

How Do The Domestic Variables Of Public Opinion, Authority, Legitimacy, Cost, And Risk Influence National Security Decision-Making In Afghanistan?

Prepared For: American Security Project

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Executive Summary

In this paper, I analyze American involvement and national security decision-making relating to the War in Afghanistan through a domestic lens. I utilize a variety of sources to provide a narrative analysis on five variables, including public opinion, authority, legitimacy, cost, and risk. I assess public opinion polls, U.S. laws, Presidential speeches, and a variety of reports, newspaper and journal articles. The paper concludes with implications for how the domestic considerations and variables influence the notion of continuing military operations in Afghanistan. With this analysis, I ultimately recommend that the U.S. should maintain a military presence in the country.

Each of my chosen variables is discussed at length throughout the paper. I begin with the public opinion variable, which examines the viewpoints expressed by the American people throughout the 19-year War and why they have changed over time. This variable finds that Americans have lost substantial confidence in the possibility of the U.S. winning the War. However, recent polls indicate the public may be willing to passively accept the concept of an ongoing war, under the perception that staying is keeping the U.S. safe from terrorist attacks.

The second variable examined is authority, in which I explain how the AUMF legally authorizes the U.S. to conduct military operations and deploy troops to Afghanistan. The AUMF was passed by Congress and signed into law a few days after the 9/11 attack so the U.S. could exercise its right to self-defense to protect American citizens. This variable is useful in understanding the continued legal domestic authority for an American military force in the country, but it also explains how the authority could potentially be revoked by new Congressional legislation in the future.

The third variable discussed is legitimacy, and the paper poses a two-part test for policymakers to ensure that the U.S. is operating legitimately in Afghanistan and that legitimacy of the War's prosecution exists between politicians and the American people. The test seeks to determine if stated objectives match up with employed strategies and if the objectives are effective. I analyzed Presidential speeches from September 2001 – March 2020 and pulled out selections that directly addressed a U.S. objective in the country. Through my analysis of the Presidential speeches, I explain how the strategies changed over time, and how a divide between strategies and objectives continues to pose a problem for American military effectiveness. I conclude that the mismatch of means and ends results in an illegitimacy in the prosecution of the War. As a result, the legitimacy variable, more than any other, is responsible for perpetuating the forever War.

After legitimacy, the paper explores the cost variable, by examining both monetary and human costs of the War. The section includes reports to detail the sunk costs of the War, along with descriptions of papers that offer predictive analysis of future costs of both withdrawing troops and keeping them in the country. The section concludes with an analysis to help decision-makers understand how the monetary and human costs of keeping the U.S. military in Afghanistan are comparatively low to past numbers and present alternatives.

Finally, the paper examines perceptions of risks, in both keeping and removing a U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. The risks of keeping a military presence include the prospect of an endless war aided by the lack of comprehensive strategy and purpose in understanding and directing operatives in the War, along with an opportunity cost in allocating resources to other U.S. priorities. The primary risk of removing a troop presence is a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan may re-emerge as a safe haven for terrorist organizations, posing a direct threat to

the U.S. Additionally, the U.S. would lose intelligence capabilities if troops left, from both the removal of the military and from allies who would follow our lead and leave as well. I ultimately assess that the risks of maintaining a military presence in Afghanistan are minimal, while leaving the country poses a large perceived risk to the security of the U.S.

Considered together, the domestic variables I analyzed signify that the national security decision should be keeping troops in Afghanistan.

Introduction

The United States has been at war in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. After 9/11, the U.S. launched Operation Enduring Freedom, which began the Global War on Terrorism. Now the War in Afghanistan has spanned 19 years and has become America's longest war, costing \$2 trillion¹ and the lives of 2,400 U.S. soldiers.² For a decade, our country has been involved in contentious internal debates over whether or not we should withdraw forces and terminate military operations.

This Master's Project (MP) examines the domestic variables contributing to the continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan. It discusses the complexities of American perceptions, in particular tying together the ideas that the U.S. public is irrationally afraid of terrorism, but is also exhausted from the War in Afghanistan. Through the examination of U.S. objectives, public opinion, executive documents, and Congressional reports and legislation, the paper assesses the variables of public opinion, authority, legitimacy, cost, and risk perceptions of the national security decision-making strategies of the seemingly endless war.

Disclaimer: In this MP, I only examine five domestic variables, which is by no means an exhaustive list. I do not take into account international factors, which could result in a different conclusion. Although not addressed in this paper, international factors and variables are vital in fully understanding the conflict and in ultimately guiding U.S. policy.

¹ O'Hanlon, Michael. "Why Afghanistan Peace Talks Between the Taliban and US Have Promise – But More Potential Pitfalls." *NBC News*. 17 July 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/why-afghanistan-talks-between-taliban-u-s-show-promise-withdrawal-ncna1030831>.

² Thomas, Clayton. "Afghanistan: Background and US Policy." *Congressional Research Service*, 19 Sept. 2019, <https://sakai.duke.edu/access/content/attachment/ae21e20f-0700-4d43-b245-761510b27db8/Assignments/ffab4172-5b34-4b08-9423-00054a8da948/CRS%20Afghanistan%20Background%20and%20US%20Policy%20Sept%202019.pdf>.

Defining Domestic Variables

This MP analyzes American involvement in the War in Afghanistan through a domestic lens. In particular, I identify and assess five domestic variables: public opinion, authority, legitimacy, cost, and perceptions of risk. Public opinion is defined as the views prevalent among the American people. Public opinion is represented through formal and informal polls and surveys that aim to understand how the American people have viewed the War in Afghanistan over time. Authority refers to the laws that permitted the U.S. military to initiate hostilities and be active in Afghanistan since 2001. This variable also explains how U.S. troops are legally allowed to be in Afghanistan today and in what capacity they may operate. The legitimacy variable looks at the stated objectives of the War to determine whether Presidential statements have matched up with U.S. actions and strategies. This variable also examines whether the objectives are achievable. The cost variable measures both the monetary and human costs of the War, along with determining predictions for future costs. Finally, the risk variable examines the perceived risks of the U.S. military remaining in Afghanistan and the perceived risks of withdrawing troops. These risks include the risk to human life (particularly pertaining to U.S. soldiers) and the risk of increased instability that could result in threats to U.S. national security.

Defining U.S. Policy in Afghanistan

The original U.S. policy in Afghanistan emerged following the events of September 11th. President Bush announced the U.S. goals were to “keep the terrorists from striking again [and] make it clear to the country and the world that the United States had embarked on a new kind of war.” In essence, Bush’s strategy was to “protect the American people at home and defeat

terrorism abroad.”³ The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan followed the objective of “retaliat[ing] against al-Qaeda and prevent[ing] a repeat of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.”⁴ The U.S. military was also given the same straightforward mission to “protect the [Afghan] population and defeat the enemy.”⁵ In essence, the U.S. was charged with defending innocent populations by defeating terrorist organizations that posed a threat to Afghans in the country and Americans abroad.

Although the goals and missions changed as the war persisted, the most basic objectives remained the same. In a 2009 speech at West Point, Obama remarked that the purpose of his Afghanistan policy was to “bring this war to a successful conclusion [by denying] al-Qaeda a safe haven.” Obama argued the U.S. military goals were to “reverse the Taliban's momentum... and strengthen the capacity of security forces and government.”⁶ However, other U.S. policies during Obama’s Presidency went beyond military capabilities by specifying the need to “create a strong central [Afghan] government” and “establish a ‘flourishing market economy.’”⁷

The current U.S. strategy falls in line with those defined by the preceding two Presidents. Recently, President Trump described the U.S. policy in Afghanistan as “grounded in the fundamental objective of preventing any further attacks on the United States by terrorists enjoying safe haven or support in Afghanistan.”⁸

³ Gregg, Gary L. “George W. Bush: Foreign Affairs.” *Miller Center*, 10 July 2017, millercenter.org/president/gwbush/foreign-affairs.

⁴ Whitlock, Craig. “Confidential Documents Reveal U.S. Officials Failed to Tell the Truth about the War in Afghanistan.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 9 Dec. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/?wpisrc=al_news__alert-national--alert-world--alert-politics&wpmk=1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Associated Press*. “Updated: Obama Speech Balances Afghanistan Troop Buildup with Exit Pledge.” Cleveland, 2 Dec. 2009, www.cleveland.com/nation/2009/12/obamas_speech_on_adding_30000.html.

⁷ Whitlock.

⁸ Thomas.

Methodology

This qualitative paper uses a narrative analysis to study five specific variables and their influence on national security decision-making policies in Afghanistan. The paper begins with a historical context of the position the U.S. is in today and why the country still has troops in Afghanistan. A variety of documents, in particular books and academic articles (found mostly through Google Scholar and the Duke University library), offer a brief view of the relationship between the United States and Afghanistan that has existed throughout the last two decades. I primarily explain this relationship from an American perspective, as the paper focuses on domestic variables.

After the literature review of the context of the conflict, the paper delves into the first variable, public opinion. The section includes an examination of American public opinion polls and how public views have shifted over time. Public opinion is referred back to in later sections as well, in the discussion of the legitimacy and risk variables of the paper. To find these polls, I utilized large polling organizations, including Gallup and Pew, and individual polls conducted through national newspapers and television stations, such as CBS News, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal.

The second variable that is discussed in the paper is authority. In particular, this section examines specific laws and principles that have authorized U.S. troops to be stationed in and engage in operations in Afghanistan since 2001. Primary sources for this section include the 2001 AUMF and the 2015, 2018, and 2019 unsuccessful attempts to rescind the law. An additional resource used is Lawfare, as the informational magazine has many articles devoted to understanding and debating the authority of the AUMF. The authority section concludes with an

explanation of how U.S. troops are legally allowed to be present in Afghanistan today and in what capacity.

The third section focuses on the legitimacy of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. While this variable touches on public opinion and how it can determine legitimacy, the section primarily focuses on Presidential speeches to determine changing objectives over time. As such, within this section is reference to politics to explain what specific policies were implemented and what they were meant to accomplish. I analyze these objectives through employed strategies to determine whether or not they are or were effective. The majority of the speeches come from the Miller Center's compilation of Presidential Speeches, with the remainder from the White House's collection of briefings and Presidential statements.

The goal of reading these documents is to explain why the U.S. military is still present in Afghanistan and whether the presence is legitimate domestically, to both American political leaders and the American public. To analyze the information, I kept notes on how the wording of speeches and reports have changed over time. Of particular interest is how priorities announced by the U.S. have changed from counterterrorism strategies to nation-building and then back to counterterrorism. This information is particularly useful in analyzing the legitimacy of the U.S. presence, particularly in examining how statements have matched up with actions (both those proposed or executed).

Following legitimacy, the cost variable is analyzed. An assessment is made on the costs (monetary and human) and the sustainability of the costs in the future. This section is important in determining whether the costs follow the U.S. strategy for counter-terrorism. To understand the costs, three sources are heavily utilized. The sources include SIGAR (Special Inspector

General for Afghanistan Reconstruction), CRS' semi-annual reports, and Brown University's Cost of War Project.

