THE ISSUE
This brief presents a summary of key historical events in Afghanistan since 1989 and outlines a possible worst-case scenario following a U.S. and allied withdrawal from the country. The United States, Afghanistan, and its allies must work together in search for greater Afghan self-reliance, security, and stability in order to avoid a catastrophic scenario. Only then will Afghanistan be able to free itself of foreign presences and embark on its own journey to prosperity and self-reliance.

INTRODUCTION
A complete and sudden U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan would be a recipe for disaster. Pulling the plug on U.S. troops, civilian presence, foreign aid, and security assistance could lead other NATO countries to do the same, encourage the Taliban to abandon peace talks, and ultimately lead to civil war. The Afghan forces could disintegrate, leading thousands of soldiers trained and equipped by the United States to side with the Taliban, the Islamic State, al-Qaeda or others. Drug production would exponentially increase, and terror organizations would gain significant ground. Civilians would be stripped of their social and political freedoms and flee the violence, adding to the millions of Afghan refugees and other migrants dispersed around the world.

Afghanistan has made dramatic political, social, and economic progress over the past 20 years with the help of the United States and its allies, and the consequences of a hasty withdrawal have not been properly considered. In the worst-case scenario, Afghanistan could have a dystopian future filled with horrific violence and bad actors with free rein: the country could revert to an apocalyptic society and become a hub for terrorism, causing violence-induced deaths to escalate. Afghanistan could also become a cauldron for communicable disease and a source for forced migration, producing thousands if not millions of refugees, some of which will seek refuge in the United States and Europe. Great powers would choose sides and take up arms, prolonging an arguably four-decade long civil war. The social and political gains made in Afghanistan could be lost, the United States’ prestige would be heavily damaged, and the international community’s expense of blood and treasure would be for naught. Given the likelihood that terror groups would operate in this scenario, the United States might have to return to Afghanistan within a decade of ending its support with less allies and less moral authority than in 2001.

Nevertheless, this fate is not preordained and will hopefully not be suffered. Afghanistan’s dramatic gains could continue on an upward trajectory, a political settlement with the Taliban could be achieved, and the United States could withdraw from Afghan soil without leading to death, terrorism, and forced migration. To understand these potential outcomes, it is crucial to draw parallels from post-Soviet Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban to the terror attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001.
A RETROSPECTIVE
POST-SOVIE T AFGHANISTAN, 1989-2001

The Soviet Union’s Red Army marched into Afghanistan with nearly 100,000 soldiers in 1979.¹ Ten years later, the Soviet forces retreated, ending an unsuccessful occupation that led to over 1 million civilian deaths and 120,000 military deaths and produced 6.3 million refugees by 1990 (see figures 1 and 4).² The United States was an active participant in the conflict and channeled funds to the Afghan resistance known as the Mujahideen (which included Arab fighters) through Pakistan. It is estimated that the United States spent over $2 billion (in 1992 dollars, equivalent to over $3.5 billion today) to fund the Mujahideen.³ Other countries such as Saudi Arabia, which funneled around $4 billion in foreign aid, Pakistan, Iran, China, and various Islamic and European countries also provided support to the resistance.⁴

The Soviets ultimately withdrew in 1989—leaving a puppet regime under Mohammad Najibullah in power. Contrary to initial expectations, Najibullah was able to remain in power until 1992, when the Soviets cut off economic and security assistance and the regime collapsed. In the same year, the United States also withdrew all economic and security assistance to the Mujahideen.⁵ Some of these Mujahideen later went on to resist the Taliban, while others joined the group.

The period after the collapse of the Najibullah regime (from 1992 to 1996) saw chaos, civil war, political instability, and the rise of the Taliban. With the help of the Pakistani Intelligence, the Taliban began to control territory in 1994 and seized Kabul in 1996, claiming de-facto authority of the country despite only being recognized by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.⁶ The Taliban encountered resistance within the country, mainly from Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara minorities, some of which joined together to form the Northern Alliance and resisted the Taliban throughout its rule.⁷ Nevertheless, the Taliban remained in control of most of Afghanistan’s territory until the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, following the September 11 attacks and the Taliban’s refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden.

