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Is time really being called on Americas longest war in Afghanistan?

US aircraft, drones and special forces may continue warfare remotely

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In a televised [speech](#) on the 14 April President Biden announced a complete US troop withdrawal from what he called the “forever war” in Afghanistan by 11 September 2021—the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, when al-Qaeda extremists, based in Afghanistan and protected by the Taliban government, successfully attacked New York and Washington. President George W. Bush announced the US invasion of Afghanistan in October, 2001, and in the two decades since, over [47,000 Afghan civilians](#) have been killed, along with 45,000 members of the Afghan army and police and at least 3,500 US and coalition troops. The [financial cost](#) to the US of the war in Afghanistan has been estimated at \$2.3 trillion.

During his speech, Biden argued that the United States cannot “continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan hoping to create the ideal conditions for our withdrawal, expecting a different result”. “We delivered justice to bin Laden a decade ago,” Biden said, “and we’ve stayed in Afghanistan for a decade since”. Biden is not the first US president to call for a full withdrawal; both Barack Obama and Donald Trump did so. Yet, as opposed to

previous announcements, the Biden administration emphasized that this time the US military’s withdrawal will not be “conditions based”. However, he warned the Taliban that if US forces are attacked during withdrawal, “we’re going to defend ourselves and our partners with all the tools at our disposal”.

Following an [agreement](#) between the United States and the Taliban in February 2020 both the United States and NATO have been gradually reducing their troop presence as part of the peace process. Under that process a deadline of 1 May 2021 had been agreed for a full troop withdrawal. Currently, the United States has about 2,500 troops (plus perhaps [another 1,000 “off-the books” special forces](#)) remaining in Afghanistan, while international partner troops in the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) number about 7,000. There had been growing speculation that a delay was likely, but it remained unclear whether such a delay would be negotiated with and accepted by the Taliban. It now appears that the US decision was unilateral, though Biden in his remarks claimed it was consistent with the US-Taliban deal.

NATO announces a simultaneous withdrawal

Late the same day, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin joined a closed-door meeting with the NATO foreign and defence ministers to begin coordinating a collective withdrawal of the RSM forces in Afghanistan. Blinken spoke from the NATO headquarters in Belgium in a [joint press conference](#) with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. “I am here to work closely with our allies, with the Secretary General, on the principle that we have established from the start, ‘In together, adapt together and out together,” he said. The RSM forces will also be withdrawn by the 11 September deadline, as confirmed in a [North Atlantic Council Ministerial Statement on Afghanistan](#). Stoltenberg said the decision to withdraw was “unanimous” and that “This is not an easy decision and it entails risks. ... We’ve said for many months we face a dilemma, because the alternative to leaving in an orderly fashion is to be prepared for a long-term, open-ended military commitment with potentially more NATO troops”.

During the press conference the NATO Secretary General attempted to highlight a number of achievements in the campaign: “Together, we have prevented Afghanistan from serving as a safe haven for terrorist attacks against our own countries. Since 9/11, there have been no terrorist attacks on allied soil organized from Afghanistan. We also helped to build the Afghan Security Forces from scratch. With great bravery and professionalism, they have provided security across the country over the last years. And in the almost two decades of international military presence, we have helped the Afghan people achieve social progress”. It is true that there has been some social progress in education,

especially for girls, and increased [life expectancy](#). But these gains remain [fragile](#) despite the continuing peace talks. Overall, however, the initial US military successes in Afghanistan were followed by long attritional years of conflict in what was generally regarded as an unwinnable war. One British commentator [describes](#) it as the “most pointless and unsuccessful war that Britain has fought in the past 70 years”. (For selected NATO Watch commentaries on the conflict, see box 1).