Finally, I examine the perceived risks of both staying in Afghanistan and in withdrawing troops and leaving the country. I use the information I compiled throughout the rest of the paper to determine what most concerns U.S. politicians and the American public. I identify the major risks and provide an assessment of their implications. For the risk variable, I also analyze public opinion polls that show Americans' fears and perceptions of the threat of terrorism. This variable includes little outside research, as it instead elaborates on and assesses the specific risks touched upon in the rest of the paper.

The paper concludes with implications for how the domestic considerations and variables influence or relate to questions of staying in Afghanistan.

Understanding the U.S. Military Presence in Afghanistan

The roots of terrorism have been present in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979. The invasion led to the rise of the Mujahideen (a collection of insurgent groups) whom the U.S. initially supported. Much of the Mujahideen eventually transformed into organizations that threaten the U.S., including the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The Mujahideen coalition government ruled Afghanistan during the mid-1990s until the Taliban took over. The Taliban permitted Afghanistan to be a safe haven for other terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, who launched the 9/11 attacks.

A few days after the 9/11 attacks, Congress passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), which acted as the legal justification for the U.S. to go to war.⁹ In particular, the

⁹ "S.J.Res. 23 — 107th Congress: Authorization for Use of Military Force." *GovTrack*, 5 Nov. 2019, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/107/sjres23>.

AUMF allowed the U.S. to use force against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks and those who harbored them. Simultaneously, the U.S. and the UN demanded that the Taliban hand over Osama bin Laden and expel al-Qaeda from Afghanistan.¹⁰ After refusing to adhere to either request, the U.S. launched Operation Enduring Freedom in collaboration with the UK.¹¹ The goal was to dismantle al-Qaeda and target the Taliban, who controlled Afghanistan.¹²

Initially, Operation Enduring Freedom was largely successful. The Operation began on October 7th with a bombing campaign, which was quickly followed by a ground invasion of 10,000 American troops.¹³ By November 12th, the Taliban had retreated from Kabul, Afghanistan's capital city. By mid-December, the U.S. and its allies drove the Taliban from power, and the last Taliban stronghold, Kandahar, fell. At this point, most al-Qaeda and Taliban operatives and leaders escaped to Pakistan or to the rural and remote mountainous regions in Northern Afghanistan.¹⁴ Bush continued military missions by maintaining a light military footprint in Afghanistan. After 2006, Bush increased the U.S. military footprint to combat the Taliban which had regained strength in the country. American operations in Afghanistan were able to continue with little scrutiny by the U.S. media for the rest of the decade, as attention turned to the Iraq War.

When Obama began his Presidency in early 2009, 38,000 U.S. troops were stationed in Afghanistan (see Figure 1). In an effort to recommit the U.S. to Afghanistan and confirm his intention to eradicate terrorism, Obama approved the deployment of an additional 17,000

¹⁰ "U.S.-Led Attack on Afghanistan Begins." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 20 July 2010, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/u-s-led-attack-on-afghanistan-begins.

¹¹ Vulliamy, Ed, et al. "It's Time for War, Bush and Blair Tell Taliban." *The Guardian*, Guardian News, and Media, 7 Oct. 2001, www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/07/politics.september11.

¹² Glass, Andrew. "US Invades Afghanistan, Oct. 7, 2001." *Politico*, 7 Oct. 2018, www.politico.com/story/2018/10/07/this-day-in-politics-oct-7-2001-867332.

¹³ "A Timeline of the US War in Afghanistan." *Council on Foreign Relations*, www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan.

¹⁴ "U.S.-Led Attack on Afghanistan Begins."

troops.¹⁵ Despite this increase, several military leaders, such as General McChrystal, General Petraeus, and Admiral Mullen, pushed Obama to commit to another troop surge within the year.¹⁶ The belief was that more troops combined with the “protect-the-population counterinsurgency strategy” could turn the stalling war effort. Those pushing for the surge thought it would allow the military to protect critical areas from the Taliban.¹⁷ In December 2009, Obama announced the deployment of 30,000 additional U.S. troops, bringing the total to nearly 100,000.¹⁸

In June 2011, Obama announced that 33,000 U.S. forces deployed in the surge a year and a half earlier would return to the U.S. within the next 15 months. Shortly after his announcement, U.S. casualties grew, causing the American public to increase their demands for a withdrawal. August 2011 marked the deadliest month for U.S. forces since the conflict began, with a total of 71 casualties. The following month saw 77 U.S. troops wounded by a Taliban suicide bomber at the entrance of Combat Outpost Sayed Abad.¹⁹

Since 2011, the U.S. has maintained a military presence in Afghanistan and has continued to engage in support operations in conjunction with the Afghan Army, but in more limited ways. In recent years, the U.S. has placed greater emphasis on shifting more responsibility to Afghan forces while decreasing its troop presence. For the last year and a half, the U.S. has been engaged in direct talks with the Taliban with the goal of reaching and executing a peace agreement, which

¹⁵ “Operation Enduring Freedom Fast Facts.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 26 Sept. 2019, www.cnn.com/2013/10/28/world/operation-enduring-freedom-fast-facts/index.html.

¹⁶ Chandrasekaran, Rajiv. “The Afghan Surge Is Over.” *Foreign Policy*, 25 Sept. 2012, foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/25/the-afghan-surge-is-over/.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ “Operation Enduring Freedom Fast Facts.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

was signed on February 28th, 2020. As of March 2020, 8,000 U.S. troops and an additional 8,500 troops from 39 NATO allies and partner countries remain in Afghanistan.²⁰

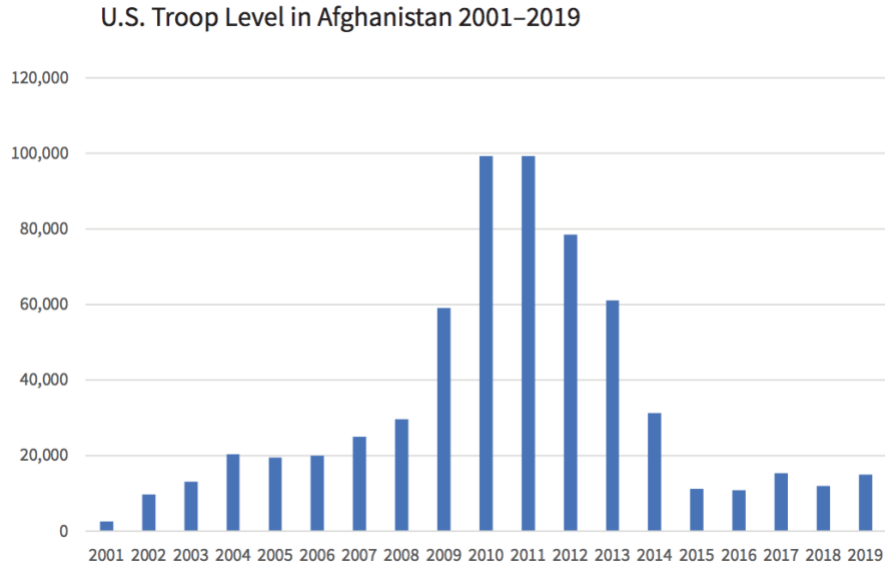


Figure 1: This graph of U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan shows the steady increase of troops between 2001 – 2008 and the surge that occurred during the beginning of President Obama’s first term. Since 2011, the majority of U.S. troops have been withdrawn from Afghanistan. Under President Trump, there was a temporary increase, but as of March 2020, there are approximately 8,000 U.S. troops left in the country. (Source Credit: Defense Manpower Data Center; DOD FY 2020 Budget Overview).

Despite the decrease in troop levels, there is still immense debate over the U.S.’s future in Afghanistan. The issue became more convoluted after the Washington Post published the Afghanistan Papers in early December 2019. The report and released documents revealed remarks by high-ranking officials who believed the War was unwinnable, but who had systematically misled the public. Perhaps influenced by the release of the Papers, on February 29th, 2020, the U.S. and Taliban signed a deal for a large “reduction in violence” that may finally

²⁰ Lee, Matthew, et al. “All US Troops to Leave Afghanistan in 14 Months If Taliban Meets Commitments of Peace Deal.” *Military Times*, 2 Mar. 2020, www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/02/29/all-us-troops-to-leave-afghanistan-in-14-months-if-taliban-meets-commitments-of-peace-deal-signed-today/.

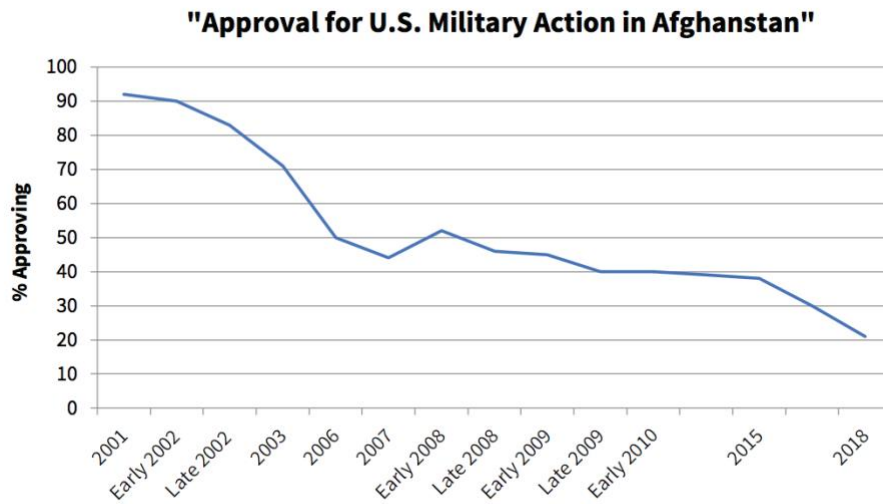
end American military involvement in Afghanistan.²¹ As part of the deal, the U.S. has agreed to a gradual troop withdrawal of 5,000 troops in 135 days and the promise that the remaining soldiers will exit the country within the next 14 months. In return, the Taliban pledged to block terrorist groups from Afghanistan and engage with the Afghan government in an attempt to unite the country. This marks the first time in almost two decades that there is a real possibility of ending what was viewed as a forever war. However, challenges in Afghan leadership and a divided government, along with Taliban insurgency, threaten the strength of the peace deal.²²

Public Opinion

Public opinion for the War in Afghanistan has steadily decreased throughout the last 18 years (see Figure 2). This section describes in detail how opinions have changed from being extremely supportive of military operations in Afghanistan to strongly disapproving of continued actions and a U.S. troop presence. Over the years, newspapers, TV stations, and major polling organizations have asked the public a variety of questions designed to understand how Americans feel about our presence in Afghanistan, whether they believe the U.S. is winning the War, and whether they think engaging in military activities in the country was a mistake.

²¹ Mashal, Mujib, and Russell Goldman. “4 Takeaways From the U.S. Deal With the Taliban.” *The New York Times*, 29 Feb. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/world/asia/us-taliban-afghanistan.html.

²² Constable, Pamela. “Afghanistan Is Stuck with a Divided Government and Taliban Insurgency. Now, Coronavirus Is Spreading.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 18 Mar. 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-coronavirus-crisis/2020/03/18/29b0ac8c-6875-11ea-b199-3a9799c54512_story.html.



