Pop-Up Case: Afghanistan Withdrawal

At the start of a new term in 2021, the U.S. president wrestles with whether to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, even though doing so would increase the risk of a Taliban takeover.

The Situation:

In October 2001, the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan with the dual goal of killing or capturing the al-Qaeda leaders behind 9/11 and overthrowing the Taliban, the Islamic fundamentalist group that ruled Afghanistan and was harboring al-Qaeda. U.S. and allied forces quickly gained control of much of the country, but Taliban militants continued to fight an insurgency. U.S. troops have remained in the region for nearly two decades, continuing to hunt down al-Qaeda operatives and fighting the Taliban. As the Taliban insurgency has waxed and waned, the number of U.S. troops in the country has varied, from over 110,000 to just a few thousand. During this time, the United States has begun work on a third goal: rebuilding Afghanistan by investing in democratic institutions, building infrastructure, and advancing women’s rights.

The United States has spent more than $2 trillion fighting in and rebuilding Afghanistan. The war has already cost the lives of nearly 3,600 U.S. and allied service members, thousands of military contractors, and an estimated 100,000 Afghan soldiers and civilians. In 2011, U.S. forces killed Osama bin Laden, a primary target of the invasion. Meanwhile, the Afghan army began to take over the fight against the Taliban, with the United States moving to a supporting role. In the 2010s, the United States and the Taliban began talks that ultimately led to a February 2020 agreement. The Taliban promised not to harbor terrorists in return for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops by summer 2021. Though the agreement did not include a ceasefire, Taliban attacks have lessened as the withdrawal date approaches.

The prospect of withdrawal has generated considerable debate. Proponents of remaining warn that a U.S. withdrawal could lead to the Taliban retaking control of Afghanistan. Although the U.S.-Taliban agreement fulfills U.S. counterterrorism goals, withdrawal would effectively admit defeat on the second war aim: removing the Taliban. It would also likely negate much of the rebuilding: observers agree that a Taliban government would be undemocratic and oppress women. They also note that the last few years have been relatively peaceful, with the Afghan army shouldering most of the fighting, supported by a small contingent of U.S. troops. Would a continued presence, they wonder, be sustainable and worth the relatively low cost?

Proponents of withdrawal, however, worry that the Taliban’s recent low level of activity is the result of their knowledge that U.S. forces are on the way out; it will not necessarily last. A continued presence in Afghanistan, they argue, would have no clear end point and could require an increasing commitment if Taliban attacks expand. Moreover, if the United States has failed to defeat the Taliban in what is already the longest war in U.S. history, they ask, what would be different should U.S. forces remain in place?

Decision Point: Set in March 2021

As President Joe Biden takes office, he has called a National Security Council (NSC) meeting to decide whether to end the United States’ longest war and withdraw from Afghanistan. U.S. intelligence has warned that without U.S. support, the Afghan government could fall to the Taliban in about eighteen months. A withdrawal would end an expensive two-decade commitment, but it could also see the loss of a significant U.S. investment and lead to instability in a strategically important region.

Maintaining a low level of troops could keep the Taliban at bay and perhaps buy time for a more comprehensive strategy—though if history is any guide, such a commitment would not be brief. A significantly larger commitment would be necessary to thwart the Taliban’s ability to fight. Domestic politics also play a role: many Americans have tired of the war and have little stomach for an expansion of U.S. involvement.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- **Withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan.** This option would end the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan, likely leading to the Taliban overthrow of the Afghan government. However, it would guarantee that no more U.S. lives are lost or money spent on fighting the Taliban.
- **Maintain a small U.S. force to provide support for the Afghan army.** This option could keep the Taliban at bay, perhaps buying time to strengthen the Afghan government and army. However, this policy option has no clear end point, and if Taliban attacks were to increase, it could force the United States to deepen its commitment.
- **Significantly increase U.S. troop commitment in order to fight the Taliban directly.** This option could change the calculus on the ground more successfully than a limited deployment, but at a significant cost. It is unlikely to be met with public support.

Additional Resources:

2. Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan – August 16, 2021 (White House)
3. America’s Withdrawal of Choice (Project Syndicate)

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Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips here and here). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

Simple NSC simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president.

NSC simulation with assigned opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign opinions. For example, assign one-third of the class to be isolationist, one-third to favor a military response, and one-third to favor a diplomatic response. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or a student) as president.

Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students imagine they are advising a generic president rather than a specific one.

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