



POLICY BRIEF

Afghanistan and the Transatlantic Relationship

The Future of U.S.-European Cooperation

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This policy brief explores evolving U.S. policy of supporting Afghanistan in partnership with NATO and other European states. It outlines U.S. domestic politics and how this may shape the potential U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, explores scenarios of how a withdrawal might impact the country, and seeks prospects for future cooperation among Afghanistan’s partners.

The United States has engaged and intervened in Afghanistan’s conflict, off and on, dating back to 1979.¹ After working through Pakistan to fund and supply weapons to mujahedin fighting against occupying Soviet forces in the 1980s, U.S. attention drifted when the U.S.S.R. dissolved, leaving Afghans on all sides effectively abandoned by the external support of the last decade. This vacuum ushered in a period of bitterly intense civil war, only curbed after the Taliban rose to power and replaced unrestrained conflict with harsh authoritarian rule. Since late 2001, the United States, together with European and international allies, has ushered in a new Afghan state and social order, stabilizing Kabul and other urban centers even while it struggled to contain a growing insurgency.

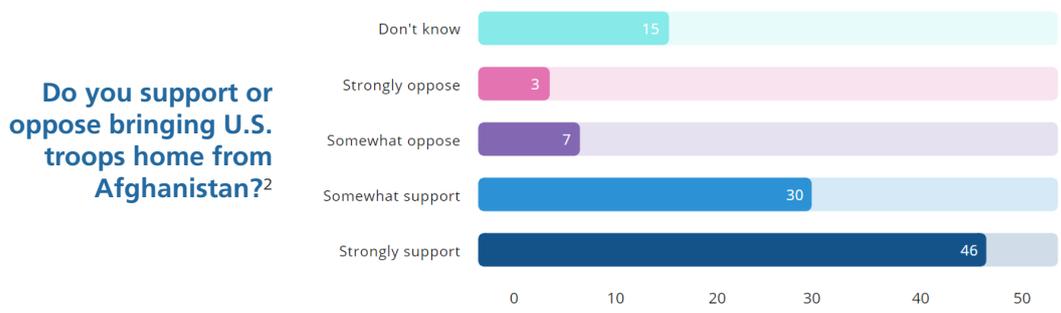
American Politics, Afghan Conflict

As American policy appears to trend toward disengagement once again, questions loom over European policy responses toward the country and the region: has the U.S. approach to a peace process disrupted transatlantic cooperation on

Afghanistan, and if so, how can this be rectified? Is there any potential for Europe to step into the security assistance vacuum that would be left by departing American troops? If not, will the current levels of security (and development) assistance provided by European states remain feasible in the future?

One key factor that complicates these questions is the uncertainty surrounding the U.S. presidential election and the potential impact change in administrations may have on policies toward Afghanistan. Before election day, speculation has built over how a Joe Biden administration may shift away from the course charted by U.S. President Donald J. Trump. But many observers of U.S. politics and policymaking warn that the overall trajectory of American disengagement may transcend party lines—and may only vary by degree, timing, and conditions. As a vice president active in foreign policymaking in the Obama White House, Biden was the most prominent voice calling for downsizing of NATO’s mission in Afghanistan, seeking minimal ambitions and military footprint already over a decade ago.

American Views of the US Military Presence in Afghanistan



¹ The project “From Uncertainty to Strategy: What are the odds for future win-win scenarios in Afghanistan’s Neighborhood?” is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) to develop and discuss likely scenarios for Afghanistan’s neighbors, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. This brief is part of a series authored by Andrew Watkins and Dr. Timor Sharan to discuss the implications of the US withdrawal and the ongoing Afghan Peace Negotiations on existing policy tools, strategic interests, and challenges for key stakeholders in- and outside of Afghanistan. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

² See <https://www.charleskochinstitute.org/news/new-poll-3-in-4-americans-want-troops-home-from-afghanistan-iraq-favor-less-defense-spending-less-military-engagement-abroad>

In recent weeks, career U.S. military and national security officials have pushed back against several statements on Afghanistan policy by Trump’s political appointees. These public rumblings signal dissent within the U.S. government on its own Afghanistan policy, also indicated in August, when for a brief period, the U.S. was both pushing to have a number of Taliban prisoners released from Afghan jails and simultaneously lobbied to keep them detained. The U.S. military’s pushback against a rapid withdrawal that might not wait for a negotiated settlement reveals a dynamic that is likely to remain, regardless of November’s election result. It also appears similar to the dynamic that emerged in the U.S. Syria policy, which led to several years of political maneuvering that complicated military and diplomatic efforts, sapped local partners’ trust, and wrought chaos in the situation on the ground.