Source: Gallup Organization, CNN/Opinion Research, and Washington Post/ABC News²⁰

Figure 2: This graph combined polling data from three sources, including Gallup (2001-2009, 2010-Present), CNN/Opinion Research (2001-2009), and the Washington Post/ABC News (2010). Before 2009, polls focused on questions that asked whether people “approved or disapproved of U.S. military action in Afghanistan.” After 2010, polls asked the public “if the U.S. is winning in Afghanistan.” This graph combines these two different types of questions to represent broad, general trends. It shows that public support for military action has decreased substantially from above 90% in 2001 to approximately 20% at the end of 2018. The graph shows a temporary spike in early 2008, which is likely from the media attention the War was receiving during the Presidential debates. During the early debates, the War in Afghanistan was put into a better light and viewed more positively when compared to the ongoing Iraq War. (Source Credit: CSIS).²³

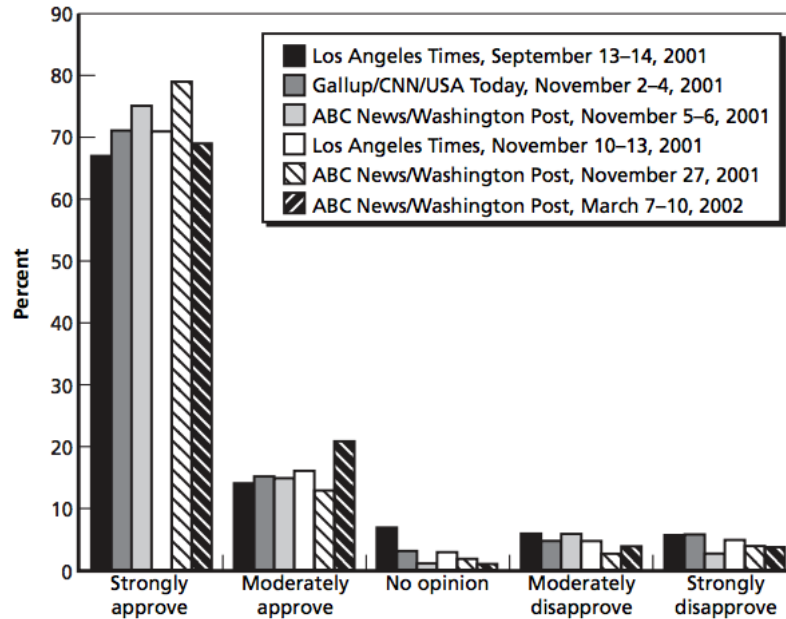
After the 9/11 attacks, there was significant bipartisan support to wage a war against the terrorist organizations responsible for the deaths of over 2,500 Americans. A poll conducted by CNN, USA Today, and Gallup on September 21-22nd 2001 found that 89% of Americans believed the U.S. should take military action in retaliation for the terrorist attacks on September 11th.²⁴ Another Gallup poll conducted a month later, right after the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom, showed 88% of Americans approved of military action in Afghanistan.²⁵

²³ Cancian, Mark F. “Tell Me How This Ends: Military Advice, Strategic Goals, and the ‘Forever War’ in Afghanistan.” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, July 2019, <https://sakai.duke.edu/access/content/attachment/ae21e20f-0700-4d43-b245-761510b27db8/Assignments/e0ab5ca7-4af3-4680-aa37-bcf8e288e741/Tell%20me%20How%20this%20Ends%20Afghanistan%202019%20Cancain.pdf>.

²⁴ Moore, David W. “Support for War on Terrorism Rivals Support for WWII.” *Gallup*, 31 Oct. 2019, news.gallup.com/poll/4954/support-war-terrorism-rivals-support-wwii.aspx.

²⁵ Newport, Frank. “Public Opinion of the War in Afghanistan.” *Gallup*, 7 June 2017, news.gallup.com/poll/9994/public-opinion-war-afghanistan.aspx.

Throughout the first few months of the War, news agencies that conducted public opinion polls found similar findings in the public’s support for Afghanistan (see Figure 3).



RAND MG231-A-4.1

Figure 3: Public support for Afghanistan measured by national newspapers and polling centers in late 2001 and early 2002 found strong support for going to war. Initial polls asked similar questions with variation in wording to determine support levels of using U.S. military action in Afghanistan. (Source credit: RAND).

The majority of Americans were also supportive of the idea of a long-term war to defeat terrorism. High support for a long-term war indicates the threat perception of terrorism within the U.S. was high following the attacks in 2001. Gallup sent out a survey on September 21-22nd and another on November 26-27th that asked, “Do you think the war against terrorism will be a long war or a short one?” In September, 92% of those who responded thought it would be a long war; this percentage dropped to 89% in November. The same survey also asked, “Do you think the war against terrorism will be a difficult one, or a comparatively easy one?” 94% of the

responses in September demonstrated the public believed that it would be a difficult war; this increased to 95% two months later.²⁶

Furthermore, at the onset of the War, most Americans had a high tolerance for U.S. casualties. A number of polls found that between two-thirds and three-fourths of Americans considered the war to be worth the costs, even if the casualties were “substantial.” A Pew poll conducted from September 13-17th 2001 found that 77% of those who responded favored “taking military action, including the use of ground troops, to retaliate against whoever is responsible for the terrorist attacks, even if it means that the U.S. armed forces might suffer thousands of casualties.”²⁷ The trend continued over the following months. A CBS News and New York Times poll collecting data between October 25-28th found that 61% of the public said the “war would be worth its costs even if several thousand American troops lost their lives.”²⁸ An NBC News and Wall Street Journal poll from November 9-11th found that 74% agreed that “the war on terrorism in Afghanistan was worth risking substantial numbers of casualties.”²⁹ Even by March 2002, Fox News and Opinion Dynamics discovered that 73% of Americans said that “they would still support the war if the current trend of increasing casualties in Afghanistan continued.”³⁰ The results from the numerous polls conducted within the first year of military operations in Afghanistan indicate that the American public theoretically supported a long, expensive, and casualty producing war that that would prevent another large-scale attack.

²⁶ Larson, Eric V., and Bogdan Savych. “American public support for US military operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad.” *Rand Corporation*, 2005, pg. 98. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG231.pdf. Originally comes from: *The Gallup Organization*, “Poll Topics & Trends: War on Terrorism,” available at <http://www.gallup.com>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 98. Originally comes from: *Pew Research Center*, 13 – 17 Sept. 2001.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 122. Originally comes from footnote 63: *CBS News/New York Times*, 25 – 28 Oct 2001.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 122. Originally comes from footnote 67: *NBC News/Wall Street Journal*, 9 – 11 Nov. 2001.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 123. Originally comes from footnote 72: *Fox News/Opinion Dynamics*, 12 – 13 March 2002.

However, it is unclear if people at the time could grasp what that war would realistically look like as it progressed.

During the start of the War in Afghanistan (roughly 2001 – 2003), Americans not only supported a long, challenging war, but they also believed it was going well, primarily due to the initial success seen with the removal of the Taliban from power during Operation Enduring Freedom.³¹ In 2003, media attention turned to focus almost exclusively on the Iraq War, so Afghanistan was largely ignored and free from intense scrutiny. Significant public attention did not return to Afghanistan until the 2008 Presidential campaign debates and the start of Barack Obama's first term.³²

When Obama began his Presidency in early 2009, there were 38,000 U.S. troops already in Afghanistan. In an effort to recommit the U.S. to Afghanistan and confirm his intention to eliminate terrorism, Obama approved the deployment of an additional 17,000 troops.³³ This decision attracted relatively high support, with a USA Today and Gallup poll from February 2009 showing that 65% of Americans supported Obama's decision to send in the additional troops.³⁴ These numbers are relatively high considering the U.S. had already been engaged in the War for almost eight years.

By the end of the year, Obama decided to increase the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan through a larger surge. Public opinion for this decision was varied. A November 2009 Gallup poll demonstrated that 35% of Americans supported General McChrystal's recommendations for an additional 40,000 troops sent to Afghanistan. Another 7% supported a

³¹ Pinto, Jennifer. "Public's Views of Afghanistan War Have Turned Sour." *CBS News*, 5 Oct. 2009, www.cbsnews.com/news/publics-views-of-afghanistan-war-have-turned-sour/.

³² Jacobson, Gary C. "A Tale of Two Wars: Public Opinion on the US Military Interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40.4, Dec. 2010, 585-610.

³³ "Operation Enduring Freedom Fast Facts."

³⁴ Dilanian, Ken. "Poll: 50% Oppose US Surge in Afghanistan." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 25 Sept. 2009, usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2009-09-25-afghanistan_N.htm.

smaller troop increase, whereas 44% wanted to see a troop reduction, which is the first time a substantial percentage of the public expressed a desire for a troop decrease.³⁵ A month later, CNN conducted a poll that showed 59% of Americans supported Obama's plan to send in an additional 30,000 troops.³⁶ The higher level of support in December could be a result of Obama's decision to send in 10,000 fewer troops than General McChrystal's original recommendation. It is also possible that the increase of American support in December was a result of Obama's phrasing of the announcement—Obama strategically announced that the surge would be temporary and that troops would be withdrawn within 18 months, which may have alleviated some of the public's concerns.

The mixed opinions for the troop surge mirrored the public's waning support for U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan. The same CNN poll that showed a slight majority of Americans supporting Obama's plan also found that 54% of those who responded were opposed to the War.³⁷ An October 2009 poll conducted by CBS and the New York Times found that 47% of Americans thought the U.S. was doing the right thing in fighting in Afghanistan, whereas 42% argued the U.S. shouldn't be involved in the country.³⁸ By July 2010, 62% of Americans thought the war was going badly, a substantial uptick of the 49% who indicated the same belief a month earlier.³⁹

Although support for the War was continuously decreasing since 2001, some political scientists view 2010 as an important turning point for the public. The year marked the emergence

³⁵ Jones, Jeffrey M. "Americans Split on Afghanistan Troop Increase vs. Decrease." *Gallup*, 9 Mar. 2019, news.gallup.com/poll/124238/americans-split-afghanistan-troop-increase-decrease.aspx.

³⁶ Good, Chris. "When and Why Did Americans Turn Against the War in Afghanistan?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 22 June 2011, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/06/when-and-why-did-americans-turn-against-the-war-in-afghanistan/240880/.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Pinto.

³⁹ Condon, Stephanie. "Poll: Most Want Afghanistan Withdrawal Timeline." *CBS News*, 13 July 2010, www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-most-want-afghanistan-withdrawal-timeline/.

of the first major partisan divides between traditionally dovish Democrats and hawkish Republicans. Polls indicate that Democratic doves were more eager to terminate military operations that did not seem to be successful. Democrats are traditionally less tolerant of war, and 2010 marked the deadliest year for American soldiers since the War began, with 500 military personnel killed.⁴⁰ After nine years resulting in an increased number of American deaths, Democrats wanted to withdraw troops within a set deadline. Similar to Democrats, Republican hawks were also under the impression that not all the U.S. goals were being achieved as desired, but they were more willing to wait for a potential future military success, despite the high costs from nearly a decade of war.

