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Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief

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SUMMARY

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Afghanistan has been a central U.S. foreign policy concern since 2001, when the United States, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban government that harbored and supported it. In the intervening 17 years, the United States has suffered around 2,400 fatalities in Afghanistan (including 13 in 2018 to date) and Congress has appropriated more than $132 billion for reconstruction there. In that time, an elected Afghan government has replaced the Taliban, and nearly every measure of human development has improved, although future prospects of those measures remain mixed. The fundamental objective of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan is "preventing any further attacks on the United States by terrorists enjoying safe haven or support in Afghanistan."

While U.S. military officials express greater optimism about the course of the war in 2018, other policymakers and analysts have described the war against the insurgency—which controls or contests nearly half of the country's territory, by Pentagon estimates—as a stalemate or worse. Furthermore, the Afghan government faces broad public criticism for its inability to combat corruption, deliver security, alleviate rising ethnic tensions, and develop the economy. Afghanistan held parliamentary elections in October 2018, but they were marred by technical, logistical, and security problems. A planned presidential election, now scheduled for July 2019, could further inflame political tensions. Meanwhile, a series of developments since July 2018 may signal greater U.S. urgency to begin peace talks to bring about a negotiated political settlement, the stated goal of U.S. policy, via direct talks with the Taliban.

For background information and analysis on the history of congressional engagement with Afghanistan and U.S. policy there, as well as a summary of recent Afghanistan-related legislative proposals, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Legislation in the 115th Congress*, by Clayton Thomas.

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Overview

The U.S. and Afghan governments, along with partner countries, remain engaged in combat with a resilient Taliban-led insurgency. While U.S. military officials maintain that Afghan forces are "resilient" against the Taliban,[1] by some measures insurgents are in control of or contesting more territory today than at any point since 2001.[2] The conflict also involves an array of other armed groups, including active affiliates of both Al Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or by the Arabic acronym *Da'esh*). Since early 2015, the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, known as "Resolute Support Mission" (RSM), has focused on training, advising, and assisting Afghan government forces; combat operations by U.S. counterterrorism forces, along with some partner forces, also continue and have increased since 2017. These two "complementary missions" make up Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS).[3]

The United States has contributed more than $132 billion in various forms of aid to Afghanistan over the past decade and a half, from building up and sustaining the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) to economic development. This assistance has increased Afghan government capacity, but prospects for stability in Afghanistan appear distant. Taliban forces continue to hold swaths of Afghanistan's vast rural areas while carrying out large-scale assaults on urban areas; two provincial centers were briefly overrun by insurgents in 2018. President Donald Trump announced what he termed "a new strategy" for Afghanistan and South Asia in August 2017, though reports in early 2019 indicate that the President may be contemplating ordering the withdrawal of some U.S. forces from the country. Efforts by the Afghan government and others to mitigate and eventually end the conflict through peace talks have been complicated by ethnic divisions, political rivalries, and the unsettled military situation, though a series of developments in 2018, including a nationwide cease-fire and direct U.S.-Taliban talks, may portend greater progress on that front.

The Afghan government faces domestic criticism for its failure to guarantee security and prevent insurgent gains, and for internal divisions that have spurred the formation of new political opposition coalitions. In September 2014, the United States brokered a compromise "national unity government" to address the disputed 2014 presidential election, in which both candidates claimed victory. Subsequent parliamentary and district council elections were postponed. After years of delay, those parliamentary elections were held in October 2018, but were marred by violence and administrative problems that may portend trouble for the 2019 presidential election (originally scheduled for April, now delayed until July). The Afghan government has made some notable progress in reducing corruption and implementing its budgetary commitments, and almost all measures of economic and human development have improved since the U.S.-led overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. Some U.S. policymakers still hope that the country's largely underdeveloped natural resources and/or geographic position at the crossroads of future global trade routes might improve the economic life of the country, and, by extension, its social and political dynamics as well. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's economic and political outlook remains uncertain, if not negative, in light of ongoing hostilities.

[1] Lolita C. Baldor and Matthew Pennington, "Attack in Afghanistan is reminder of formidable task," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2018.

[2] SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 30, 2017.

[3] "Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Quarterly Report to Congress, Jan. 1 to Mar. 31, 2018," Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, May 21, 2018.

Political Situation

The leadership partnership (referred to as the national unity government) brokered by the United States in the wake of the disputed 2014 election between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah has encountered challenges but remains intact.[4] However, a trend in Afghan society and governance that worries some observers is increasing fragmentation along ethnic lines.[5] Such fractures have long existed in Afghanistan but were relatively muted during Hamid Karzai's presidency.[6] These divisions are sometimes seen as a driving force behind some of the political upheavals that have challenged Ghani's government:

- Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum, who has criticized Ghani's government for favoring Pashtuns at the expense of the Uzbek minority Dostum claims to represent, left Afghanistan for Turkey in May 2017. Dostum's departure came in the wake of accusations that he engineered the kidnapping and assault of a political rival, prompting speculation that his departure was an attempt to avoid facing justice in Afghanistan.[7] Dostum returned to Afghanistan in July 2018, quelling protests by his supporters; he remains under indictment but no legal proceedings against him have taken place.[8]
- Ghani's December 2017 dismissal of Atta Mohammad Noor, the powerful governor of the northern province of Balkh who defied Ghani by remaining in office for several months before resigning in March 2018, was another sign of serious political divisions, possibly along ethnic lines. Noor is one of the more prominent members of the Jamiat-e-Islami party, which is seen to represent the country's Tajik minority.[9]
- A number of prominent national leaders, including Dostum and Noor, launched an electoral alliance called the Grand National Coalition of Afghanistan in July 2018; Karzai also announced his support for the coalition. One analyst speculates that while the coalition represents a real political threat to Ghani, it is a "divided alliance of historic rivals without a unified vision for Afghanistan's future" and "will likely devolve into disunity."[10]

After multiple delays, elections for the 249-seat Wolesi Jirga (the lower house of Afghanistan's bicameral legislature) were held in October 2018. District council elections, originally scheduled to take place at the same time, were delayed due to a lack of candidates.[11] The elections were

[4] See, for example, Mujib Mashal, "Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Denounces President Ghani as Unfit for Office," *New York Times*, August 11, 2016.