Afghanistan was ravaged by misery, poverty, and insecurity during this period. Over 72,000 civilians and armed forces died in conflict and 1.5 million people died due to communicable diseases, such as cholera, measles, diarrheal diseases, malaria, and tuberculosis outbreaks from 1998 to 2001.⁸ Life expectancy was 46 years and the infant mortality rate was 165 per 1,000 live births in 2001.⁹ There was a tremendous repatriation wave from Pakistan and Iran, with over 2 million people returning to Afghanistan in the early 1990s, but there were still 2.7 million refugees abroad by 1997 and 3.8 million by 2001 (see figure 4).¹⁰

When the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996, it repressed social and political freedoms, especially those of women; girls were not even allowed to attend school. Moreover, the Taliban allowed terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda to train and operate on Afghan territory. Afghanistan became the home of Osama bin Laden, and an estimated 20,000 to 100,000 recruits passed through training camps from 1996 to 2002.¹¹

**Figure 1: Conflict-Related Deaths (Civilian and Military), Afghanistan 1978–2017**

![Figure 1: Conflict-Related Deaths (Civilian and Military), Afghanistan 1978–2017](source: Central Asian Survey (1978-1987) and Uppsala Conflict Data Project (1989-2017))

**Figure 2: Deaths by Communicable Disease, Afghanistan, 1990–2017**

![Figure 2: Deaths by Communicable Disease, Afghanistan, 1990–2017](source: Global Health Data Exchange)
RECENT TRENDS

AFGHANISTAN IN 2001-2019

Some of the challenges that Afghanistan suffered from 1989 to 2001 may serve to foreshadow what could happen if the United States and its allies were to withdraw from the country in haste. The policy of the United States and its allies over the past 17 plus years has been to pursue a gradual exit strategy by means of military force and economic and security assistance to push the Afghan government to be more self-reliant. The World Bank estimates that Afghanistan will depend on foreign assistance until 2030, but annual commitments by international donors have been steadily decreasing due to the Afghan government’s greater ability to collect taxes and pay for its own budget.12

Moreover, there have been significantly fewer civilian and military deaths since 2001 than there were during the Soviet occupation, although there has been a spike in deaths over the past five years (see figure 1). The Soviet occupation featured a heavy use of indiscriminate, conventional military force including carpet bombings of civilian populations; U.S. and NATO forces have never used such tactics. There has also been significant social, economic, health, and political progress made in Afghanistan since 2001.13 The Afghan population has grown by 150 percent over the past 25 years and is expected to increase by an additional 75 percent by 2050.14 5.2 million people have returned to their homes since 2002.15 There were still disease outbreaks in Afghanistan as of mid-2018, including some cases of measles and Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever, but there have been important improvements in disease prevention overall.16 Life expectancy has increased to 63 years, infant mortality rate has decreased to 51 deaths per 1,000 live births, and there are emergency response mechanisms in place to respond to disease outbreaks.17 In 2017, slightly over 83,000 people died from communicable diseases, a considerable decrease from 1998, when deaths peaked at over 146,000 (see figure 2).18

Additionally, there have been important gains in social, political, and economic freedoms. Currently, there are an estimated 3.5 million girls in school.19 Three parliamentary elections and three presidential elections have been held since the fall of the Taliban, and a new constitution has been established. Afghanistan has considerable media freedoms and ranks as “Partly Free” in Freedom House’s Freedom of the Press Report, whereas all of its border-sharing neighbors are ranked as “Not Free.”20 The Afghan government also has a greater ability to collect domestic revenue (meaning taxes, social contributions, and other fees and government income, excluding grants) from the formal economy and is increasingly financially self-reliant (see figure 3).21

Despite these gains, there are still considerable challenges in Afghanistan. Over 128,000 people died in conflict from 2002-2017 (see figure 1).22 There were over 4.8 million Afghans seeking a better life abroad in 2017, including 2.6 million refugees and other forced and voluntary migrants (see figure 4).23 Of all migrants, approximately 1.5 million were in Pakistan, 2.3 million were in Iran, 435,000 were in Saudi Arabia, 335,000 were in Europe, 72,000 were in the United States, and 47,000 were in Canada.24 Given insecurity, poverty, and inadequate job opportunities, few Afghans are likely to return to what is one of the poorest countries in the world.