Polls conducted in 2010 underscore the political divide in America. By June 2010, Pew found that a slight majority of the U.S. public supported the War (53% were in support, compared to 40% in opposition).⁴¹ Yet this poll showed that only 35% of Democrats were in favor of keeping troops in Afghanistan, compared to 57% who wanted forces removed as soon as possible. Republicans were more supportive of the war effort, as 59% claimed to be in favor of keeping troops in the country. Independents fell in between, with a total of 45% wanting troops to remain for the time being. The partisan split was even more dramatic when people were asked about a timetable for potential troop withdrawals. 54% of Americans supported a deadline, including 73% of Democrats, 32% of Republicans, and 54% of Independents.⁴²

By March 2011, support for the War further decreased amongst the general American public. Two-thirds of Americans thought the war wasn't worth fighting, which was the highest

⁴⁰ Mitchell, Ellen. "Combat Deaths in Afghanistan Reach a Five-Year High." *The Hill*, 22 Aug. 2019, thehill.com/policy/defense/458431-combat-deaths-in-afghanistan-reach-a-five-year-high.

⁴¹ Heimlich, Russell. "Far Fewer Democrats Support Keeping Troops in Afghanistan." *Pew Research Center*, 14 Dec. 2010, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2010/12/14/far-fewer-democrats-support-keeping-troops-in-afghanistan/.

⁴² Condon.

proportion opposed to the conflict since it began.⁴³ This changed briefly in May 2011, when the U.S. was finally able to achieve a significant victory—locating and killing bin Laden, the man responsible for the 9/11 attacks. After bin Laden’s death in May 2011, a slight majority of Americans (55%) believed the war was going well for the U.S., which political scientists later realized created a false plateau in polls.⁴⁴ This marked the first time in two years that Gallup found a majority of Americans thought the U.S. was doing well in Afghanistan. Many Americans thought the death of bin Laden signaled the end of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and thought it was time to exit the country.⁴⁵ A May 2011 poll found that 59% of Americans held this opinion, while 36% thought there was more work for the U.S. to do in Afghanistan, which required troops to stay.⁴⁶ A second poll conducted a month later by CBS News found a near inverse: 36% of Americans thought bin Laden's death meant the U.S. completed its mission, whereas 56% disagreed.⁴⁷ This poll did not specify whether those who disagreed thought the U.S. had not fulfilled its mission and should remain in the country until it succeeded or if they did not believe there was a (winnable) mission to complete.

A month after bin Laden’s death, in June 2011, Obama announced that the 30,000 U.S. forces deployed in the surge in late 2009 would return to the U.S. within the next 15 months.⁴⁸ There was a high level of support for pulling troops out of Afghanistan. A Pew poll taken from

⁴³ Wilson, Scott, and Jon Cohen. “Poll: Nearly Two-Thirds of Americans Say Afghan War Isn't Worth Fighting.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 15 Mar. 2011, www.washingtonpost.com/world/poll-nearly-two-thirds-of-americans-say-afghan-war-isnt-worth-fighting/2011/03/14/ABRbeEW_story.html.

⁴⁴ Jones, Jeffrey M. “Americans More Positive on Afghanistan After Bin Laden Death.” *Gallup*, 14 Mar. 2011, news.gallup.com/poll/147488/americans-positive-afghanistan-bin-laden-death.aspx.

⁴⁵ Silverleib, Alan. “Will Bin Laden's Death End the United States' Afghan War?” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 5 May 2011, www.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/05/04/afghanistan.policy/index.html.

⁴⁶ Jones.

⁴⁷ Madison, Lucy. “Poll: Four in 5 Approve of Obama's Plan for Afghanistan Drawdown.” *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 29 June 2011, www.cbsnews.com/news/poll-four-in-5-approve-of-obamas-plan-for-afghanistan-drawdown/.

⁴⁸ “Operation Enduring Freedom Fast Facts.”

June 15th-19th found that 56% of Americans wanted forces removed “as soon as possible” (see Figure 4).

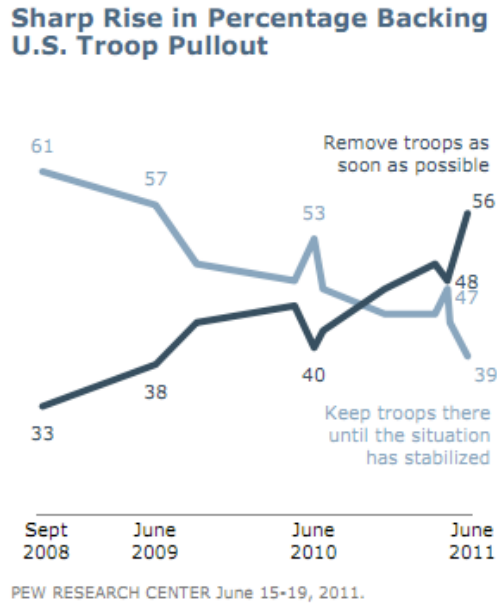


Figure 4: From September 2008 – June 2011, Pew measured public support for removing troops from Afghanistan as soon as possible compared to leaving them in the country until the situation stabilized. While 2008 showed three-fifths of Americans wanted to keep troops in the country, by June 2011, the majority wanted them removed. Bin Laden's death is represented by the second blip in the graph, when public opinion about what to do with U.S. troops was nearly equal. (Source credit: Pew).

When specifying that the withdrawal would happen within 15 months, political divides arose, both between and within parties. A poll conducted in June 2011 found that 57% of Democrats thought the number of troops that would be withdrawn in the following year was appropriate, whereas 30% thought it was too low. These results show consistency across Democratic responses to polls. Previous surveys showed that the majority of Democrats wanted to reduce the number of troops, either immediately or in the near future, so the responses in this Pew poll are not surprising. Independents were more split than Democrats as 40% thought the number of troops being withdrawn was appropriate, 33% thought it was too low, and 18% thought it was too high. These results are also understandable, as Independents are more likely to have opinions that do not follow one specific political party. Independents consistently show a

relatively even split in sharply divided political opinions. Republicans were the most fractured political group measured by the poll. At the time, 33% of Republicans believed the number was right, and another third found it was too high, while 20% thought it was too low.⁴⁹ Republicans are traditionally more willing than other parties to support war and military escalation, and they have showed the highest levels of support for the War in Afghanistan. However, the split within the party in this particular poll may represent a larger division within the Republican party. More directly, it indicates the fatigue experienced after a decade of war. Many Republicans were willing to accept a troop withdrawal because they could consider the U.S. having won a major victory by killing bin Laden. It is more palatable—even for war hawks—to accept a troop de-escalation after a major victory, after years of little success.

By late 2011, a CNN and ORC poll revealed that only 35% of Americans favored a U.S. war in Afghanistan—a significant drop from even a year prior.⁵⁰ Pew’s April 2012 poll showed record-low support for keeping troops in the country.⁵¹ 32% of the public thought the U.S. should keep troops until Afghanistan stabilized, while 60% preferred to have troops removed right away. The poll showed support had fallen in both political parties. In 2012, Republicans remained more split, with 48% wanting forces removed and 45% wanting them to stay until Afghanistan stabilized. Democrats and Independents were approximately equal (66% and 62%) in wanting troops removed immediately and 29% in each group wanting them to remain.⁵²

Since 2011, the vast majority of U.S. troops have been withdrawn from Afghanistan, but the U.S. has maintained a military presence and has thus continued to engage Afghanistan

⁴⁹ Saad, Lydia. “Americans Broadly Favor Obama’s Afghanistan Pullout Plan.” *Gallup*, 23 Apr. 2019, news.gallup.com/poll/148313/americans-broadly-favor-obama-afghanistan-pullout-plan.aspx.

⁵⁰ “Afghanistan.” *Polling Report*, 2015, www.pollingreport.com/afghan.htm.

⁵¹ “Record-Low Support for Keeping US Troops in Afghanistan.” *Pew Research Center*, 26 Apr. 2012, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2012/04/26/record-low-support-for-keeping-u-s-troops-in-afghanistan/.

⁵² *Ibid.*

through the War. Donald Trump ran for President in 2016 on a platform of getting the U.S. out of Afghanistan, a policy statement that followed trends in public support. However, when he became President in 2017, Trump reversed his decision and increased U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan, despite having little public support.⁵³ One 2017 poll argued that only 31% of Republicans agreed the U.S. should increase its troop levels,⁵⁴ while another found that up to 42% of Republicans were willing to send in more troops.⁵⁵ Although these numbers show a minority of Republicans wanted to increase troop levels, it is likely that the support was as high as it was due to Trump's initial tenure in office. Traditionally, the policies of newly elected Presidents tend to have a high level of initial support from the incoming President's political party.⁵⁶

Another aspect examined in recent polls has focused on whether Americans think the War in Afghanistan was worth fighting or worth "military engagement" in general. A 2017 poll found that despite partisan divides, the majority of Americans (60%) did not feel the war was worth military engagement. Broken down by political party, 74% of Democrats, 65% of Independents, and 41% of Republicans believed the war was no longer worth fighting.⁵⁷ A 2018 Pew poll reversed the wording of the question to ask whether people thought the war was worth fighting, rather than if it was not.⁵⁸ It found that Republicans were more likely to think the war

⁵³ Shepard, Steven, et al. "Trump's Challenge: A Wall of Public Skepticism on Afghanistan War." *Politico*, 21 Aug. 2017, www.politico.com/story/2017/08/21/trump-afghanistan-war-troops-241871.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Blumenthal, Mark. "Trump's Afghanistan Strategy Risks Public Opinion Headwinds." *SurveyMonkey*, 2017, www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/trumps-afghanistan-strategy-risks-public-opinion-headwinds/.

⁵⁶ Gao, George, and Samantha Smith. "Presidential Job Approval Ratings from Ike to Obama." *Pew Research Center*, 12 Jan. 2016, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/12/presidential-job-approval-ratings-from-ike-to-obama/.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Igielnik, Ruth, and Kim Parker. "Majorities of US Veterans, Public Say the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan Were Not Worth Fighting." *Pew Research Center*, 10 July 2019, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/10/majorities-of-u-s-veterans-public-say-the-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-were-not-worth-fighting/.

was worth fighting than Democrats, with 45% of veterans and 46% of the public in agreement. The Pew poll also found that 58% of U.S. veterans thought the Afghanistan War was not worth military engagement anymore, a percentage very similar to the 59% of the public who thought the same. It seems that one of the main reasons why Americans thought U.S. military engagements had not been working was the lack of a clear strategic objective. Only 15% of the population believed the U.S. had a clear objective in 2017, compared to 53% of the public and 60% of veterans who disagreed.⁵⁹

To date, the most recent public opinion poll is from October 2019, published less than two months before the Afghanistan Papers were released. The University of Maryland conducted a survey on “Critical Issues” and asked questions on the public’s view of the War in Afghanistan. The poll concluded that the U.S. remains “comparably supportive, after 18 years of war, of maintaining the U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan.”⁶⁰ Although 40% of Democrats and 46% of Republicans favored decreasing the troop levels or removing all troops by the end of the year, a surprising 38% of Democrats and 34% of Republicans were in favor of maintaining current troop levels in the country. Support for the War is at an all-time low, and yet this poll found people have less desire to remove or decrease troop levels in Afghanistan than they have in years. This poll’s conclusion that the U.S. is “comparably supportive” indicates that a large portion of the population may be complacent and has accepted the concept of a forever war. The American public wants to leave Afghanistan, but also appears to be relatively content at keeping low levels of troops in the country if the domestic costs do not increase. This hypothesis is

⁵⁹ Ruger, William. “Public Realism on Afghanistan.” *RealClearPolitics*, 8 Oct. 2018, www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2018/10/08/public_realism_on_afghanistan_138280.html.