[5] Frud Bezhan, "Leaked Memo Fuels New Allegations Of Ethnic Bias In Afghan Government," RFERL, November 20, 2017.

[6] See, for example, Azam Ahmed and Habib Zahori, "Afghan Ethnic Tensions Rise in Media and Politics," *New York Times*, February 18, 2014.

[7] "Afghan Vice-President Dostum flies to Turkey amid torture claims," BBC, May 20, 2017. Several of Dostum's bodyguards were sentenced to five years in jail in November 2017 for their involvement in the incident.

[8] Mujib Mashal, "'No Shame': Afghan General's Victory Lap Stuns a Victim of Rape," *New York Times*, August 7, 2018.

[9] "Powerful Afghan regional leader ousted as political picture clouds," Reuters, December 18, 2017.

[10] Scott DesMarais, "Afghan Government on Shaky Ground Ahead of Elections," Institute for the Study of War, July 31, 2018.

[11] Ali Yawar Adili, "Afghanistan Election Conundrum (10): Failure to hold the first ever district council elections?" Afghanistan Analysts Network, August 7, 2018.

preceded by contention among electoral commissioners and an ethnically charged dispute over electronic identity cards.[12] Various technical and logistical challenges have exposed the Independent Election Commission (IEC) to widespread criticism, with one observer describing the process as a "triumph of administrative chaos."[13]

Instability marred the election results as well: elections were held a week late in Kandahar and indefinitely postponed in Ghazni, and hundreds of polling stations in areas outside of the government's control were closed.[14] Additionally, 10 candidates were assassinated during the campaign and dozens of civilians were killed and hundreds wounded in election-day violence.[15] Still, most reports indicated at least some measure of voter enthusiasm, especially in urban areas; turnout was estimated at around 4 million of 9 million registered voters. As of January 2019, preliminary results for only some provinces have been released, as disputes between electoral bodies continue over results in other areas, including Kabul province.[16]

The presidential election is now scheduled for July 2019; five candidates have registered as of mid-January. The IEC announced in December 2018 a delay of three months from the original date of April 2019, citing logistical and budgetary difficulties. It is unclear to what extent, if any, that delay is related to ongoing U.S. efforts to jumpstart negotiations.[17]

Reconciliation Efforts and Obstacles

The U.S. and Afghan governments, along with various neighboring states and other international actors, have for years engaged in efforts to bring about a political settlement with insurgents.[18] A settlement is likely to require political compromises on issues such as women's rights and the Afghan constitution.[19] In his August 2017 speech laying out a new strategy for Afghanistan, President Trump referred to a "political settlement" as an outcome of an "effective military effort," but did not state what U.S. goals or conditions might be for this putative political process.

In 2018, a number of developments suggest potential progress toward peace talks. In February, President Ghani offered direct talks with the Taliban "without preconditions," though the Taliban effectively rejected his overture.[20] Ghani followed up on that offer by declaring a unilateral,

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[12] Ali Yawar Adili, "Afghanistan Election Conundrum (1): Political pressure on commissioners puts 2018 vote in doubt," Afghanistan Analysts Network, November 18, 2017; Hamid Shalizi, "Who is an Afghan? Row over ID cards fuels ethnic tension," Reuters, February 8, 2018.

[13] Jelena Bjelica, "Election Day Two: A triumph of administrative chaos," Afghanistan Analysts Network, October 21, 2018.

[14] Haseba Atakpal, "Ghazni Elections Could Be Held With Presidential Elections," *Tolo News*, October 27, 2018.

[15] Mujib Mashal, Fahim Abed, and Fatima Faizi, "Afghanistan Votes for Parliament Under Shadow of Taliban Violence," *New York Times*, October 20, 2018.

[16] Ayesha Tanzeem, "Dispute Between Afghan Election Bodies Over Kabul Results," VOA, December 6, 2018.

[17] Hamid Shalizi, "Afghanistan to delay presidential election to July: election body," Reuters, December 30, 2018.

[18] In 2011, U.S. diplomats held their first meetings with Taliban officials of the post-2001 period, and subsequent U.S.-Taliban meetings led to the 2014 release of U.S. prisoner of war Bowe Bergdahl in exchange for the release to Qatar of five senior Taliban captives from the Guantanamo detention facility. An agreement to reopen the Taliban office in Qatar (which opened in June 2013 and closed shortly thereafter under U.S. pressure) also was reached in 2014; that office remains the Taliban's sole official representation.

[19] The Obama Administration backed reconciliation with the stipulation that any settlement be Afghan-led and require insurgent leaders to (1) cease fighting, (2) accept the Afghan constitution, and (3) sever any ties to Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Random House, 2018), pp. 447-448.

[20] Hamid Shalizi and James Mackenzie, "Afghanistan's Ghani offers talks with Taliban 'without preconditions,'"

nationwide cease-fire in June. The Taliban reciprocated, leading to a three-day cease-fire during which Taliban fighters and Afghan forces socialized, prayed together, and visited areas controlled by the other.[21] A grassroots, nationwide series of peace marches and demonstrations also signaled popular support for a cessation of hostilities.[22] However, the Taliban effectively rejected a second, conditional three-month cease-fire offered by the Afghan government in August 2018.

