

2020 Country Brief: Afghanistan



The National Security Program

Takeaways

After 19 years of war in Afghanistan and a peace agreement signed with the Taliban, it's time for the United States to withdraw. Although the United States has slowly reduced troops in Afghanistan, the Trump Administration has left the remaining troops vulnerable to the Taliban and to Putin's Russia, which is paying bounties to Afghans for murdering American soldiers.

As we leave Afghanistan, the United States must:

- Give support to the Afghan government to reach a successful peace agreement with the Taliban;
- Sunset the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force that authorized open-ended and unending US military operations;

- Reduce military spending to reflect the end of the mission; and
- Hold the Russian government accountable for attacks on US soldiers.

The US war in Afghanistan has lasted through three entire presidential administrations. The agreement Trump signed with the Taliban leaves a lot of room for the United States to stay indefinitely. We should not be in Afghanistan through a fourth Administration.

The United States' history in Afghanistan includes America's longest war.

American involvement in Afghanistan has a tumultuous history. In the 1980s, the United States backed insurgents against the Soviet occupation. Then, after the Soviet withdrawal in the 1990s, the Taliban took power, bringing repressive rule and establishing a safe haven from which Al Qaeda planned and executed the 9/11 attacks. In response to those horrific attacks, in 2001, the United States deployed troops to Afghanistan and successfully drove out Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime, eventually paving the way for elections.

But from 2002 to 2009, in the words of former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, “resources and senior-level attention were diverted from Afghanistan” to Iraq, interrupting US efforts to rebuild Afghanistan.¹ It was not until the start of President Obama’s tenure in 2009 that the United States shifted its focus back to Afghanistan, sending an additional surge of 30,000 troops to suppress the Taliban insurgency and stabilize the country.² Civilian deaths in Afghanistan nevertheless increased after this period.³

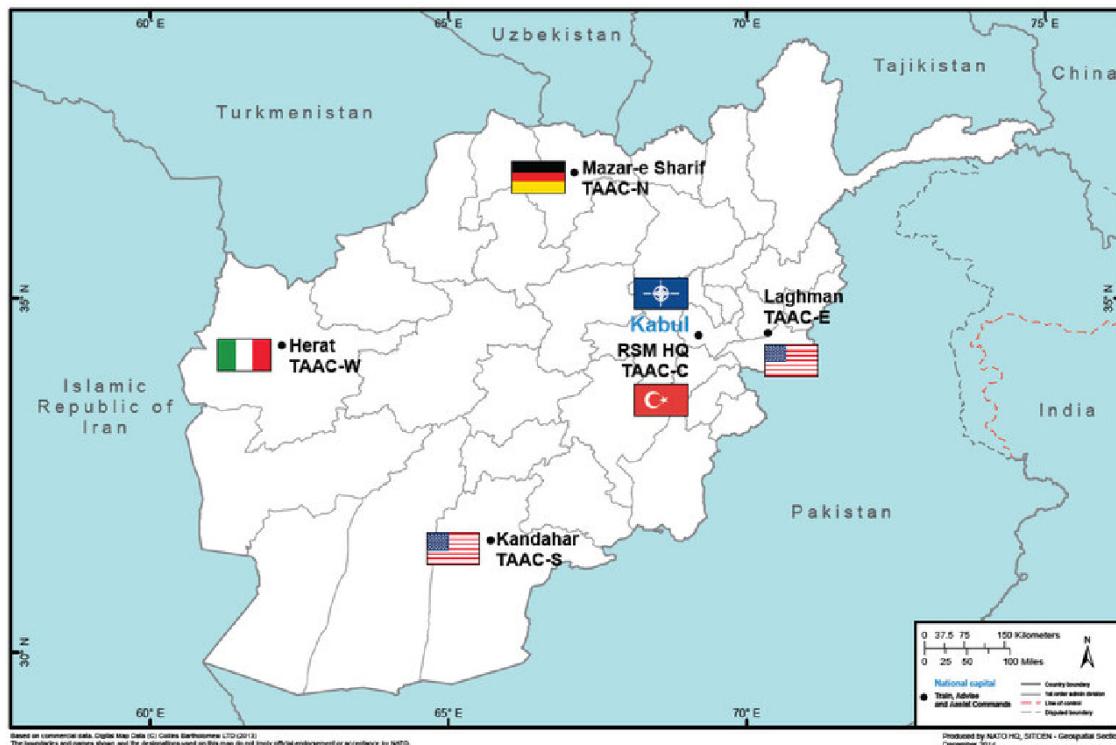
In 2014, at the end of Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s tenure and after years of tense relations with his Administration, the United States sought a political solution to a disputed election and helped broker a national unity government between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. Ghani, a former Afghan finance minister with a doctorate from an American school and decades of experience as an academic and World Bank staffer, was elected—and continues to serve as president after securing re-election in February 2020.⁴ Abdullah Abdullah, who previously served as Afghanistan’s foreign minister, became chief executive and is expected to lead the Afghan government’s negotiations with the Taliban.⁵