⁶⁰ Kopchick, Connor, and Shibley Telhami. “This Recent Poll Shows How Americans Think about the War in Afghanistan.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 5 Jan. 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/01/05/this-recent-poll-shows-how-americans-think-about-war-afghanistan/.

supported by the plurality of respondents (at 44%) who said they believe the U.S. has an obligation toward the Afghan government and Afghan society affected by the war.

By viewing public opinion polls over a 19-year period, it is clear that Americans have become less confident that the War is worth the trouble and burden it has imposed on the U.S. Americans have been tired of the War for some time, but politicians have not enacted major policy changes that support what the public wants, and in fact it appears that politicians have occasionally disregarded public opinion. For example, public support began to notably decline around 2010, which is also when the first major political divides became evident. Although approval ratings for the War were low, Obama committed to a large troop surge around the same time. It is likely that the surge—which was seen as neutral at best, and relatively unsuccessful at worst—helped to further decrease the public’s support. Even bin Laden’s death only created a brief blip of support for the War efforts. Public support continued to decrease, aided with a large number of American deaths during the time (from 2009 – 2012, over 1,500 U.S. military personnel were killed, which represents more casualties than the rest of the War combined). The only noticeable political response was to continue to end the surge and remove troops, which was already Obama’s intended plan. Since then, more troops have continued to be withdrawn, but few other policies have been enacted, even with a change in President.

Although by 2020 the U.S. has withdrawn most of its troops and only 8,000 remain, it is not necessarily a direct result of low public support. Instead, the troop reduction can more likely be attributed to a combination of a lack of success, drain of resources, and general disinterest in engaging with the country. Yet recent polls, such as the University of Maryland survey explained above, suggest that a sizeable portion of the American public may have passively accepted the

concept of a forever war. As will be further examined in the section on the risk variable towards the end of this paper, the American public may be content enough with staying in Afghanistan, even without winning the War, if they maintain the perception that staying is keeping the U.S. safe from terrorist attacks.

Authority

The United States' authority to conduct military operations and deploy troops to Afghanistan originates from the 2001 AUMF. Passed almost unanimously a week after the 9/11 attacks, the document's stated purpose is: "To authorize the use of United States Armed Forces against those responsible for the recent attacks launched against the United States." The document allows the President to use "all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons."⁶¹ The AUMF was unique in that it failed to target a specific country that the U.S. wanted to wage war against, but it provided the flexibility to fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Right to Self-Defense

The AUMF was passed so the U.S. could exercise its right to self-defense to protect U.S. citizens. The right to self-defense allows a state to act immediately and respond to aggression posed by another state. In order for the claim to be valid, a state must immediately report its intentions to the United Nations Security Council. If a state uses armed force as self-defense, it must be a last resort showing no alternatives are viable. Furthermore, a state is required to

⁶¹ "S.J.Res. 23 — 107th Congress: Authorization for Use of Military Force."

respond with an appropriate level of force for its self-protection, and it cannot respond with additional force, as that would be seen as taking preemptive measures.⁶² Preemptive measures are not legal under the United Nations Charter, as the actions do not respond to an imminent threat and thus cannot be viewed as definitively defensive.⁶³

The United States used the self-defense theory to justify its intervention in Afghanistan, a country known for harboring terrorists who had attacked the homeland. The U.S. government first formally used the term “self-defense” on September 18th, 2001 in the U.S. Congress’ Joint Resolution, which was the first draft of the AUMF.⁶⁴ The official House of Commons Library briefing paper in the U.K. explains that “the military campaign in Afghanistan was not specifically mandated by the UN, but was widely (although not universally) perceived to be a legitimate form of self-defense under the UN Charter.”⁶⁵ The argument used by the U.S. is that the self-defense claim is legitimate under article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibiting the “threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.”⁶⁶ Understanding the context of how the U.S. viewed self-defense and therefore obtained the legal authority to begin a War in Afghanistan guided national security decision-making in 2001.

⁶² Quigley, John. “The Afghanistan War and Self-Defense.” *Valparaiso University Law Review*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2003, pp. 541–562.

⁶³ Potcovaru, Alex. “The International Law of Anticipatory Self-Defense and U.S. Options in North Korea.” *Lawfare*, 31 Oct. 2019, www.lawfareblog.com/international-law-anticipatory-self-defense-and-us-options-north-korea.

⁶⁴ Williamson, Myra. “Terrorism, War and International Law: the Legality of the Use of Force against Afghanistan in 2001.” *Routledge*, 2016.

⁶⁵ “The Lack of Legality in the US-Led Invasion of Afghanistan.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 23 Aug. 2017, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/23/the-lack-of-legality-in-the-us-led-invasion-of-afghanistan.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Continued Authority and Legality

The 2001 AUMF continues to act as the legal justification for U.S. troops and military activities in Afghanistan, and thus it continues to guide decision-making today. Through the AUMF, operations in Afghanistan have been statutorily authorized, even though they are ultimately controlled by the President, through his role as Commander in Chief. The President may dictate the terms of the operations, but Congress acts as the definitive authority in deciding whether the U.S. military may legally (according to U.S. standards) be present in Afghanistan. Thus, U.S. military missions have operated under legal domestic authority throughout the entirety of the War in Afghanistan.

However, Congress has the capability to change the authorization that allows the U.S. military to operate in Afghanistan. If both chambers vote on a bill rescission and have enough support, Congress can veto a missing Presidential signature to revoke the AUMF by passing a new law. There have been several attempts to repeal or revise the 2001 AUMF from Congressmembers who have been pushed by their constituents and by institutions. For example, in 2013, the Hoover Institution published a paper that argued the authorization should be replaced as it “no longer accurately reflected the threat the nation faced.”⁶⁷ Congress responded through rescission attempts in 2015 and 2018, but both were unsuccessful in obtaining enough support, particularly by Republicans. The most recent challenge to continued authority in Afghanistan occurred in June 2019, when the House of Representatives successfully voted to repeal the 2001 AUMF for the first time since the bill’s enactment. The provision was passed in an annual appropriations bill with every Republican voting against the bill.⁶⁸ Although the

⁶⁷ Chivvis, Christopher S., and Andrew Liepman. “Authorities for Military Operations against Terrorist Groups: the State of the Debate and Options for Congress.” *RAND Corporation*, 2016, pg. 18.

⁶⁸ Golshan, Tara. “House Democrats Vote to Repeal 2001 Law Used to Authorize Perpetual War.” *Vox*, 19 June 2019, www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/6/19/18691936/house-democrats-vote-repeal-9-11-aumf-war-iran.

provision has thus far been ignored in the Republican-led Senate, it is a reminder that the authority for operations in Afghanistan can be revoked. In the meantime, the 2001 AUMF continues to provide legal domestic authority and guide decision-making for an American military force in the country.

Legitimacy

In this section, legitimacy between politicians and the American public is examined to determine the effect and influence the variable has on national security decision-making. I argue there are two questions that must be positively answered by policymakers (in particular, Congress) in order to ensure the U.S. is operating legitimately in Afghanistan, strictly from a domestic perspective.

1. Do the employed strategies adequately address the stated objectives?
2. Are the objectives, if achieved, effective and do they deliver an acceptable endstate?

From a domestic perspective, if legitimacy were to exist, the stated objectives should match up with the employed strategies. Furthermore, the objectives would clearly lay out actionable goals, and effective strategies would then be created that accomplish said objectives.

Deriving Legitimacy

A beneficial way to assess legitimacy is to look at public opinion and how it has changed over time. When the public, and particularly the international community, supports a mission, it provides some degree of legitimacy. As the representative for the American public, Congress is supposed to express the will of the people. Congress can “give additional legitimacy to military operations by passing an authorization that reflects the will of their constituents,” such as what

occurred directly following 9/11.⁶⁹ At this point, a legal legitimacy begins to form. U.S. strategies, which should also reflect the public's views, are likewise directly derived from this legitimacy. The strategy the U.S. is pursuing at a given time is often announced by the President, who, in his role as Commander in Chief, has ultimate control over the military. As explained in detail in the public opinion section above, the majority of the American public no longer supports the War in Afghanistan, which indicates that by this measure, much of the legitimacy for being engaged in Afghanistan no longer exists.

Below, I dive deeper into the legitimacy variable and the internal struggle faced by the U.S. I offer several stated objectives that come directly from Presidential speeches throughout the last 19 years. The selections offer insight to Presidential priorities and U.S. objectives in Afghanistan over time. I apply the two-part test stated above to each Presidential statement and following actions, to determine if the prosecution of the war has been or currently is legitimate.

Stated Objectives

Sept. 22, 2001: President George W. Bush – Address on the U.S. Response to the Attacks of Sept. 11⁷⁰

“We will direct every resource at our command – every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war – to the disruption and to the defeat of the global terror network. Our response involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes... We will starve terrorists

⁶⁹ Chivvis. pg. 24.

⁷⁰ Bush, George. “Address on the U.S. Response to the Attacks of September 11.” *Miller Center*, 22 Sept. 2001, millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-22-2001-address-us-response-attacks-september-11.

of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism.”

The Address on the U.S. Response read by President Bush outlined broad goals that the U.S. intended to pursue. The initial statements were far from achievable as they required a multitude of strategies and immense resources to match up with the enormous objective. The actualized early U.S. response was focused on removing the Taliban from government and capturing or killing as many terrorists as possible. Although the U.S. succeeded in its first effort, the Taliban was able to regain strength and territory in only a few years, and continues to retain a strong presence in the country, even today. As such, the goals in Bush’s address failed to materialize as the objectives were too broad to meet up with any actionable strategy. For the better part of two decades, the Taliban has held territory and allowed other terrorist groups a partial safe haven. The U.S. has not been able to turn the groups against each other, drive them from Afghanistan, or prevent a refuge. Therefore, this example fails both parts of the proposed test as the stated objectives did not match up with the employed strategies and the objectives were not particularly effective.

Sept. 3, 2004: President George W. Bush – Remarks at the Republican National Convention⁷¹

“Our mission in Afghanistan is clear: We will help new leaders to train their armies, and move toward elections, and get on the path of stability and democracy as quickly as possible.”

The stated objectives offered at the Republican National Convention were more specific than they were in 2001, but still too vague and broad. These remarks offered political objectives for the direction of the War. The U.S. pursued strategies to train the Afghan army, but even

⁷¹ Bush, George. “Remarks at the Republican National Convention.” *Miller Center*, 3 Sept. 2004, millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/september-3-2004-remarks-republican-national-convention.

today, sixteen years after this speech was given, the country's army is viewed as weak and corrupt. The Afghan army continues to have high turnover and casualty rates and offers limited effectiveness in stabilizing the country and combating terrorism. The U.S. also pursued strategies and programs to increase democracy and fair elections. In 2004, Hamid Karzai was declared the first ever democratically elected head of state in Afghanistan. However, al-Qaeda and Taliban members have continuously threatened to disrupt elections and they have often employed violent tactics to undermine the government. The Taliban has been largely effective in disrupting elections—even in 2019—which has hampered any efforts towards the claim of a truly democratic Afghanistan. As such, this example also fails the proposed test. The stated objectives matched up better with employed strategies—there was mild, brief success in training the Afghan army and democratizing the country. However, neither the objectives nor the strategies were effective in the long-term, as Afghanistan is struggling to maintain a trained Army and is currently in a state of political chaos.