While the Taliban have long expressed a willingness to negotiate directly with the United States,[23] the official U.S. position for years was that the Taliban can only negotiate with the Afghan government in an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" process.[24] However, since July 2018, Trump Administration officials have held several preliminary meetings with Taliban representatives in what amounts to a major shift in U.S. policy.[25] In September 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo named former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad as a "special advisor" to serve as "the State Department's lead person" for reconciliation efforts. Khalilzad has reportedly met with Taliban officials several times, including an October 2018 meeting in Doha, Qatar, that angered President Ghani, who was said to have been "blindsided."[26]

Military and Security Situation

Since early 2015, the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan of 16,200 troops, known as "Resolute Support Mission" (RSM), has focused on training, advising, and assisting Afghan government forces. Combat operations by U.S. forces also continue and have increased in number since 2017. These two "complementary missions" comprise Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS).[27] There are around 14,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, of which approximately 8,500 are part of RSM. The remaining 7,700 troops of RSM come from 39 partner countries. In early 2018, Afghanistan became "CENTCOM's main effort" as U.S. operations in Iraq and Syria wound down.[28]

While U.S. commanders have asserted that the ANDSF performs well despite taking heavy casualties, insurgent forces retain, and by some measures are increasing, their ability to contest and hold territory (see **Figure 1**) and to launch high-profile attacks. U.S. officials have often emphasized the Taliban's failure to capture a provincial capital since their week-long seizure of Kunduz city in northern Afghanistan in September 2015, but two capitals, Farah and Ghazni, were briefly overrun in 2018 (in May and August, respectively). Former Secretary of Defense

Reuters, February 28, 2018.

[21] "Taliban and Security Forces Celebrate Eid Together," *Tolo News*, June 16, 2018.

[22] Ali Mohammed Sabawoon, "Going Nationwide: The Helmand peace march initiative," Afghanistan Analysts Network, April 23, 2018.

[23] Pamela Constable, "Taliban appeals to American people to 'rationally' rethink war effort," *Washington Post*, February 14, 2018.

[24] Rebecca Kheel, "Tillerson sees place for Taliban in Afghan government," *The Hill*, October 23, 2017.

[25] Mujib Mashal and Eric Schmitt, "White House Orders Direct Taliban Talks to Jump-Start Afghan Negotiations," *New York Times*, July 15, 2018; "UAE says US-Taliban talks show 'positive' result," *Al Jazeera*, December 20, 2018.

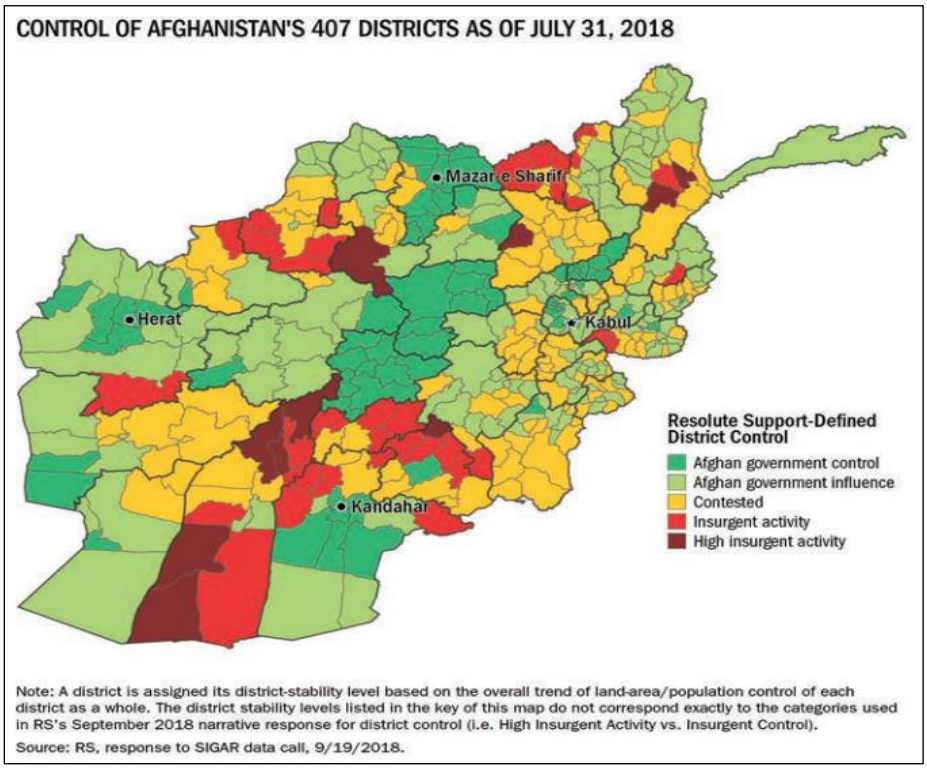
[26] Mujib Mashal, "Afghan Leader Blindsided by U.S. Meeting With Taliban, Officials Say," *New York Times*, October 18, 2018. For more, see CRS Insight IN10935, *Momentum Toward Peace Talks in Afghanistan?*, by Clayton Thomas.

[27] "Operation Freedom's Sentinel, Quarterly Report to Congress, Jan. 1 to Mar. 31, 2018," Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, May 21, 2018.

[28] Department of Defense Press Briefing By Major General Hecker via Teleconference from Kabul, Afghanistan, February 7, 2018. Overall, the amount of U.S. munitions used in Afghanistan has increased, with 4,361 weapons released in 2017 (up from 1,337 in 2016), the highest annual figure since 2011; 6,823 were released in the first 11 months of 2018 (AFCENT Airpower Summary, November 30, 2018).

James Mattis described the Taliban assault on Ghazni, which left hundreds dead, as a failure for the Taliban, saying "every time they take something ... they're unable to hold it."[29]

Figure 1. Insurgent Activity in Afghanistan by District



Source: SIGAR, October 30, 2018, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress.