These dynamics have fed a strain of discussions on Afghanistan being held in Washington, revolving around a key question: “does zero troops really mean zero?” The question reflects political and policy-level considerations as American foreign policy figures consider the implications of a looming withdrawal even as fighting continues, and the just-commenced peace talks have yet to gain traction.

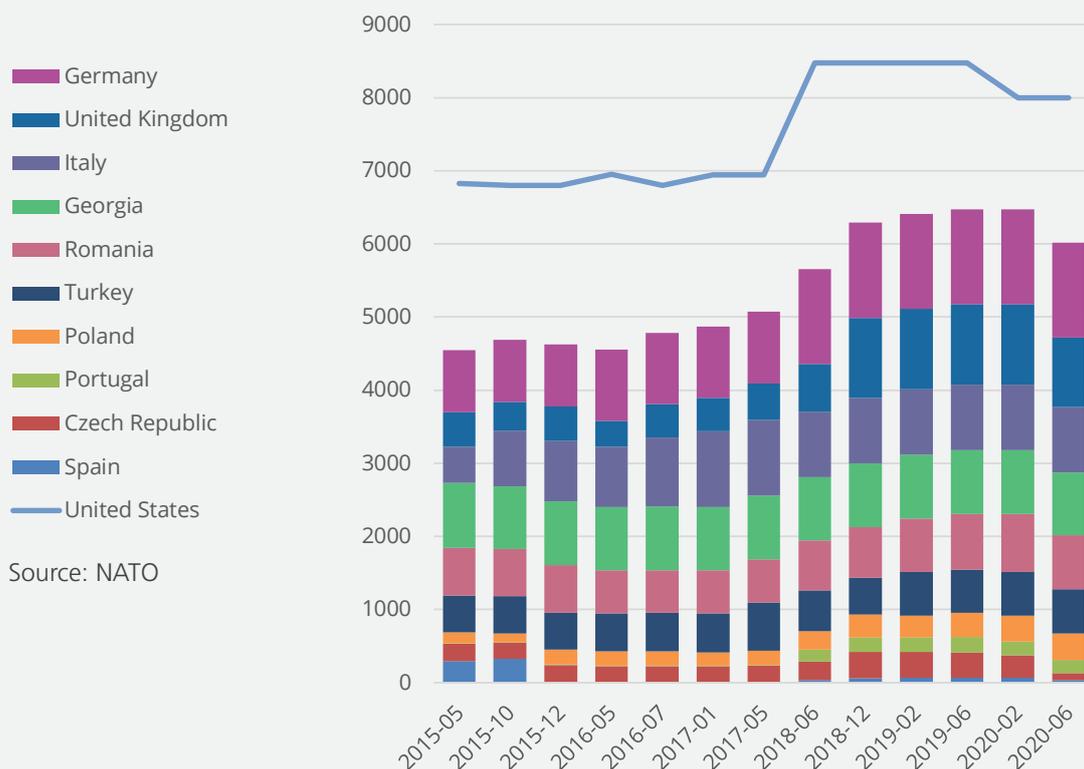
NATO in the Wind?

The U.S. strategy to reach peace negotiations included a unilateral commitment that entailed a timeline of withdrawal for all military forces of NATO member states, not just American troops—which has become a critical source of tension between

the U.S. and its European allies. While the public line amongst NATO members quickly settled on “in together, out together” after the 29 February deal was announced, German and other European officials have voiced frustration with the lack of consultation underpinning the U.S.’ approach—a friction that has extended well beyond Afghanistan over the past four years. There seems to be little question among U.S. officials that an American withdrawal would prompt European disengagement as well; despite NATO ally frustrations, the organization’s reliance on the U.S. infrastructure and security umbrella is clear.

Critiques have extended beyond the style of U.S. diplomatic efforts, with some stakeholders expressing concern that more has not been done to establish and formalize a regional framework agreement to accompany the negotiations between Afghan parties. While the U.S. has engaged in shuttle diplomacy across the region in hopes of building and maintaining momentum in support of direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and it has dedicated attention to a number of trilateral dialogues between Afghanistan and neighboring states, the U.S. has done much less to bring European partner and donor states together with regional nations—and to date, there is still no Track I regional dialogue established. Some U.S. officials have noted that diplomatic difficulties with international stakeholders (including Russia, China, and Iran) mean that while the U.S. should instigate regional efforts, it may not be best placed to administer over them.