Dec. 1, 2009: President Barack Obama – Speech on Strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan⁷²

“Our overarching goal remains the same: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future. To meet that goal, we will pursue the following objectives within Afghanistan. We must deny al Qaeda a safe haven. We must reverse the Taliban's momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government. And we must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan's future. We will meet these objectives in three ways. First, we will pursue a military strategy that will break the

⁷² Obama, Barack. “Speech on Strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” *Miller Center*, 1 Dec. 2009, millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-1-2009-speech-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan.

Taliban's momentum and increase Afghanistan's capacity over the next 18 months. Second, we will work with our partners, the United Nations, and the Afghan people to pursue a more effective civilian strategy, so that the government can take advantage of improved security. Third, we will act with the full recognition that our success in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to our partnership with Pakistan.”

Obama’s objectives in 2009 experienced mixed success from employed strategies. As he stated later in the speech, “We’ve made progress on some important objectives. High-ranking al Qaeda and Taliban leaders have been killed, and we’ve stepped up the pressure on al Qaeda worldwide... In Afghanistan, we and our allies prevented the Taliban from stopping a presidential election, and – although it was marred by fraud – that election produced a government that is consistent with Afghanistan’s laws and constitution.” Yet despite these successes, many of the objectives were not achieved. Obama also addressed the failures and stated, “Afghanistan is not lost, but for several years it has moved backwards. There’s no imminent threat of the government being overthrown, but the Taliban has gained momentum. Al Qaeda has not reemerged in Afghanistan in the same numbers as before 9/11, but they retain their safe havens along the border. And our forces lack the full support they need to effectively train and partner with Afghan security forces and better secure the population.”

Although several initiatives were successful, the majority of the plans employed following Obama’s speech failed to accomplish many of the laid out goals, which questions the plausibility and legitimacy of the strategy. Obama’s strategy included a troop surge to deny terrorist groups a safe haven and help strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s security forces and government. Idealistic in theory, the strategy completely failed to match up with the desired objectives. Obama’s speech also marked a shift in U.S. goals, as the U.S. no longer intended to

defeat the Taliban “no matter what,” and aimed instead to reverse the Taliban’s momentum and focus more heavily on disrupting al-Qaeda.

June 22, 2011: President Barack Obama – Remarks on the Afghanistan Pullout⁷³

“The goal that we seek is achievable, and can be expressed simply: No safe haven from which al Qaeda or its affiliates can launch attacks against our homeland or our allies. What we can do, and will do, is build a partnership with the Afghan people that endures – one that ensures that we will be able to continue targeting terrorists and supporting a sovereign Afghan government.”

The U.S. technically succeeded in its goal to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for al-Qaeda, but it failed to later prevent ISIS’ control over much of the country. The U.S. also failed to build an enduring partnership with the Afghan people who are exhausted after experiencing violence and turmoil for decades. It is worthwhile to note that there were fewer goals mentioned in this speech than there were in the past. The decreasing goals indicate a lack of support from the U.S. public, who were no longer willing to pour immense resources to support lofty objectives that were accomplishing little. Yet even with fewer goals, the objectives failed to be effective in the long-run and therefore, this example fails the legitimacy test.

Feb. 13, 2013: President Barack Obama – 2013 State of the Union Address⁷⁴

“America’s commitment to a unified and sovereign Afghanistan will endure, but the nature of our commitment will change. We’re negotiating an agreement with the Afghan

⁷³ Obama, Barack. “Remarks on the Afghanistan Pullout.” *Miller Center*, 22 June 2011, millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/june-22-2011-remarks-afghanistan-pullout.

⁷⁴ Obama, Barack. “2013 State of the Union Address.” *Miller Center*, 13 Feb. 2013, millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/february-13-2013-2013-state-union-address.

government that focuses on two missions – training and equipping Afghan forces so that the country does not again slip into chaos, and counterterrorism efforts that allow us to pursue the remnants of al Qaeda and their affiliates.”

Obama’s 2013 State of the Union announced a change in U.S.’s objectives. The wording clearly specified the decreased focus on counterterrorism efforts and the increased need to train Afghan forces. Obama’s speech indicated a shift towards nation building—a task that should not be under the responsibility of armed services who are not trained for those missions. The change in objective was supported by billions of dollars allocated to relief and reconstruction, but the reconstruction initiatives lacked appropriate planning and oversight. Furthermore, the U.S. failed to create a comprehensive strategy to guide reconstruction efforts.⁷⁵ As such, the U.S. objectives were not only ineffective, but they could not match up with the narrowly defined strategies that were meant accomplish the stated goal.

Aug. 21, 2017: President Donald Trump – Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia⁷⁶

“We will expand authority for American armed forces to target the terrorist and criminal networks that sow violence and chaos throughout Afghanistan.”

Trump’s 2017 speech indicated that he would roll-back Obama’s objective of nation-building in Afghanistan to re-focus on counterterrorism efforts, that mainly entail the targeting and killing of terrorists. It is noteworthy that Trump, unlike previous Presidents, did not specify

⁷⁵ Bandow, Doug. “The Nation-Building Experiment That Failed: Time For U.S. To Leave Afghanistan.” *Forbes*, 1 Mar. 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/doughbandow/2017/03/01/the-nation-building-experiment-that-failed-time-for-u-s-to-leave-afghanistan/#1da7903265b2.

⁷⁶ Trump, Donald. “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia.” *The White House*, The United States Government, 21 Aug. 2017, www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/.

fighting the Taliban. His speech expanded the target to “terrorist and criminal networks,” which reflects the current situation in Afghanistan—the country is home to more strong terrorist groups than ever before. Trump’s remarks also noted another shift in U.S. policy as he made no mention of continuing to fight for a democracy in Afghanistan, at a time when the Afghan government was weaker than ever. The change in wording indicates a failure of previous U.S. strategies to meet previously stated objectives. Furthermore, this particular speech emphasizes the broadness of the missions the U.S. is currently pursuing and the lack of clarity of employed strategies. This example fails both criteria of the proposed two-part test as there is little cohesiveness between objectives and strategies and therefore, a lack of effectiveness.

Measuring Legitimacy

The Presidential remarks above listed the objectives of Bush, Obama, and Trump and some of the strategies that were designed to carry out their goals. I found that there has been a mismatch of means and ends throughout the entire War in Afghanistan as strategies were repeatedly not able to achieve the laid-out objectives. The objectives themselves were unachievable, because they were too broad, vague, and unclear. As such, it was an impossible challenge for employed strategies to match up. As the War in Afghanistan progressed, the gap between objectives and strategies grew, rendering both ineffective. As such, U.S. efforts in Afghanistan fail both legitimacy tests that I lay out—as the objectives and strategies do not match up and the objectives are not effective, the prosecution of the War has elements of illegitimacy. These findings have important implications for national security decision-making today as it is clear that the U.S. Government needs to revise its policies for them to be perceived

as legitimate. The new policies should include minimal political objectives pursued with minimal force guided by an adequately capable whole-of-government effort.

Cost

Monetary Costs

The War in Afghanistan has been monetarily costly for the U.S. A SIGAR report noted that after adjusting for inflation, the U.S. has spent more on reconstruction in Afghanistan than it did on Western Europe with the Marshall Plan after World War II.⁷⁷ The New York Times used data from Brown University's Cost of War Project to estimate that the U.S. had spent \$2 trillion in Afghanistan by the end of 2019. Broken down, this equates to \$1.5 trillion spent solely on war efforts and \$87 billion on training Afghan military and police forces. An additional \$10 billion has been spent on counter-narcotics, \$24 billion on economic development, and \$30 billion on other reconstruction programs in the country.⁷⁸ For the past three years, the direct monetary cost of the War in Afghanistan has been stagnant at approximately \$52 billion annually. This is a notable decrease from the 2011 and 2012 peak, in which \$107 billion was spent a year to deploy the U.S. military.⁷⁹

The Institute for Spending Reform published its own breakdown of the estimated total Afghanistan War costs.⁸⁰ The institute attempted to calculate a breakdown of indirect costs,

⁷⁷ "SIGAR's High-Risk List Afghanistan." *Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction*, 2016, www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/high-risk-list/index.html.

⁷⁸ Almukhtar, Sarah, and Rod Nordland. "What Did the U.S. Get for \$2 Trillion in Afghanistan?" *The New York Times*, 9 Dec. 2019, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/09/world/middleeast/afghanistan-war-cost.html?action=click&module=Top%2BStories&pgtype=Homepage.

⁷⁹ McCarthy, Niall. "The Annual Cost Of The War In Afghanistan Since 2001." *Forbes*, 12 Sept. 2019, www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2019/09/12/the-annual-cost-of-the-war-in-afghanistan-since-2001-infographic/#3dd2a6381971.

⁸⁰ "Rethinking Afghanistan." *Institute for Spending Reform*, 2019, Rethinking Afghanistan, rethinkingafghanistan.org/pflip/rethinking-afghanistan.pdf.

accrued proportionately to direct Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) requests. The organization attributed 46.8% of total indirect costs to the War in Afghanistan, except for Homeland Security spending which was solely covered by the U.S. Figure 5 below illustrates the Institute for Spending Reform’s estimates for total war costs, which they believe exceed \$2.5 trillion (\$1 trillion of direct costs and \$1.5 trillion in related costs and accrued obligations). The institute is in concurrence that \$2 trillion have already been depleted, and estimates that an additional \$500 billion will be spent on future costs for veterans’ care.

Expense	\$ Billion	Afghanistan Share (46.8%)
Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Appropriations	\$2,090	\$978
War-related Spending in the DoD Base Budget	\$903	\$423
Medical and Disability Care for Post-9/11 Veterans	\$437	\$204
Homeland Security Spending for Prevention and Response to Terrorism	\$1,054	\$0
Est. Interest on Borrowing for OCO Spending	\$925	\$433
Total War Approps and War-Related Spend. through FY 2020	\$5,409	\$2,038
Est. Future Obligations for Veterans’ Medical and Disability FY2020-59	> \$1,000	> \$468
Total War-Related Spending and Obligations through FY2020	\$6,409	\$2,506

Figure 5: Estimated total costs for the Afghanistan War broken down by expense. The figure includes an estimate for future obligations for veterans’ medical and disability costs, from 2020 – 2059. (Source: Institute for Spending Reform, pg. 18).

The monetary cost of the War is an important domestic variable for decision-making. At over \$1.5 trillion and counting, the monetary cost is impressively high. However, research shows that most Americans “do not care” about the cost of the War because they feel so removed from the conflict occurring thousands of miles away and view the money as abstract debt.⁸¹ This presents the U.S. Government with an interesting conundrum. For some, the high cost would be better allocated to other national security priorities. For others, \$52 billion a year is a drop in the

⁸¹ Savell, Stephanie. “The Real Reason Americans Don't Care About the Costs of War.” *The Nation*, 15 Feb. 2018, www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-real-reason-americans-dont-care-about-the-costs-of-war/.

federal budget bucket so long as Americans are safe from terrorism. As this variable is domestically important for national security decision-making, it is important for policymakers to also consider additional cost metrics, such as the value of human lives.