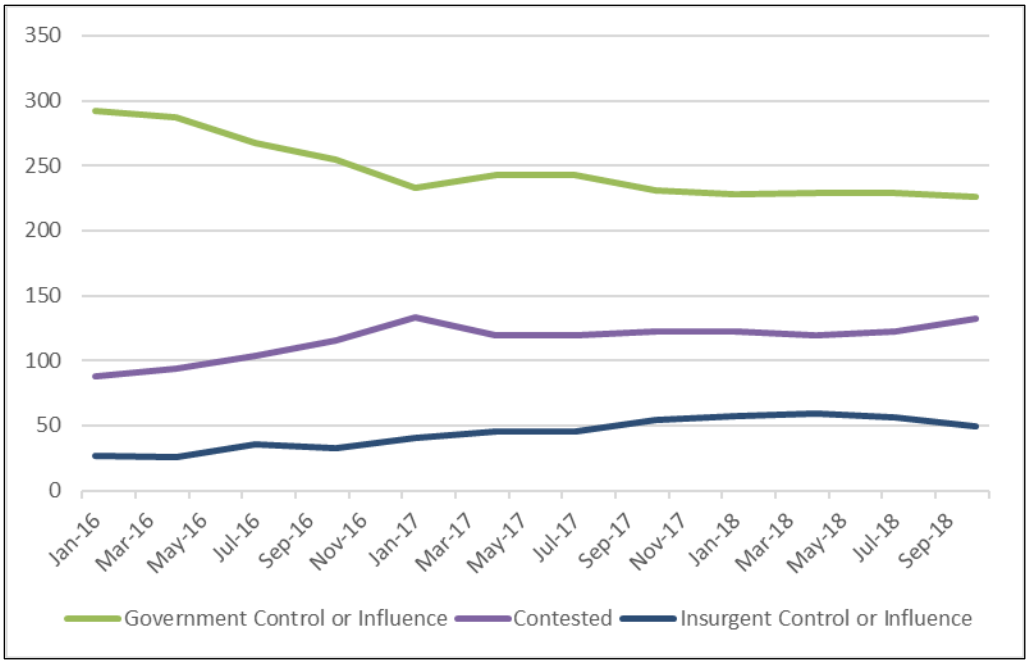
Since at least early 2017, U.S. military officials have publicly stated that the conflict is "largely stalemated."[30] Arguably complicating that assessment, the extent of territory controlled or contested by the Taliban has steadily grown in recent years by most measures (see **Figure 2**). In its October 30, 2018, report, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported that the share of districts under government control or influence has fallen to 55.5%; this figure, which marks a slight decline from previous reports, is the lowest recorded by SIGAR since tracking began in 2015; 12% of districts are under insurgent control or influence, with the remaining 32% contested.[31]

[29] Media Availability with Secretary Mattis en route to Bogota, Colombia, Department of Defense, August 16, 2018; W.J. Hennigan, "Exclusive: Inside the U.S. Fight to Save Ghazni From the Taliban," *Time*, August 23, 2018.

[30] Ellen Mitchell, "Afghanistan war at a stalemate, top general tells lawmakers," *The Hill*, December 4, 2018.

[31] SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 30, 2018.

Figure 2. Control of Districts in Afghanistan



Source: SIGAR Quarterly Reports.

Notes: The y-axis represents the number of districts, of which the U.S. government counts 407 in Afghanistan.

While the Taliban retain the ability to conduct high-profile urban attacks, they also demonstrate considerable tactical capabilities.[32] Due to the high levels of casualties inflicted by the Taliban, the Trump Administration has reportedly urged Afghan forces to pull out of some isolated outposts and rural areas.[33] Reports indicate that ANDSF fatalities have averaged 30-40 a day in recent months, and President Ghani confirmed in November 2018 that Afghan forces had suffered over 28,000 fatalities since 2015.[34] So-called "green on blue" attacks (insider attacks on U.S. and coalition forces by Afghan nationals) are a sporadic, but persistent, problem—several U.S. servicemen died in such attacks in 2018, as did 85 Afghan soldiers.[35] In October 2018, General Miller was present at an attack inside the Kandahar governor's compound by a Taliban infiltrator who killed a number of provincial officials, including the powerful police chief Abdul Raziq; Miller was unhurt but another U.S. general was wounded.[36] The May 2016 killing of then-Taliban head Mullah Mansour by a U.S. strike demonstrated Taliban vulnerabilities to U.S. intelligence and combat capabilities, although it did not appear to have a measurable effect on Taliban

[32] Alec Worsnop, "From Guerilla to Maneuver Warfare: A Look at the Taliban's Growing Combat Capability," Modern War Institute, June 6, 2018.

[33] Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Helene Cooper, "Newest U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan Mirrors Past Plans for Retreat," *New York Times*, July 28, 2018.

[34] Rod Nordland, "The Death Toll for Afghan Forces Is Secret. Here's Why," *New York Times*, September 21, 2018; Ankit Panda, "Ghani: Afghan Police, Army Death Toll Since 2015 at More Than 28,500," *Diplomat*, November 16, 2018.

[35] Richard Sisk, "85 Afghan Troops Killed in Insider Attacks This Year, Report Finds," *Military.com*, November 5, 2018.