On January 1, 2015, NATO ground forces, including American troops, officially ended their combat mission in Afghanistan, replacing it with a train-and-advise mission. In November 2017, NATO allies and partners decided to set the number of troops in Afghanistan at 16,000 personnel. Prior to that decision, in June, President Trump had already reversed his campaign

pledge to withdraw from Afghanistan and approved a plan by then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis to send 3,000–5,000 troops to advise Afghan forces.⁶ This brought the number of US forces to 14,000—just a fraction of President Obama’s surge of 30,000 troops in 2009. As of June 2020, per the recent agreement signed with the Taliban, the United States reduced its presence to 8,600 troops, with the timeline of pulling all troops from Afghanistan by May 2021 if the Taliban upholds its commitments.⁷ According to the Department of Defense (DoD), over 2,400 US military personnel and civilian employees have been killed in support of US military operations in Afghanistan.⁸ From 2002 to 2017, the US Congress has appropriated or allocated between \$934 billion and \$978 billion for various State Department and Pentagon programs to support the Afghan security forces.⁹

Despite increases in US forces over the years, the Taliban has ultimately gained back a lot of ground since the 2002 invasion. An increase of new weapons has allowed the Taliban to launch attacks on Afghan security forces in rural areas and remote military outposts.¹⁰ Indeed, the Taliban is estimated to control almost 400 districts in Afghanistan,¹¹ and in many cases the group acts as a shadow government by collecting taxes, providing basic services, and running local bazaars.¹²

NATO Resolute Support Mission Bases in Afghanistan



Source: "Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan." North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 18 July 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_113694.htm. Accessed 17 Feb. 2019.

The signed peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban is an important step, but the Trump Administration should now work to encourage intra-Afghan negotiations.

In February 2020, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, announced that the United States had reached an agreement with the Taliban to end America's involvement in the 19-year war.¹³ The framework's four tenets are:

1. The Taliban will prevent the use of Afghanistan by any group or individual seeking to attack the United States or its allies;
2. The United States and all foreign forces will gradually withdraw from Afghanistan within 14 months, if certain commitments are met by the Taliban;

3. The Taliban will engage in direct negotiations with the Afghan government, if certain steps are taken; and
4. A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an agenda item in intra-Afghan negotiations.¹⁴

The deal between the United States and the Taliban does not guarantee lasting peace in Afghanistan, but it is an important step in facilitating US withdrawal from the country. However, there are still many questions about what the US government committed to and how it will monitor whether the Taliban is upholding its end of the agreement. The Trump Administration agreed to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and rescind sanctions on Taliban leaders by late August if intra-Afghan negotiations move forward,¹⁵ in exchange for a number of commitments by the Taliban. The Administration has said the agreement for US withdrawal of troops is “conditions based,” but has not made these conditions public and has hindered transparency and accountability through its classification of secret annexes containing further information.¹⁶ After so many years at war, the American people deserve more information about how decisions will be made about whether US troops stay or go.