Drug production has also skyrocketed in recent years. 328,000 hectares, worth $1.4 billion, were cultivated for

Figure 3: Revenue, Excluding Grants, Afghanistan

opium poppy in 2017. 25 Opium cultivation provides the equivalent of 590,000 full-time jobs, which is more than the combined employment of the Afghan army and police.26

Terror organizations still have a significant presence in Afghanistan, which is home to the highest concentration of terrorist groups in the region.27 There are approximately 27,000 to 64,000 Salafi-jihadist fighters in Afghanistan and 20 or less terror organizations and affiliates active, according to the U.S. government.28 These organizations include al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other independent or affiliated groups and groups with ties to the Taliban, such as the Haqqani Network, the Pakistani Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement.29 If the Taliban succeeds in expanding its geographic reach, there may be greater opportunities for transnational terrorist groups to find safe haven in Taliban controlled areas. Research by the BBC suggests that the Taliban is active in 70 percent of the country, and recent SIGAR estimates show that the government struggles to maintain control in rural areas.30 Currently, the Afghan government controls 54 percent of Afghanistan’s districts—down from 72 percent in 2015. 31

PAST AS PROLOGUE

A hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan could resurface some of the horrific realities that Afghanistan experienced in the post-Soviet era and create new ones. The RAND Corporation predicts that, following the United States, other NATO countries would withdraw their troops, civilian presence, foreign aid, and security assistance.32 Cutting off this assistance could mortally damage the Afghan forces and the government’s influence and stability, prompt the Taliban to abandon peace negotiations with the United States, and lead to civil war and greater terrorist and warlord control.33

The Afghan government is only able to pay for its armed forces with U.S. assistance, and without such assistance, it is not clear how long they would be able to sustain the fight: the government’s collapse would be a real possibility. The billions of dollars spent on training and paying the Afghan forces could be rendered useless, and fighters could use their skills and U.S.-funded weapons to join the Taliban or other armed groups. There are currently significant challenges in the Afghan forces. The Afghan air force is particularly underdeveloped. Estimates optimistically suggest that the Afghan air force will be self-sufficient in the next three or four years, except for maintenance.34 The United States has a plan to provide the air force with 81 Black Hawk helicopters, but the program is unlikely to be completed until 2030.35 If the United States withdraws its support before then and leaves a half-trained air force, instead of fully training it or ending the program and retraining personnel, the air force could collapse, wasting the billions of dollars of U.S. investment. Moreover, the Afghan army has been trained to rely upon air power in accordance with U.S. doctrine, and the collapse of the air force would quickly lead to overall collapse of government forces.

If the United States withdraws and the Afghan government collapses, it is easy to imagine a multi-dimensional and kaleidoscopic civil war ensuing. The current rifts within the Pashtun community are likely to deepen, with some joining the Taliban and others potentially joining other militant groups. Some non-Pashtun minorities may reunite under a revamped Northern Alliance, while others may form separate allegiances. A complex armed standoff could follow

Figure 4: Afghan Refugees, 1970–2017

Source: Migration Data Portal
and leave millions of civilians stuck in conflict. Soldiers trained and equipped by the United States would have to pick sides, and some would abandon their positions or join the groups that the United States has worked hard to fight against since 2001. Already, the Afghan army struggles to meet its quotas and observe high rates of casualties and desertion, including 150 members of the Afghan armed forces who received training in the United States and have since gone absent.36

A sustained spike in violence could lead many Afghans to consider the possibility of leaving their homes, adding to the existing millions of Afghan refugees and internally displaced persons. The number of Afghan refugees could rise again to the 6 million figure mark surpassed in 1992 (see figure 4) and even grow beyond that, given decreases in cost of travel, greater access to information, and a larger population. The number of migrants in Pakistan and Iran, currently around 3.8 million, could plausibly increase to 6 million, and the migrant populations of India and the United Arab Emirates could also increase. In 2017, there were 72,000 Afghans in the United States and 335,000 Europe, and it is conceivable that these numbers combined could rise to over 600,000 (around 60,000 per year over 10 years).

These refugee influxes would be most untimely, given that these countries are already struggling to accommodate forced and voluntary migrants amidst a strained international system and growing domestic resistance against surges in foreign migrants. However, they would not be impossible to manage. The United States has granted nearly 65,000 refugee and special immigrant visas to Afghans since 2007 and should expect to grant at least twice this amount over the next decade if Afghanistan collapses.37 This number is not implausible and should be accepted, similar to the Indochinese refugee resettlement program after the Vietnam War. From 1975 to 1985, over 482,000 Vietnamese refugees and 277,000 Cambodian and Laotian refugees arrived in the United States.38

If the Taliban were to regain power, their regime might look different than it did in the 1990s, although it remains to be seen how much would actually change. For example, the Taliban has stated it no longer oppose having girls in school, although they believe girls should receive religious education, in segregated schools, and for shorter periods of time—at least until there is sufficient funding for separate teachers.39 Even this minimalist vision would require substantial long-term planning and accommodation and is unlikely to succeed without enforcement and regulation. Consequently, the number of girls in school would inevitably decrease, both by Taliban-imposed restrictions and security concerns, depriving millions of girls of basic education and affecting Afghanistan’s future prospects for growth. Media and political freedoms gained would also be reversed.