[36] Pamela Constable and Sayed Salahuddin, "U.S. commander in Afghanistan survives deadly attack at governor's compound that kills top Afghan police general," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2018.

effectiveness; it is unclear to what extent current leader Haibatullah Akhundzada exercises effective control over the group and how he is viewed within its ranks.[37]

Beyond the Taliban, a significant share of U.S. operations are aimed at the local Islamic State affiliate, known as Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP, also known as ISIS-K), although there is debate over the degree of threat the group poses.[38] ISKP and Taliban forces have sometimes fought over control of territory or because of political or other differences.[39] In April 2018, a U.S. air strike killed the ISKP leader (himself a former Taliban commander) in northern Jowzjan province, which NATO described as "the main conduit for external support and foreign fighters from Central Asian states into Afghanistan."[40] ISKP also has claimed responsibility for a number of large-scale attacks, many targeting Afghanistan's Shia minority. The U.S. government reports that Al Qaeda is "seriously degraded" in Afghanistan but that remnants "continue to operate in remote locations ... that historically have been exploited as safe havens."[41]

ANDSF Development and Deployment

The effectiveness of the ANDSF is key to the security of Afghanistan. As of September 2018, SIGAR reports that Congress has appropriated at least $83.1 billion for Afghan security forces since 2002.[42] Since 2014, the United States generally has provided around 75% of the estimated $5 billion a year to fund the ANDSF, with the balance coming from U.S. partners ($1 billion annually) and the Afghan government ($500 million).[43]

Major concerns about the ANDSF raised by SIGAR, DOD, and others include

- absenteeism and the fact that about 35% of the force does not reenlist each year, and that the rapid recruitment might dilute the force's quality;
- widespread illiteracy within the force;[44]
- credible allegations of child sexual abuse and other potential human rights abuses;[45] and

[37] Matthew Dupee, "Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence," *CTC Sentinel*, January 2018.

[38] See, for example, Kyle Rempfer, "Is ISIS gaining 'serious' ground in Afghanistan? Russia says yes. The US says no," *Military Times*, March 26, 2018.

[39] See, for example, Amira Jadoon, et al., "Challenging the ISK Brand in Afghanistan-Pakistan: Rivalries and Divided Loyalties," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, Issue 4, April 26, 2018; Najim Rahim and Rod Nordland, "Taliban Surge Routs ISIS in Northern Afghanistan," *New York Times*, August 1 2018.

[40] NATO Resolute Support Media Center, "Top IS-K commander killed in northern Afghanistan," April 9, 2018. American officials are reportedly tracking attempts by IS fighters to enter Afghanistan and use Afghan territory as a base from which to plan and conduct international operations. Helene Cooper, "U.S. Braces for Return of Terrorist Safe Havens to Afghanistan," *New York Times*, March 12, 2018

[41] U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2017.

[42] SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 30, 2018.

[43] The FY2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) conference report authorizes and the FY2018 defense appropriation provides the Administration's request of $4.9 billion for the ANDSF. The Administration's FY2019 request seeks $5.2 billion for the ANDSF, and the House- and Senate-passed versions of the FY2019 NDAA (P.L. 115-232) would authorize the appropriation of the requested amount.

[44] Most estimates put the rate of illiteracy within the ANDSF at over 60%, but reliable figures may not exist. SIGAR reported in January 2014 that means of measuring the effectiveness of ANDSF literacy programs were "limited," and that judgment seems not to have changed in the years since.

[45] See SIGAR Report 17-47, "Child Sexual Assault in Afghanistan: Implementation of the Leahy Laws and Reports of Assault by Afghan Security Forces," June 2017 (released on January 23, 2018).

- casualty rates often described as unsustainable.

Key metrics related to ANDSF performance, including casualties, attrition rates, and personnel strength, were classified by U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) in response to a request from the Afghan government starting with the October 2017 SIGAR quarterly report. Although SIGAR previously published those metrics as part of its quarterly reports, they remain withheld.[46]

U.S. Troop Levels and Authorities

At a February 2017 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, General Nicholson indicated that the United States had a "shortfall of a few thousand" troops that, if filled, could help break the "stalemate."[47] A subsequent National Security Council-led review of U.S. strategy that included plans for more troops was reportedly held up due to disagreements within the Administration.[48] In June 2017, President Trump delegated to Secretary Mattis the authority to set force levels, reportedly limited to around 3,500 additional troops, in June 2017; Secretary Mattis signed orders to deploy them in September 2017.[49] Those additional forces (all of which are dedicated to RSM) have arrived in Afghanistan, putting the total number of U.S. troops in the country at around 14,000.[50] Some reports in late 2018 and early 2019 indicate that President Trump may be contemplating ordering the withdrawal of some U.S, forces from Afghanistan.[51]

NATO Contribution

The current train, advise, and assist mission in Afghanistan, Resolute Support Mission (RSM), is led by NATO, and NATO partners have been heavily engaged in Afghanistan since 2001. At its height in 2012, the number of NATO and non-NATO partner forces reached 130,000, around 100,000 of whom were American. As of September 2018, RSM is made up of around 16,200 troops from 39 countries, of whom 8,475 are American. This represents an increase of about 3,000 troops from NATO and other partner countries. At the NATO summit in July 2018, NATO leaders extended their financial commitment to Afghan forces to 2024 (previously 2020).[52]

Additionally, U.S. forces now have broader authority to operate independently of Afghan forces and "attack the enemy across the breadth and depth of the battle space," expanding the list of targets to include those related to "revenue streams, support infrastructure, training bases,

[46] Shawn Snow, "Report: US officials classify crucial metrics on Afghan casualties, readiness," Military Times, October 30, 2017.

[47] Statement for the record by General John W. Nicholson, Commander, U.S. Forces – Afghanistan before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan, February 9, 2017.

[48] Susan Glasser, "The Trump White House's War Within," *Politico*, July 24, 2017. Some participants reportedly expressed skepticism that a few thousand more troops could meaningfully impact dynamics on the ground, pointing to previous "surges" that did not do so, and raised concerns about an open-ended U.S. commitment in a country where U.S. troops have already been deployed for nearly two decades. Others countered that the relative cost of the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan is a worthy investment when viewed against the cost of a terrorist attack the absence of U.S. forces might allow, comparing it to "term-life insurance." Asawin Suebsaeng and Spencer Ackerman, "$700 Billion and 16 Years at War Is a 'Modest Amount,' U.S. Officers Say," *Daily Beast*, July 24, 2017.

