AFGHANISTAN, WHAT'S NEXT?

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The War in Afghanistan was won as swiftly as it was lost. On October 7, 2001, the United States and Allied Forces began operations against the Taliban in response to their involvement in the September 11 attacks. By mid-November of that same year, the Taliban had lost control of most of the country. At a briefing with reporters in Kabul in May of 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld informed the American people that the United States was "at a point where we clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction activities. The bulk of this country today is permissive, it's secure."[1] In reality, however, from that point through the American withdrawal in August of 2021, stability and security remained unattainable objectives.

To contrast this swift victory, four months after President Biden announced his intention to pursue a complete withdrawal of American forces and "to end America's longest war," the Taliban recaptured Kabul, rendering two decades of exorbitant economic costs and loss of human life futile.[1] Foreign policy experts have attributed this recent geopolitical failure to many causes, criticizing Afghan security forces, unsuccessful attempts at nation-building, and the haste of the withdrawal.

The United States now finds itself at a crossroads of rivaling foreign policy opportunities and perspectives relative to Afghanistan. How the United States chooses to engage the region will undeniably have effects on the greater Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the rest of the world.

One approach is for the United States to reengage with partners within the country, such as the Northern Resistance Front (NRF), "the last remaining ally resolved to fight against terror groups in Afghanistan."[2] The group, which is based north of Kabul in the Panjshir Valley, has leveraged its mountainous surroundings as a "defensive advantage that has played a strong role in making it the epicenter of guerrilla warfare, withstanding all types of foreign interlopers that have knocked on its doors."[3] Many have argued that after investing billions of dollars training the Afghan security forces, "the Pentagon…should now coordinate and consolidate those in whom they have invested."[2] In a multiethnic and multicultural state like Afghanistan, the NRF believes that "the only way of ending this conflict…is to distribute power from Kabul to elsewhere, so everyone sees themselves being part of the power structure… [in] a decentralized system which can devolve power from the center to the peripheries."[3]

Partnering with the NRF would be a viable way for the United States to remain engaged in Afghanistan without suffering from a continuous physical presence, both in terms of high economic costs and the risk of losing American servicepeople. Coupled with American air support, the NRF would be able to provide intelligence as the eyes and ears surveilling the activities of the Taliban. Moreover, as the Taliban assert their control and dominance in Afghanistan, "al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are now increasing their presence throughout the country," posing a threat to the local population and presenting more worrisome implications for terrorism in the region.[2] Additionally, the protection of the Taliban enables these terrorist organizations to plan and launch attacks against the U.S. and its allies. Thus, a strategic partnership with the NRF and minimal military effort could be a direct solution to a key national security objective.

In addition to military and security interests for re-engagement, there are humanitarian incentives to alleviate the suffering caused by the Taliban. Local police, state officials, and translators who aided the United States during its involvement are now hiding in fear of retaliation by the Taliban. One former Criminal Investigation Division officer stated, "Now they are after me and want to kill me, and since they have taken over, killings have increased."[3] Other vulnerable groups include nearly 6,300 women who served in the country's first "female Afghan police and military units as one of the flagship accomplishments of the West's effort to empower women in Afghanistan."[4] Samina, a 26-year-old former Afghan Air Force official, is now "living in hiding, desperately hoping for a way out of Afghanistan." She says, "The U.S. and the international community said they would support us no matter what. But they have forgotten us."[4] Political, economic, and military pressure applied against the Taliban could give the United States leverage in ensuring that human rights are protected for those who are vulnerable and for whom they promised safety.

Skeptics maintain that a move by the United States to become re-entrenched in conflict by pursuing air support, military aid, or troop training in the country could have various consequences. Efforts to increase American involvement could be hindered by diminished public support and domestic political debate, making broader foreign policy interests incredibly difficult to attain.

Some experts believe direct diplomatic engagement with the Taliban is the next step for American foreign policy in Afghanistan. They advise that the "international community should now look seriously at making a deal with the Taliban."[5] Not to "use humanitarian aid as a threat against the Taliban… but to deliver a basic level of development support…immediately, not as part of a negotiation."[5] They argue that "in exchange for diplomatic recognition, and gradual, conditional access to funds as well as other resources, the Taliban might be expected to meet minimal standards of human rights and fair governance."[5] This approach to establish diplomatic relations with the Taliban would be part of an effort to conform to a new reality conceding that "the Taliban won the War in Afghanistan," and that the only way to ensure economic development, humanitarian relief, and political stability is through recognition of the Taliban and engagement in joint efforts with them.

It may be a compelling assumption that after twenty years of war, living with the Taliban is an unfortunate reality that the United States and its allies must come to terms with. The United States should not confuse fatigue and frustration with its commitment to the protection of human rights and vital national security interests, however. As China increases its hegemonic aspirations throughout Eurasia—utilizing its grand strategic economic, political, and military tools—and as Russia continues to pressure Ukraine, now is not the time for the United States to back down and watch as autocratic, human rights abusers excel on the world stage. A commitment to the NRF and Afghan security forces would be a sign of strength for the U.S. to remain influential and reliable as the rest of the world watches.

Ultimately, whether the current administration chooses to pursue diplomatic recognition and direct engagement with the Taliban or support the NRF through military and political assistance is a matter of long-term, foreign policy strategy. That being said, American and Afghan people deserve a coherent and deliberate plan aimed at rectifying the severe humanitarian, political, economic, and social costs that have affected both nations.

As a bastion of democracy, empowerment, and moral stature, the United States is obligated to help remedy the problems it has created. If the United States cannot develop and pursue a new strategy regarding Afghanistan after twenty years of involvement, what will American allies around the world think? What level of commitment and aid can the United States actually uphold? The administration must address these questions as greater regional threats from Iran, North Korea, China, and Russia threaten the US-led global order. It is essential from a policy standpoint that a revamped American foreign policy should be decisive and deliberate in its strategic aims and measures for implementation.