US and European Troop Contributions, NATO Resolute Support Mission



Despite frustrations, more than one European official has admitted that without U.S. involvement and infrastructure, unique even among NATO allies, the prospects of providing future security assistance are effectively voided. Both European and American officials agree on the implausibility of a lasting military footprint, absent the U.S. The domestic political “fatigue” on Afghanistan, recently referred to by some European officials, only underscores the infeasibility of perpetuating anything like current security assistance levels. The mantra “In together, out together” may breed resentment in some corners of Europe. Still, if the U.S. opts to move forward with a total withdrawal, there appear to be few conventional alternatives.

The Afghan government continues to publicly maintain that it does not understand the U.S. government’s policy as one of total withdrawal, even as the U.S. president issues social media announcements precisely suggesting that. Simultaneously, a less official discourse among Kabul officials and elites has begun exploring alternatives to U.S.-led assistance and support. This has included probing NATO and select member states for their willingness to maintain or even augment current levels of support but also outreach to regional countries. This activity stems from the uncertainty surrounding the U.S.’s next steps, what it might mean for peace negotiations, and how parties to the conflict may react.

Possible Scenarios for U.S. Withdrawal

- **“Zero means zero”:** The U.S. continues to adhere to the terms of its agreement with the Taliban irrespective of conditions at the negotiating table or in the Afghan conflict, completing a total withdrawal along the same rough timeline as anticipated by the Doha agreement (May or midyear 2021). Under this scenario, NATO troop presence would be effectively obliged to withdraw as well, with European security and development assistance likely falling under intensive scrutiny as a result. Given the history of U.S. intervention and how strongly U.S. military presence correlates with higher levels of financial security assistance, under this scenario, the Afghan government would need to anticipate and account for a sharp drop in foreign funding. While other donors might pledge to maintain funding at current levels in the face of such a reduction, “filling the gap” left by the U.S. is highly unlikely. Such a reduction could have potentially catastrophic effects on the conflict and security environment across the country.
- **“Payment on Delivery”:** The U.S. employs the departure of its last remaining troops as leverage against the Taliban (and possibly the Afghan government) in order to push for progress in peace negotiations. It only finalizes a withdrawal after the two sides reach a political settlement to the war. In this scenario, the military drawdown could very well usher in the same drop in funding from the U.S. and other Western donors, but perhaps without the same negative security impact in Afghanistan (or on transatlantic relations). This scenario would also ideally include a greater degree of consultation and collaborative strategizing between the U.S. and its NATO partners.
- **Reverse course:** The U.S. political leadership may decide to retract its commitment to withdrawal troops, citing the continuation of Taliban violence across the country or its continued ties with Al Qaeda and other extremist groups. Doing so would almost certainly stall and collapse the current framework of peace talks, which the Taliban entered primarily based on the assurance that foreign troops’ departure was imminent. As a result, the Afghan government would look both to the U.S. and NATO for continued current support levels to continue fighting the war. It is not clear how European donors and NATO allies would react to such a reversal, or calls of continued high levels of security assistance and aid, after being confronted with an obligation to withdraw earlier this year. Such a reversal could potentially unfold after some of the more catastrophic effects of the first scenario take place, whereby European states would likely be impacted by the spillover effects of an intensified Afghan civil war.

Recommendations

- Regardless of which policy approach the U.S. government takes, European states will need to stake out independent positions on Afghanistan, ideally before the dust settles from any U.S. political transition. The sooner NATO members and other European donors outline their near- and medium-term approaches and commitments, the more it will assure the Afghan government.
- European states supporting Afghanistan should develop specific (and unified) positions on security assistance, clarifying the precise implications “in together, out together” will have on financial and advisory assistance without any military presence in-country.
- The U.S. should immediately increase intra-NATO dialogue at the highest possible levels, incorporating allied interests and concerns into its strategic approach to peace and conflict in Afghanistan.
- The U.S. should formulate clear expectations and demands regarding what their international partners (including non-NATO allies and donor states) may do to influence the Afghan government and peace process while leverage still exists, such as pledges, security cooperation, even migration policies. U.S. policy has allowed other international stakeholders to take a “back seat” and remain ambiguous, which could be rectified beginning with close allies.



American Soldiers in Afghanistan / dougg

About the authors

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About the cover photo

U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper (L), NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (2nd-L), Afghanistan's Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah (2nd-R) and Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani (R) arrive for a joint news conference in Kabul, Afghanistan February 29, 2020. REUTERS/Mohammad Ismail

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