[49] Tara Copp, "Mattis signs orders to send about 3,500 more US troops to Afghanistan," *Military Times*, September 11, 2017.

[50] Dan Lamothe, "Trump added troops in Afghanistan. But NATO is still short of meeting its goal," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2017. As of September 30, 2017, the total number of active duty and reserve forces in Afghanistan was 15,298. Defense Manpower Data Center, Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country Quarterly Report, September 2017.

[51] Dan Lamothe and Josh Dawsey, "Trump wanted a big cut in troops in Afghanistan. New U.S. military plans fall short," *Washington Post*, January 8, 2019.

[52] Brussels Summit Declaration, issued July 11, 2018.

infiltration lanes."[53] This has been demonstrated in a series of operations, beginning in the fall of 2017, against Taliban drug labs. These operations, often highlighted by U.S. officials, seek to degrade what is widely viewed as one of the Taliban's most important sources of revenue, namely the cultivation, production, and trafficking of narcotics.[54] Some have questioned the impact of these strikes, especially in the context of the United States' overall counternarcotics strategy.[55] In November 2018, the United Nations reported that the total area used for poppy cultivation in 2018 was 263,000 hectares, the second-highest level recorded since monitoring began in 1994.[56]

Regional Dynamics: Pakistan and Other Neighbors

Regional dynamics, and the involvement of outside powers, are central to the conflict in Afghanistan. The neighboring state widely considered most important in this regard is Pakistan, which has played an active, and by many accounts negative, role in Afghan affairs for decades. President Trump has directly accused Pakistan of "housing the very terrorists that we are fighting."[57] Afghan leaders, along with U.S. military commanders, attribute much of the insurgency's power and longevity either directly or indirectly to Pakistan. President Ghani said in February 2018 that Pakistan was "the center of the Taliban."[58] Experts debate the extent to which Pakistan is committed to Afghan stability or is attempting to exert control in Afghanistan through ties to insurgent groups, most notably the Haqqani Network, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) that has become an official, semiautonomous component of the Taliban.[59] U.S. officials have repeatedly identified militant safe havens in Pakistan as a threat to security in Afghanistan, though some observers question the validity of that charge in light of the Taliban's increased territorial control within Afghanistan itself.[60]

Pakistan may view a weak and destabilized Afghanistan as preferable to a strong, unified Afghan state (particularly one led by a Pashtun-dominated government in Kabul; Pakistan has a large Pashtun minority). However, at least some Pakistani leaders have stated that instability in Afghanistan could rebound to Pakistan's detriment; Pakistan has struggled with indigenous Islamist militants of its own.[61] Afghanistan-Pakistan relations are further complicated by the large Afghan refugee population in Pakistan and a long-standing border dispute over which violence has broken out on several occasions.[62] Pakistan sees Afghanistan as potentially providing strategic

[53] Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson via teleconference from Kabul, Afghanistan, November 20, 2017.

[54] Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan estimated in a February 6, 2018, Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing that 65% of Taliban revenues are derived from narcotics.

[55] Kyle Rempfer, "Doubts rise over effectiveness of bombing Afghan drug labs," *Military Times*, February 5, 2018.

[56] "Afghanistan Opium Survey 2018," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 19, 2018.

[57] White House Office of the Press Secretary, Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, August 21, 2017.

[58] Hayatullah Amanat, "Pakistan Is The Center Of Taliban, Ghani Tells The Nation," *Tolo News*, February 2, 2018.

[59] For more, see CRS In Focus IF10604, *Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan*, by Clayton Thomas.

[60] Author interviews with Pakistani military officials, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, February 21, 2018.

[61] Jon Boone, "Musharraf: Pakistan and India's backing for 'proxies' in Afghanistan must stop," *Guardian*, February 13, 2015; author interviews with Pakistani military officials, Islamabad, Pakistan, February 2018.

[62] About two million Afghan refugees have returned from Pakistan since 2001, but approximately 2.4 million remain in Pakistan and Pakistan is pressing many of them to return; the forced return of several hundred thousand since 2016 may raise questions under international law and exacerbate humanitarian needs in Afghanistan. Nassim Majidi, "From Forced Migration to Forced Returns in Afghanistan: Policy and Program Implications," Migration Policy Institute, November 29, 2017.

depth against India, but may also anticipate that improved relations with Afghanistan's leadership could limit India's influence in Afghanistan. Indian interest in Afghanistan stems largely from India's broader regional rivalry with Pakistan, which impedes Indian efforts to establish stronger and more direct commercial and political relations with Central Asia.

In his August 2017 speech, President Trump announced what he characterized as a new approach to Pakistan, saying, "We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups that pose a threat to the region and beyond."[63] He also, however, praised Pakistan as a "valued partner," citing the close U.S.-Pakistani military relationship. In January 2018, the Trump Administration announced plans to suspend security assistance to Pakistan, a decision that could impact hundreds of millions of dollars in aid.[64] In February 2018, CENTCOM Commander General Joseph Votel stated, "Recently we have started to see an increase in communication, information sharing, and actions on the ground," but said that these "positive indicators" have "not yet translated into the definitive actions we require Pakistan to take against Afghan Taliban or Haqqani leaders."[65]

Afghanistan largely maintains cordial ties with its other neighbors, including the post-Soviet states of Central Asia, though some warn that rising instability in Afghanistan may complicate those relations.[66] In the past year, multiple U.S. commanders have warned of increased levels of assistance, and perhaps even material support, for the Taliban from Russia and Iran, both of which cite IS presence in Afghanistan to justify their activities.[67] Both nations were opposed to the Taliban government of the late 1990s, but reportedly see the Taliban as a useful point of leverage vis-a-vis the United States. Afghanistan may also represent a growing priority for China in the context of broader Chinese aspirations in Asia and globally.[68]

The President mentioned neither Iran nor Russia in his speech, and it is unclear how, if at all, the U.S. approach to them might have changed as part of the new strategy.[69] Afghanistan may also represent a growing priority for China in the context of broader Chinese aspirations in Asia and globally.[70] In his 2017 speech, President Trump encouraged India to play a greater role in Afghan economic development; this, along with other Administration messaging, has compounded

[63] White House Office of the Press Secretary, Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, August 21, 2017.