Drug production would likely continue to skyrocket. The Taliban banned opium production during its rule, but now it receives approximately 65 percent of its income from narcotics.40 If it regains control of Afghanistan, it is unlikely that drug production or income to the Taliban will decrease. On the contrary, given the recent spikes in poppy production, it is conceivable that drug-related revenue will continue to increase in this scenario.

Terror organizations could also continue to thrive. Al-Qaeda rejoiced after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and, thereafter, Afghanistan became a den for terrorists. Similarly, Salafi-jihadist groups will perceive a Taliban victory following a U.S. withdrawal as their own victory.41 Amidst greater disputed territory, terror organizations in Afghanistan are likely to be encouraged to become more active, and the country may once again become a playground for training terrorists and harboring weapons against the West. There have been recent reports of new al-Qaeda training camps springing in Afghanistan, so it is not unlikely that a new major attack against the United States be plotted from an Afghanistan free of counterterrorism operations. 42 This could happen even if the Taliban does not promote or oppose it.

THE GREAT GAME

Afghanistan has long been a playground for proxy wars by regional actors. The modern Afghan state, which was established in the nineteenth century as a buffer state between the Russian and British Empires, continued to play that role through the Cold War. Only with the Saur Revolution of 1978 did Afghanistan break with the tradition of neutrality. The past four decades have seen repeated interventions by regional powers, and this dynamic is likely to continue and intensify should the current regime collapse. It is easy to imagine that Pakistan would support a re-ascendance of the Taliban, which would trigger resistance from Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras who have benefited from the current political dispensation. They are likely to seek foreign patrons from other regional powers, who will continue to pursue hedging strategies in Afghanistan. While the rise of China is the most important regional development, Beijing has been reluctant to use its power to impose peace in Afghanistan to date. In fact, Afghanistan has been excluded from the otherwise regionally inclusive Belt and Road Initiative. It, therefore, seems likely that the Great Game of the nineteenth century would again be
played out on Afghan territory in the absence of strong central authority in Kabul.

CHOOSING THE BETTER PATH

History should serve as a warning that Afghanistan could once again descend into civil war. A hasty withdrawal of U.S. and allied support could lead to the collapse of the Afghan government and create an enabling environment for terror organizations and U.S. rivals, as well as a very costly civil war. Afghan people could lose their social and political rights and freedoms, prompting many to seek shelter abroad—including in the United States. It is plausible that a major terrorist attack of the caliber of the September 11, 2001 attacks be planned against the United States on Afghan soil. This could trigger a future U.S. president to occupy Afghanistan once again, but with fewer allies, lower political appetite, and less moral authority than in 2001.

This catastrophic scenario is not the only possible one. A phased and orderly withdrawal of U.S. troops and assistance in accordance with an overall political settlement would be a very different proposition from a sudden pullout. The Afghan government is already making strides toward self-reliance and has the support of the international community in strengthening institutions, fighting corruption, and paying for more of its own development and security. The government is currently offering to work to further reduce U.S. security costs based on a joint threat assessment. In recent years, U.S. and allied economic and security commitments to Afghanistan have already gradually reduced. If these trends continue, the Afghan government may have significant autonomy by 2030.

Peace talks between the United States and the Taliban appear to be advancing, and a settlement could lead to a gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan as the result of dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Moreover, Afghanistan is set to hold presidential elections in September, and if a candidate with broad support wins, there may be more peace and stability in the country and diminish or eliminate the need for foreign troops on the ground. This is an alternative in which U.S. policy objectives are met and in which the United States retains a partnership with a post-settlement with Afghanistan. There is hope for peace and the preservation of the gains made in the last two decades, but the United States and the rest of the international community need to be patient and take gradual, thoughtful measures. A hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan could lead to catastrophe.

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7. Ibid.


13. There were over 1.1 million deaths in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 and over 133,000 deaths from 2001 to 2017. See: Taylor, “The Soviet War in Afghanistan” and Uppsala Conflict Data Project, “Afghanistan.”


18. Global Health Data Exchange, “GBD Results Tool.”


24. Ibid.


29. Thomas, “Al Qaeda and Islamic State Affiliates in Afghanistan.”


33. Ibid.


35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.