Human Costs

Besides monetary costs, it is useful for policymakers making national security decisions to consider the value of human lives and examine casualty rates resulting from the War. Between October 2001 when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan until October 2019, there have been 157,052 deaths that have occurred as a direct result of the War. A breakdown of the total number of casualties is provided below.⁸²

Type of Actor	Number of Casualties
U.S. Military	2,298
U.S. DoD Civilians	6
U.S. Contractors	3,814
Afghan National Military and Police	64,124
Other U.S. Allied Troops	1,145
Civilians	43,074
Opposition Fighters	42,100
Journalists and Media	67
Humanitarian and NGO Workers	424

Figure 6: This chart shows the breakdown of casualties in Afghanistan between October 2001 and October 2019. The chart displays the number of casualty rates for nine groups of people. Most important for national security decision-making are the

⁸² Crawford, Neta C., and Catherine Lutz. “Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones, Afghanistan and Pakistan (October 2001 – October 2019) Iraq (March 2003 – October 2019); Syria (September 2014-October 2019); Yemen (October 2002-October 2019); and Other.” *Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs at Brown University*, 13 Nov. 2019, watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/Direct%20War%20Deaths%20COW%20Estimate%20November%2013%202019%20FINAL.pdf.

actors relating to the U.S., particularly U.S. military, followed by U.S. DoD Civilians and U.S. Contractors (Source: Brown University's Cost of War Project).

In the last 18 years, approximately 775,000 American soldiers have fought in Afghanistan.⁸³ In addition to the 2,298 deaths, at least 20,000 soldiers have been wounded in the War.⁸⁴ Figure 7 shows a representation of U.S. casualties throughout the War broken down by number of deaths per year.

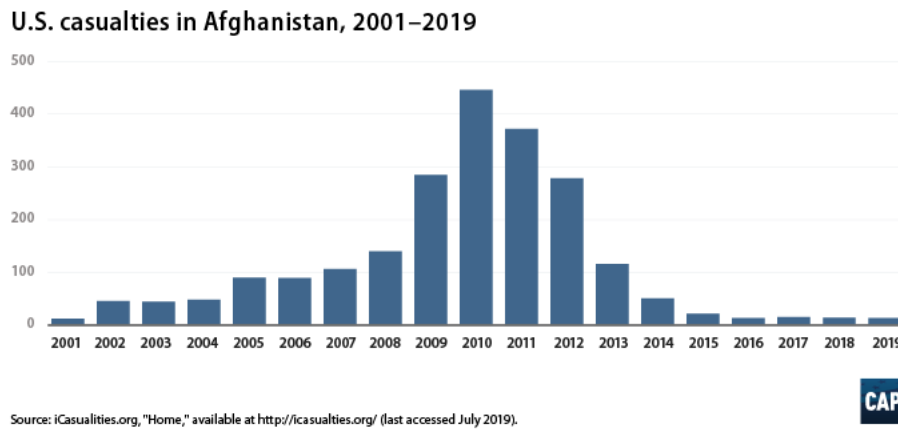


Figure 7: U.S. casualties in Afghanistan, 2001 – 2019 broken down by year. The figure shows a stark increase in number of casualties in the late 2000s, followed by a gradual decline. The number of U.S. fatalities has been relatively consistent in the last five years, with only a handful of troops dying each year. (Source: American Progress⁸⁵).

Analyzing Future Costs

In addition to breaking down exhausted costs, several organizations have attempted to estimate how much the War in Afghanistan will ultimately cost the U.S. These organizations look at existing monetary costs and try to estimate future obligations for veterans' medical and disability expenditures. The New York Times estimated that veterans who fought in post-9/11

⁸³ Lamothe, Dan. "How 775,000 U.S. Troops Fought in One War: Afghanistan Military Deployments by the Numbers." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 11 Sept. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2019/09/11/how-us-troops-fought-one-war-afghanistan-military-deployments-by-numbers/.

⁸⁴ Crawford and Lutz.

⁸⁵ Magsamen, Kelly, and Michael Fuchs. "The Case for a New U.S. Relationship with Afghanistan." *Center for American Progress*, 29 July 2019, www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/07/29/472611/case-new-u-s-relationship-afghanistan/.

wars, including veterans from both the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, will cost the U.S. \$1.4 trillion by 2059. It is likely that a slight majority of overall medical and disability costs will be allocated for those who fought in Afghanistan, as over 50% of spending in this category (over \$350 billion total) has already gone to these veterans.⁸⁶ These costs are essentially guaranteed as they are allocated to providing care for soldiers who have already spent time fighting in Afghanistan. Additional future costs are dependent on what actions the U.S. decides to pursue. If the U.S. continues to deploy troops to the country, costs will likely be higher than if they are withdrawn.

Several analysts have provided cost estimates for various future actions that the U.S. may pursue.⁸⁷ A report published by the Institute for Spending Reform calculated the strategic and economic benefits of ending U.S. military presence in its entirety in Afghanistan. The report suggests savings could be between \$210 and \$360 billion in direct costs and future obligations.⁸⁸ Others, such as AEI Research Fellow Rick Berger, argue that withdrawing troops may be expensive and may ultimately not save much money. Berger argues that the troops Trump intends to withdraw within the next few months are the least expensive to deploy. Furthermore, if troops are removed, the U.S. may need to request more airborne intelligence missions to offset the loss of its on-the-ground collection, which could ultimately cost the U.S. more money than current operations.⁸⁹

Amongst scholars and researchers, there is relative consensus that the U.S. will be paying some future cost, regardless of the strategy it ultimately decides to pursue. *War on the Rocks* author Jonathan Schrodin writes that even if the U.S. left Afghanistan, we would continue to

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Rethinking Afghanistan.” and Berger, Rick. “Why Withdrawing from Syria and Afghanistan Won’t Save Much Money.” *Defense One*, 26 Feb. 2019, www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/02/why-withdrawing-syria-and-afghanistan-wont-save-much-money/155134/.

⁸⁸ “Rethinking Afghanistan.”

⁸⁹ Berger.

engage in counter-terrorism missions to some extent. Although direct costs would plummet, residual requirement costs would remain. Schroden argued that this would amount to “perhaps \$2 billion per year for continued support to Afghanistan’s security forces, and sizeable additional amounts in continued development aid, refugee resettlement programs, and programs to demobilize and reintegrate insurgent fighters.”⁹⁰ Although the \$2 billion a year is a recurring cost, it is substantially lower than the amount that would have to be allocated annually if the U.S. were to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan. National security decision-makers have to weigh these costs against the other variables to determine if the future monetary and human costs incurred as a result of the War outweigh the benefits of keeping a military presence in the country.

Finally, in addition to determining future costs and potential savings depending on whether the U.S. military decides to remain in Afghanistan, it is also important to consider the opportunity cost of pivoting from domestic issues. The opportunity cost is a key risk in keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Defending the U.S. against terrorism continues to be a large concern for the American public, and in 2019, it tied with social security and Medicare as number four on Pew’s poll measuring the public’s policy priorities for the year.⁹¹ The public ranked the economy, health care costs, and education—all domestic issues—as more pressing policy concerns. Although defending against terrorism is still ranked high, it is listed at one of the lowest points for the issue since 9/11, indicating that Americans are refocusing on domestic issues. Furthermore, there is more of a partisan divide on terrorism than any of the other top

⁹⁰ Schroden, Jonathan. “Weighing the Costs of War and Peace in Afghanistan.” *War on the Rocks*, 20 Mar. 2019, warontherocks.com/2019/03/weighing-the-costs-of-war-and-peace-in-afghanistan/.

⁹¹ “Public’s 2019 Priorities: Economy, Health Care, Education and Security All Near Top of List.” *Pew Research Center*, 31 Dec. 2019, www.people-press.org/2019/01/24/publics-2019-priorities-economy-health-care-education-and-security-all-near-top-of-list/.

issues, with 83% of Republicans calling it a top priority compared to only 53% of Democrats. The substantial decline of Democrats believing terrorism is a top issue compared to previous years (72% believed it was a top priority for the government in 2017) indicates that the Party wants to focus less on foreign affairs and more on domestic issues. For much of the Democratic Party, the opportunity costs of staying in Afghanistan are too high, and the time and resources devoted to maintaining a troop presence should be reallocated to domestic priorities. For national security decision-makers, the partisan divide of how important the War on Terror and the War in Afghanistan are and the desire to refocus resources on domestic issues is vital to consider.

Perceptions of Risk

Perceptions of Risks in Keeping a U.S. Troop Presence in Afghanistan

There are several perceived risks for the United States in maintaining troops in Afghanistan that decision-makers have to consider. These risks include the prospect of an endless war aided by the lack of comprehensive strategy and purpose in understanding and directing operations in the War. Keeping a military presence in Afghanistan also demands high costs, in terms of both money and human lives. By focusing on Afghanistan, the U.S. pays an opportunity cost in how it must limit time and resources that could be spent on other priorities.

1. Endless War

Critics of the War in Afghanistan have complained that the U.S. is engaged in an endless war with no realistic termination in sight. This idea was emphasized in the section on the legitimacy variable, when I laid out the divide between objectives and actionable strategies that failed to accomplish the intended goals. One issue is the U.S. lacks a comprehensive strategy for

reconstruction in Afghanistan. In particular, the strategy lacks clear metrics and planning.⁹² As such, troops are continuously deployed with no clearly defined goal they are seeking to accomplish, therefore making success challenging (if not impossible) to measure. Troops are re-assigned to the same tasks, with little progress being made in reconstructing Afghanistan. Furthermore, the lack of clarity also means tasks are accidentally repeated. The “lack of planning and related strategies means the U.S. military and civilian agencies are at risk of working at cross purposes, spending money on nonessential endeavors, or failing to coordinate efforts in Afghanistan.”⁹³ This creates inefficiency and waste, which allows the War to continue endlessly.

In the past, U.S. governmental agencies coordinated efforts for Afghanistan through Civil-Military Strategic Frameworks and United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plans. Currently, the government has “no updated civilian-military framework to guide its operations in Afghanistan.”⁹⁴ Without proper coordination and guidance, the War has trudged on, but there has been little incentive to change current efforts.

2. Opportunity Costs

The money, time, attention, and other resources spent in keeping the U.S. engaged in military operations in Afghanistan detract from other national security and domestic concerns. The National Security Strategy (NSS) emphasizes the necessity to prepare for the Great-Power Competition between the U.S., China, and Russia, an opportunity cost partially lost by allocating so many resources on operations in Afghanistan.⁹⁵ In addition, the 2019 Worldwide Threat

⁹² Bandow.

⁹³ “SIGAR's High-Risk List Afghanistan,” pg. 55.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 55.

⁹⁵ Trump, Donald J. “National Security Strategy of the United States of America.” *The White House*, The United States Government, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community highlights the most demanding national security challenges, including cybersecurity, the rise of China, and other types of terrorist threats posed outside of Afghanistan. While other global and regional threats are emphasized as particularly pressing, Afghanistan is only briefly mentioned in either of the documents yet it diverts much attention and resources. U.S. involvement in Afghanistan continues to use time and energy that could be redirected elsewhere to better support emerging national security threats and concerns of the American public.