Box 1. Selected NATO Watch Commentary on the Afghan Conflict

- NATO’s new counterinsurgency guidance for Afghanistan: from kinetic to human security? [September 2009](#)
- Afghanistan: The Runaway War, [July 2010](#)
- Afghanistan: the exit strategy and beyond to 2024, [May 2012](#)
- NATO’s departure from Afghanistan: an orderly rush to the blocked exits? [January 2013](#)
- The endless war in Afghanistan and the departure of another US general claiming a winning strategy, [September 2018](#)
- Political turmoil in Afghanistan threatens US-Taliban peace deal, [March 2020](#)

Blinken then travelled to Afghanistan where he met with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to reiterate the US commitment to an ongoing relationship between the two nations. According to a statement by the US State Department, the two leaders discussed the importance of preserving gains made over the past 20 years and continual counter-terrorism cooperation. Ghani expressed support for the US troop withdrawal, [stating](#) “Afghanistan’s proud security and defence forces are fully capable of defending its people and country, which they have been doing all along”.

The reaction in Washington and by the Taliban

The reaction in Washington, DC to Biden's announcement was mixed. Most Republicans criticized the decision, with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell [labelling](#) it "a retreat in the face of an enemy" and Senator Lindsay Graham [calling](#) it "dumber than dirt." Although some Democrats in Congress voiced concern about the overall situation in the region, most welcomed the decision. The only US lawmaker to vote against military action against the Taliban in 2001, Congresswoman Barbara Lee of Oakland, [applauded](#) Biden's announced troop withdrawal, adding, "This is the result of decades of hard work by activists, advocates, and members of Congress committed to ending our forever wars...We must utilize this momentum to rein in executive war powers...and put that power back in the hands of Congress and the people".

There was also veiled criticism among some senior US officials. During a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on worldwide threats, CIA Director William Burns [said](#) the US withdrawal from Afghanistan would limit the agency's ability to gather intelligence in the country. "When the time comes for the US military to withdraw, the US government's ability to collect and act on threats will diminish. That's simply a fact", said Burns. Similarly, the [annual threat](#)

[assessment](#) published by the US Intelligence Community on 9 April warned 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 response by the Taliban has also been mixed. In one tweet the group [said](#) it would not attend any conference to determine Afghanistan's future until foreign troops have departed, an apparent rejection of the Turkey-hosted peace conference planned for 24 April and organised by Ankara, the UN and Qatar —and proposed by the United States in March. The US plan included a [proposal](#) to establish a "transitional" or interim power-sharing government consisting of various Afghan stakeholders including the Taliban. While the Taliban has been saying publicly for months that any delay beyond the date specified in the February 2020 US-Taliban agreement would violate the deal and risk a violent response, it seems more likely the group will wait out the withdrawal, and then push for outright victory or at least dominance. The country has already seen the early stages of a flight of its political leaders and civil society activists, journalists and academics over the past 12 months due to a [targeted killing campaign](#) inside the country, largely unclaimed but widely attributed to the Taliban.



Will the US intervention continue remotely?

“We will not take our eye off the terrorist threat,” Mr. Biden said in his televised address. “We will reorganize our counterterrorism capabilities and the substantial assets in the region to prevent re-emergence of terrorist threat to our homeland”. However, the scope and nature of future US and NATO security assistance to Afghanistan remains unclear. NATO and other international partners remain committed to providing funding at similar levels for the coming years, and this may be sufficient to allow the Afghan government to continue to function and to defend itself in the short-term. US remote or “over-the-horizon” military support to Afghan forces, ranging from strategic advice to intelligence sharing to training (presumably outside Afghanistan) to airstrikes, are also apparent possibilities. For example, there are more than 16,000 [civilian contractors](#), including over 6,000 Americans, currently providing security, logistics and other support in Afghanistan, and these might continue to be used to train Afghan security forces.

According to the [New York Times](#), other potential remote military options are being considered. For example, the Pentagon is said to be discussing with allies where to reposition forces, possibly to neighbouring Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In addition, combat aircraft on aircraft carriers and long-range bombers flying from land bases along the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean and even in the United States could strike insurgent fighters spotted by armed surveillance drones. This would be in keeping with current US counterterrorism practice (e.g., in Libya, Somalia and Yemen), where every effort is made to minimize boots on the ground and replace them with remote forces. US Defense Secretary Austin [told](#) reporters

after the NATO meeting “There’s probably not a space on the globe that the United States and its allies can’t reach”. This will certainly continue to include Afghanistan.

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