[64] Mark Landler and Gardiner Harris, "Trump, Citing Pakistan as a 'Safe Haven' for Terrorists, Freezes Aid," *New York Times*, January 4, 2018. Pakistan closed its ground and air lines of communication (GLOCs and ALOCs, respectively) to the United States after the latter suspended security aid during an earlier period of U.S.-Pakistan tensions in 2011-2012

[65] Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, U.S. Central Command before the House Armed Services Committee on Terrorism and Iran: Defense Challenges in the Middle East, February 27, 2018.

[66] Ivan Safranchuk, "Afghanistan and Its Central Asian Neighbors: Toward Dividing Insecurity," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2017.

[67] Carlotta Gall, "In Afghanistan, U.S. Exits, and Iran Comes In," *New York Times*, August 5, 2017; Justin Rowlatt, "Russia 'arming the Afghan Taliban', says US," BBC, March 23, 2018.

[68] Thomas Ruttig, "Climbing on China's Priority List: Views on Afghanistan from Beijing," Afghanistan Analysts Network, April 10, 2018.

[69] In October 2018, the Trump Administration sanctioned several Iranian military officials for providing support to the Taliban "Treasury and the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center Partners Sanction Taliban Facilitators and their Iranian Supporters," U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 23, 2018.

[70] Thomas Ruttig, "Climbing on China's Priority List: Views on Afghanistan from Beijing," Afghanistan Analysts Network, April 10, 2018; Michael Martina, "Afghan troops to train in China, ambassador says," Reuters, September 6, 2018.

Pakistani concerns over Indian activity in Afghanistan.[71] India has been the largest regional contributor to Afghan reconstruction, but New Delhi has not shown an inclination to pursue a deeper defense relationship with Kabul. Afghans themselves appear divided on the wisdom of cultivating stronger ties with India.[72]

Economy and U.S. Aid

Economic development is pivotal to Afghanistan's long-term stability, though indicators of future growth are mixed. Decades of war have stunted the development of most domestic industries, including mining.[73] The economy has also been hurt by a steep decrease in the amount of aid provided by international donors. Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has grown an average of 7% per year since 2003, but growth slowed to 2% in 2013 due to aid cutbacks and political uncertainty about the post-2014 security situation. Since 2015, Afghanistan has experienced a "slight recovery" with growth of between 2% and 3% in 2016 and 2017, though the increase in the poverty rate (55% living below the national poverty line in 2016-2017 compared to 38% in 2012-2013) complicates that picture.[74] A severe drought affecting northern and western Afghanistan has compounded economic and humanitarian challenges.[75] Social conditions in Afghanistan remain equally mixed. On issues ranging from human trafficking[76] to religious freedom to women's rights, Afghanistan has, by all accounts, made significant progress since 2001, but future prospects in these areas remain uncertain.

Congress has appropriated more than $132 billion in aid for Afghanistan since FY2002, with about 63% for security and 28% for development (and the remainder for civilian operations and humanitarian aid).[77] The Administration's FY2019 budget requests $5.2 billion for the ANDSF, $500 million in Economic Support Funds, and smaller amounts to help the Afghan government with tasks like combating narcotics trafficking.[78] This is roughly even with the overall FY2017 enacted level of about $5.6 billion (down from nearly $17 billion in FY2010). These figures do not include the cost of U.S. combat operations (including related regional support activities), which was estimated at a total of $752 billion since FY2001 in a July 2017 DOD report, with approximately $45 billion requested for each of FY2018 and FY2019.[79]

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[71] Author interviews with Pakistani military and political officials, Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan, February 2018.

[72] Author interview with Afghan officials, Islamabad, Pakistan, February 2018.

[73] Much attention has been paid to Afghanistan's potential mineral and hydrocarbon resources, which by some estimates could be considerable but have yet to be fully explored or developed. Once estimated at nearly $1 trillion, the value of Afghan mineral deposits has since been revised downward, but those deposits reportedly have attracted interest from the Trump Administration. Mark Landler and James Risen, "Trump Finds Reason for the U.S. to Remain in Afghanistan: Minerals," *New York Times*, July 25, 2017. Additionally, Afghanistan's geographic location could position it as a transit country for others' resources. The United States has emphasized the development of a Central Asia-South Asia trading hub, dubbed a "New Silk Road" (NSR), in an effort to keep Afghanistan economically viable and perhaps also to counter a similar Chinese initiative ("One Belt, One Road").

[74] World Bank Data, last updated October 7, 2018.

[75] "Afghan drought 'displacing more people than Taliban conflict,'" BBC, October 17, 2018.

[76] Afghanistan was ranked as "Tier 2" in the State Department Trafficking in Persons Report for 2017, an improvement from 2016 when Afghanistan was ranked as "Tier 2: Watch List" on the grounds that the Afghan government was not demonstrating increased efforts against trafficking since the prior reporting period.

[77] SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, October 30, 2018.

[78] For more, see CRS Report R45329, *Afghanistan: Legislation in the 115th Congress*, by Clayton Thomas.