Assessment of Staying in Afghanistan

The perceived risks of staying in Afghanistan are minimal. While there are American casualties, the numbers have remained relatively low in recent years. As defending against terrorism remains a top priority for Americans, it is likely that the public can tolerate low levels of fatalities if they continue at the current sustained level. With a cost of \$52 billion in the \$4.45 trillion government budget, the War in Afghanistan accounted for 1.17% of total U.S. expenditures in 2019. While still a sizeable amount, it is minimal compared to other programs such as Social Security which accounted for \$1,046 trillion or 23.6% of the 2019 budget. As public opinion polls have listed terrorism as a top five priority every year for two decades, maintaining a troop presence in Afghanistan is a worthwhile expenditure for many Americans if it decreases the perceived risk of another large-scale attack. Although there is a low possibility of attacks emerging directly from Afghanistan against the U.S., there is a perceived feeling of safety in maintaining troops just in case. Furthermore, Presidents are wary of terminating all actions in Afghanistan because the consequences of another attack emerging from the country on the U.S. homeland would be politically devastating. For the last two decades, decision-making

has been guided by the substantially smaller political risk for Presidents to maintain a minimal troop presence in Afghanistan. Finally, as the Institute for Spending Reform report points out, staying in Afghanistan might make the most economic sense. The report goes on to say that “the cost of retaining a few thousand troops in Afghanistan pales in comparison with the price the nation will pay, strategically and economically, if al Qaeda or ISIS rebuilds a terrorist platform there.”⁹⁶ It appears that the report is suggesting that the shrinking of a U.S. presence in Afghanistan to only a few thousand soldiers may have constituted a new acceptability of the current cost.

Perceptions of Risks in Removing a U.S. Troop Presence from Afghanistan

Compared to the minimal perceived risks of staying in Afghanistan, the perceived risks in removing a U.S. troop presence from the country are considerable. The largest perceived risk in leaving Afghanistan is the high potential for harm to the U.S. homeland or people. Not only are Americans concerned that leaving may increase the direct threat of a physical attack on the U.S., but there is also some concern about the possibility of losing intelligence and warning information, which could indirectly hurt the U.S. homeland and our interests.

1. Direct threat to U.S. homeland, people, or interests

The most obvious threat in withdrawing troops from Afghanistan is the prospect of a safe haven reemerging in the country, which could be used to threaten the U.S. A real possibility is a security vacuum could emerge in the absence of American military involvement.⁹⁷ Since the

⁹⁶ “Rethinking Afghanistan.”

⁹⁷ Haqqani, Husain. “Don't Trust the Taliban's Promises.” *Foreign Policy*, 7 Feb. 2019, foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/07/dont-trust-the-talibans-promises-afghanistan-trump/.

Afghan security forces are struggling with internal threats, they may not be able to protect the military or government from collapsing. This could have concerning implications for the U.S., particularly if terrorist groups fill the security void like they did when international forces withdrew from Afghanistan in the 1990s. If terrorist organizations took over Afghanistan, they could more easily plan and execute attacks against the U.S.

The threat to the United States would almost certainly grow if the American military were to leave Afghanistan. The Taliban has expanded its operations and is in a “stronger military position now than at any point since 2001.”⁹⁸ By January 2018, the Taliban controlled or threatened 70% of Afghanistan.⁹⁹ Afghan security forces are struggling to stop the Taliban's expansion, particularly as casualty and turnover rates remain high.¹⁰⁰ The security forces are experiencing a “lack of robust and inspiring leadership, the timely supply of logistics, and corruption.”¹⁰¹ As weak and corrupt organizations, the Afghan army and police rely on U.S. air support to stop terrorist organizations. Afghan diplomacy expert Sadiq Amiri expressed his concern for the security forces in the absence of an American military operation. He said, “Due to a lack of maturity in terms of institutions, leadership, and their dependency on skills, weapons, and leadership, there’s a real danger that [Afghan] forces might be fractured or even divided along ethnic lines and then disintegrate.”¹⁰²

If Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, the organization would likely offer more freedom to terrorist groups in the country. While the Taliban is not interested in attacking the United

⁹⁸ Thomas.

⁹⁹ Sharifi, Shoaib; Adamou, Louise. “Taliban Threaten 70% of Afghanistan, BBC Finds.” *BBC News*. 21 Jan. 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42863116>.

¹⁰⁰ “Why Afghanistan is More Dangerous than Ever.” *BBC News*. 14 Sept. 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45507560>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Schiavenza, Matt. “Afghanistan's Transformation Through the Eyes of Its Young Leaders.” *Asia Society*. 7 Oct. 2019. <https://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/afghanistans-transformation-through-eyes-its-young-leaders>.

States,¹⁰³ other active terrorist organizations in the region, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, certainly are. Allowing Afghanistan to become a safe haven for these organizations could be extremely dangerous to our national security. It is clear that if an attack were to happen after leaving, it would be highly visible, much more so than if it had emerged from a place, such as another rogue state, in which the U.S. has not been so heavily invested.

2. Losing intelligence capabilities

A second risk in removing a troop presence from Afghanistan is the potential that the U.S. may lose significant intelligence capabilities, which is a domestic national security concern. Without a large military presence and on-the-ground troops, U.S. intelligence may be less clear. The U.S. would maintain other intelligence-gathering capabilities, guided primarily by the CIA under Title 50 authority. The CIA has been present in Afghanistan throughout the War, and particularly active since late 2017 through the agency's engagement in night raids to kill or capture insurgents. However, the CIA has been criticized for committing at least 14 serious abuses between late 2017 and mid-2019, mostly as a result of faulty intelligence.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, there is substantial risk in removing a military presence that allows for additional intelligence to be gathered. The concern is that intelligence collected in Afghanistan benefits the U.S.'s understanding of terrorism in the region, and much of that intelligence could dry up. The U.S. would be forced to solely rely on the CIA, which poses a risk of losing visibility of new and

¹⁰³ "The Afghan Taliban." *Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation*, cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/afghan-taliban#highlight_text_8601.

¹⁰⁴ "They've Shot Many Like This': Abusive Night Raids by CIA-Backed Afghan Strike Forces." *Human Rights Watch*, 31 Oct. 2019, www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/31/theyve-shot-many/abusive-night-raids-cia-backed-afghan-strike-forces.

emerging threats in an already volatile country, which may otherwise be caught by on-the-ground troops.

Without a military presence, it may be assumed that the U.S. would rely more heavily on its allies and partners to collect and share intelligence. However, our partners remaining in Afghanistan consist solely of NATO troops, and they would quickly depart from the country if the U.S. withdrew its forces. Over 1,000 NATO troops have died throughout the War and there is little incentive for the allied countries to remain in a seemingly never ending conflict that they entered only in a show of support to the U.S. after 9/11. Allied officials have already said “they will have to rethink their commitment to maintaining their forces and NATO’s current network of bases” if the U.S. were to “cut back on support forces.”¹⁰⁵ As such, an American troop withdrawal would result in the loss of U.S. military intelligence, as well as intelligence collected from NATO partners and shared with American national security entities. Losing these substantial intelligence capabilities is a considerable risk for domestic decision-making.

Assessment of Leaving Afghanistan

The perceived risks are profoundly different if the U.S. military left Afghanistan than if several thousand troops remain in the country. At this time, it is highly possible that these risks could be actualized in the near future. On February 29th, the U.S. and the Taliban signed a peace agreement that entails the withdrawal of American troops and intelligence presence in Afghanistan. The remaining 16,500 combined U.S. and NATO troops are expected to leave the country within the next 14 months.

¹⁰⁵ Gibbons-neff, Thomas, and Julian E Barnes. “NATO Eyes Troop Reductions in Afghanistan as U.S. Draws Down.” *The New York Times*, 5 Feb. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/world/asia/nato-afghanistan-troops.html.

The risks of leaving Afghanistan include the possibility of a failed Afghan government, the humanitarian issue for the people in the country, and a resurgence of extremism that could ultimately threaten U.S. national security. It is challenging to measure these risks, even if attempting to use a counterfactual, as it is unknown precisely what would happen in the absence of an American military presence in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the risks can be perceived as dangerous both to international and domestic security. However, it is likely that the security situation in Afghanistan would deteriorate without an American presence, which would compromise U.S. interests in the country. Even more concerning are the possibilities of terrorist groups gaining recruits and resources in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and targeting the U.S. From a domestic perspective, this concern is exacerbated by the loss of intelligence resulting from a troop withdrawal that would make it more challenging for the U.S. to detect terrorist activities emerging from Afghanistan.

Conclusion

In this paper, I analyzed five variables to determine the national security decision-making of why the U.S. continues to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan. The domestic variables individually provide conflicting insight to the decision on whether the U.S. should stay in Afghanistan, but together they strongly suggest that the U.S. should maintain a military presence in the country. Americans are tolerant enough to accept a small force remaining in Afghanistan, so long as the costs and U.S. fatalities are low, and the authorities endure. However, it is clear that Americans have abandoned the policy imperatives of “fixing Afghanistan,” because they think it is an unreasonable objective and any such overtures are viewed with skepticism and

illegitimacy. Instead, the U.S. should revise its policies and announce a new concession strategy highlighting only minimal political objectives to be pursued with minimal force.

In this paper, I first analyzed public opinion. This variable demonstrated how support for the War has steadily declined throughout the past two decades, and how politicians have made few policy changes that either increase support for the War or appropriately match the level of disinterest expressed by the public. Although public opinion polls imply that Americans do not support the War in Afghanistan, the most recent poll from late 2019 indicates that the public is content with a small presence in the country that would act as a reassuring safety net for our national security.

The second variable analyzed was authority, and I explained how the U.S. is legally operating in Afghanistan through a claim to self-defense that was manifested in the AUMF. So long as Congress does not rescind the document, which it has not yet done, the U.S. may continue to legally operate in the country. Next, I explained the legitimacy variable, which sought to determine if U.S. objectives have matched applied strategies. Analysis from the legitimacy variable indicates that regardless of legality, the U.S. lacks legitimacy in its prosecution of the War. As the means and ends have failed to match up for decades, legitimacy plays the largest role of the five variables I analyze in perpetuating the forever war. I then discussed the fourth variable, which focused on the monetary and human costs of the War up until this point, and assessed what future costs could look like if the U.S. decided to stay in Afghanistan or remove troops from the country. The U.S. has poured an enormous amount of money into the War, almost all of which is a sunk cost that is lost regardless of future decision-making.

Finally, the risk variable looked at the perceived risks of staying in Afghanistan and withdrawing troops from the country. I concluded the perceived risks of staying are minimal as the costs are low, there is a relatively small American presence in the country, and people are irrationally afraid of terrorism. This fear makes the perceived risks of leaving high—public opinion polls indicate that Americans may feel safer with a small presence in Afghanistan, as there is the perception that a full withdrawal could lead terrorist groups in the country to better organize and plan attacks on the U.S. As such, the risk variable indicates a clear advantage of keeping a small presence of U.S. troops in the country.

Considered together, the domestic variables I analyzed signify that the national security decision should be keeping troops in Afghanistan. The influence from the variables analyzed have winnowed what was once a mission to rebuild Afghanistan into an independent, democratic nation to a co-dependent early warning relationship that presents no achievable end-state other than the continuous conflict that has plagued the country for decades.

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