in Afghanistan, not least because the Afghan Taliban are largely a creation of Pakistan's infamous Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)<sup>20</sup>. Even though Islamabad is nominally a partner of Washington in the Global War on Terrorism, the Pakistanis played a "double game" throughout the duration of the conflict. South Asia expert Christine Fair suggested, "Pakistan has spent decades setting fires in South Asia—and then expected praise and remuneration for offering to put them out"<sup>21</sup>. Pakistan cultivates and nurtures relationships with a bevy of militant groups throughout South Asia, conceived of as "strategic depth" in any potential future conflict with India, particularly regarding Kashmir. There will be some blowback for Pakistan, however, as the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) or Pakistani Taliban, which is at odds with the Pakistani state and security forces, has already increased its operational tempo and begun launching attacks with greater frequency.

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<sup>18</sup> D. Jones, *Erdogan Pushes for Turkish Role in Afghanistan after US Leaves*, VOA, 21 July 2021 r., [www.voanews.com](http://www.voanews.com).

<sup>19</sup> *Expert react: What the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan means for Turkey*, Atlantic Council, 2 September 2021 r., [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org).

<sup>20</sup> *The Real Winner of the Afghan War? It's Not Who You Think*, „The New York Times”, 26 August 2021 r., [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>21</sup> C. Fair, *Pakistan Is an Arsonist That Wants You to Think It's a Firefighter*, Foreign Policy, 10 September 2021 r., <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

If Pakistan is the biggest “winner” of the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, then by the zero-sum nature of the way the authorities in Islamabad and New Delhi assess their foreign policies, India is the biggest “loser”. India sought to work closely with the government of Ashraf Ghani and over the years has spent billions of dollars on development and infrastructure projects, including building roads, schools, and clinics<sup>22</sup>. But with a Taliban government, inherently hostile to India, there are growing concerns that India will find itself yet again in the crosshairs of highly capable jihadist terrorist groups. As Kabir Taneja recently warned, “Anti-India terrorist groups like *Lashkar-e-Taiba* and *Jaish-e-Mohammed* could eventually use the country as a base to launch attacks in Kashmir or other parts of India, as they did in the 1990s”<sup>23</sup>. India will also lose the economic and diplomatic clout it had been growing in Afghanistan over the previous two decades. As the Taliban advanced on Kabul, India sought to evacuate its embassy personnel and it remains unclear what the country’s relationship will be like with the Taliban moving forward<sup>24</sup>.

Russia is concerned about the prospect that the Taliban victory will embolden religious extremists throughout Central Asia, increasing the chances for blowback on Russian soil. The Kremlin is also concerned about an uptick in illicit flows—weapons, drugs, humans—being smuggled and trafficked across porous borders<sup>25</sup>. Afghanistan and areas along its various borders will be attractive for criminals and terrorists, and could lead to a strengthening of the crime-terror nexus in Central Asia. Since 2018, Russia has engaged in talks with the Taliban and will seek to maintain working relations, albeit with a wary eye<sup>26</sup>. Moscow has a complicated history in Afghanistan, but will also be pragmatic. As the major military power in the

<sup>22</sup> L. Frayer, *With The U.S. Exit From Afghanistan, India Fears An Increasingly Hostile Region*, NPR, 27 August 2021 r., [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).

<sup>23</sup> K. Taneja, M. S. Siyeh, *Terrorism in South Asia After the Fall of Afghanistan*, War on the Rocks, 23 August 2021 r., <https://warontherocks.com>.

<sup>24</sup> S. Haidar, *India evacuates all Kabul embassy personnel*, „The Hindu”, 18 august 2021 r., [www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com).

<sup>25</sup> P. Stronski, *Forget Schadenfreude. What Does the Kremlin Really Think About Afghanistan?*, Carnegie, 30 August 2021 r., <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

<sup>26</sup> P. Kozlov, A. Rynda, *Afghan crisis: Russia plans for new era with Taliban rule*, BBC, 21 August 2021 r., [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).



region, Russia will continue to work with its allies in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Like Russia, China is also concerned about the spreading instability and the revival of Islamist militancy throughout Central Asia, which includes new opportunities for Uighur jihadists<sup>27</sup>. China is also cautious of getting dragged into the same situation that the U.S. just extricated itself from, so it will likely be parsimonious in its commitments to Afghanistan. While there are clear economic interests at play, including valuable minerals that China covets, the unpredictability of Afghanistan's security situation will give it pause<sup>28</sup>. In the meantime, China will not forfeit the opportunity to use the U.S. withdrawal in its propaganda, describing it as a declining power and a force for instability in the world. Still, true to the realpolitik nature of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the government has engaged in outreach with the Taliban and spoken positively of its behaviour. The Taliban, in turn, have so far remained mum about the plight of the Uighurs, Chinese Muslims being persecuted by the government in what some have labelled a modern-day genocide.

## CONCLUSION

It is hard to look at Afghanistan in 2021 and feel any optimism. After 20 years, the United States has withdrawn and the Taliban are back in control of Afghanistan. The Taliban remain allied with Al-Qaida, and members of the Haqqani Network—designated as a foreign terrorist organisation by the U.S.—now form part of Afghanistan's government. With no presence on the ground, the United States has little to show for its two-decade-long commitment. And if Al-Qaida, ISIS, or both are able to regroup on Afghan soil and threaten the U.S., the options to respond will be limited and dependent on an offshore counterterrorism approach that has real limitations. There is also the issue of U.S. credibility, as America's adversaries, both state and non-state alike, have been emboldened by the Taliban's victory.

The zeitgeist in the Washington D.C. Beltway is all about the great power competition. Supporters of withdrawing troops from Afghanistan

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<sup>27</sup> Y. Sun, *How China Views the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, War on the Rocks, 13 May 2021 r., <https://warontherocks.com>.

<sup>28</sup> R. Hass, *How will China seek to profit from the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan*, Brookings, 18 August 2021 r., [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu).

frequently point to the need to reallocate resources to confront the threat of a rising China and a revanchist Russia. But Afghanistan is directly related to the concept of the great power competition, especially considering that America's near-peer competitors will look for ways to leverage recent events into an opportunity to increase their respective influence in Afghanistan and the broader region. Framing U.S. involvement in Afghanistan as a sideshow to more important missions like the great power competition is a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept itself. If President Biden is concerned with limiting the influence of countries like Russia, China, and Iran, withdrawing from Afghanistan will actually have the opposite effect. With the United States absent from Afghanistan, Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran see opportunities to move in, as already demonstrated by their diplomatic presence in Kabul and ongoing dialogue with the Taliban.