[79] Estimated Cost to Each U.S. Taxpayer of Each of the Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, July 2017. Available at http://www.govexec.com/media/gbc/docs/pdfs_edit/section_1090_fy17_ndaa_cost_of_wars_to_per_taxpayer-

Outlook

Insurgent and terrorist groups have demonstrated considerable capabilities in 2018, throwing into sharp relief the daunting security challenges that the Afghan government and its U.S. and international partners face. At the same time, hopes for a negotiated settlement have risen, inspired by such developments as the June 2018 nationwide cease-fire. Additionally, U.S. officials are reportedly engaging in direct talks with the Taliban, though the prospects for such negotiations to deliver a settlement are uncertain.

U.S. policy has sought to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table by compelling the group to conclude that continued military struggle is futile in light of combined U.S., NATO, and ANDSF capabilities. It is still unclear, however, how the Taliban perceives its fortunes; given the group's battlefield gains in 2018, one observer has said that "the group has little reason to commit to a peace process: it is on a winning streak."[80]

Still, most observers assess that the Taliban do not pose an existential threat to the Afghan government, given the current military balance.[81] That dynamic could change if the United States changes the level or nature of its troop deployments in Afghanistan or funding for the ANDSF. President Ghani has said, "[W]e will not be able to support our army for six months without U.S. [financial] support."[82] Notwithstanding direct U.S. support, Afghan political dynamics, particularly the willingness of political actors to directly challenge the legitimacy and authority of the central government, even by extralegal means, may pose a serious threat to Afghan stability in 2019 and beyond, regardless of Taliban military capabilities.

A potential collapse of the Afghan military and/or the government that commands it could have significant implications for the United States, particularly given the nature of negotiated security arrangements. While it may be unlikely that the Taliban would be able to gain full control over all, or even most, of the country, the breakdown of social order and the fracturing of the country into fiefdoms controlled by paramilitary commanders and their respective militias may be plausible, even probable. Afghanistan experienced a similar situation nearly thirty years ago. Though Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan by February 1989, Soviet aid continued, sustaining the communist government in Kabul for nearly three years. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 ended that aid, and a coalition of mujahedin forces overturned the government in April 1992. Almost immediately, mujahedin commanders turned against each other, leading to a complex civil war during which the Taliban was founded, grew, and took control of most of the country, eventually offering sanctuary to Al Qaeda. While the Taliban and Al Qaeda are still "closely allied" according to the UN,[83] Taliban forces have clashed repeatedly with the Afghan Islamic State affiliate. Under a more unstable future scenario, alliances and relationships among extremist groups could evolve or security conditions could change, offering new opportunities to transnational terrorist groups whether directly or by default.

After more than 17 years of war, Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers may reassess notions of what "victory" in Afghanistan looks like, examining the array of potential outcomes,

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[80] Michael Semple, "The Taliban's Battle Plan," *Foreign Affairs,* November 28, 2018.

[81] See, for example, Seth Jones, "Why the Taliban Isn't Winning in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs,* January 3, 2018.

[82] Anwar Iqbal, "Afghan army to collapse in six months without US help: Ghani," *Dawn,* January 18, 2018.

[83] Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, United Nations Security Council, July 27, 2018.

how these outcomes might harm or benefit U.S. interests, and the relative levels of U.S. engagement and investment required to attain them.[84] The present condition, which is essentially a stalemate that has existed for several years, could persist; some argue that the United States "has the capacity to sustain its commitment to Afghanistan for some time to come" at present levels.[85] Others counter that "the threat in Afghanistan doesn't warrant a continued U.S. military presence and the associated costs—which are not inconsequential."[86]

The Trump Administration has described 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."[87] For years, some analysts have dismissed that line of reasoning, describing it as a strategic "myth" and arguing that "the safe haven fallacy is an argument for endless war based on unwarranted worst-case scenario assumptions."[88] Some of these analysts and others dismiss what they see as a disproportionate focus on the military effort, citing evidence that "the terror threat to Americans remains low" to argue that "a strategy that emphasizes military power will continue to fail."[89] As many have observed, increased political instability, fueled by questions about the central government's authority and competence and rising ethnic tensions, may pose as serious a threat to Afghanistan as the Taliban does.[90]

In light of these internal political dynamics, Members of Congress may also examine how the United States can leverage its assets, influence, and experience in Afghanistan, as well as those of Afghanistan's neighbors and international organizations, to encourage more equal, inclusive, and effective governance. Congress could also seek to help shape the U.S. approach to potential negotiations around amending the constitution or otherwise altering the highly centralized Afghan political system, e.g., through legislation and public statements.[91] Core issues for Congress include its role in authorizing, appropriating funds for, and overseeing U.S. military activities, aid, and regional policy implementation.

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[84] See, for example Jim Banks, "The Public Deserves an Afghanistan War Progress Report," *National Review*, October 23, 2018; Seth Jones, "The U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: The Perils of Withdrawal," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 26, 2018.

[85] Semple, op. cit.

[86] Charles Pena, "We Can't Win-and Don't Have To-In Afghanistan." *Real Clear Defense*, October 9, 2018.

[87] U.S. Department of State, "Integrated Country Strategy: Afghanistan," September 27, 2018.

[88] A. Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner, "Another Year of the War in Afghanistan," *Texas National Security Review*, September 11, 2018. See also Micah Zenko and Amelia Mae Wolfe, "The Myth of the Terrorist Safe Haven," *Foreign Policy*, January 26, 2015.

[89] Erik Goepner, "In Afghanistan, the Withdrawal of U.S. Troops Is Long Overdue," Cato Institute, September 29, 2017.

[90] Sayed Salahuddin, "Strongman's loyalists show Taliban isn't only threat in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, July 4, 2018.

[91] Omar Samad, "A Pivotal Year Ahead for Afghanistan," Atlantic Council, November 27, 2018.

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