Meanwhile, attacks by the Taliban and terrorist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have continued in Afghanistan. While the public agreement calls for the Taliban and the Afghan government to negotiate a permanent ceasefire as part of an intra-Afghan negotiations process,¹⁷ Taliban fighters have carried out 44 attacks and killed or wounded 24 civilians every day since the end of February.¹⁸ Additionally, attacks by Al Qaeda—which organized and executed the attacks on 9/11 from Afghan territory under the patronage of the Taliban—and ISIS have inflicted devastating casualties in Afghanistan.¹⁹

The future direction of these intra-Afghan negotiations is unclear, in large part, because the Trump Administration did not include the Afghan government in its negotiations with the Taliban. While a deal between the Afghan government and the Taliban is essential for peace and stability in the country and a prerequisite for complete US troop withdrawal by May 2021, the Taliban have notoriously resisted negotiations with the Afghan government and refused to enter into a power-sharing arrangement,²⁰ calling into question whether implementation of this agreement will be possible. The US-Taliban agreement mandated a prisoner exchange between the Afghan government and the Taliban, without the consent of the Afghan government.²¹ The agreement called on the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban soldiers, but the government slowly released only around 4,600. In early August, Afghan President Ghani called a consultative session with country elders to debate the release of the remaining 400 Taliban prisoners. After a weekend of consultation, the council agreed to release the final “hardcore” soldiers, paving the way for intra-Afghan talks.²² The Taliban told US and Afghan officials they were ready for peace talks after upholding their commitment to release 1,000 prisoners. But the sustained period of violence between the two sides has

further complicated the start of intra-Afghan negotiations. In July 2020 alone, Taliban soldiers killed at least 282 Afghan security forces and over 109 civilians.²³

It is also unclear what will happen to the US agreement with the Taliban, and America's future in Afghanistan, if the intra-Afghan negotiations fail. The US-Taliban agreement was particularly flawed in its exclusion of not only the government in Kabul but also women's groups and other voices from civil society that will be most affected by this agreement and whose inclusion is critical for its long-term sustainability.²⁴ The US government must take steps to encourage and support intra-Afghan negotiations moving forward, while strongly calling for the inclusion of women and other civil society actors in those negotiations. To do so, the United States should use its diplomatic levers to push both sides to uphold its commitments under the US-Taliban agreement and promote more inclusive negotiations. And Congress should continue to demand transparency and accountability in these efforts, pushing for comprehensive, ongoing updates on what actions the Administration is taking to support inclusive, intra-Afghan negotiations.

Further, Congress must hold the Trump Administration accountable for developing a clear and comprehensive exit strategy for US troop withdrawal and provide the resources necessary to shift to non-combatant support through diplomatic and humanitarian efforts. Without continued US engagement on both governance and development, Afghanistan could return to the chaos of the 1990s and give rise to terrorist safe havens. To prevent terrorist organizations from once again gaining a stronghold in Afghanistan, the United States must continue to maintain other forms of support to ensure stability.

Ultimately, long-term peace between the Taliban and Afghan government, coupled with effective governance that promotes rule of law and reduces corruption, will keep Afghanistan from backsliding into a terrorist safe haven—the core US priority in the country.

As the United States works to end its military involvement in Afghanistan, Congress must also reassert its responsibility to make decisions on US troop deployments by sunsetting the 2001 AUMF.

Since 9/11, Congress has deferred to the president on where the United States deploys troops and how military operations are conducted. But after 19 years of deference and no end in sight for the conflict, this approach is not working. *Congress must reassert itself by rescinding its war authority permission slip and blank check for military spending that the executive branch has taken for granted.* To do this, Congress must:

1. Rescind its 2001 AUMF permission slip granting the executive branch unrestrained counterterrorism authority and consider a new, narrowly tailored authorization for US counterterrorism efforts.

Congress deferred its constitutional authority over matters of war 19 years ago by granting the executive branch a permission slip for unilateral military action. Congress should assert its authority as a co-equal branch of government, rescind the 2001 AUMF, and debate the merits of a new, narrowly tailored counterterrorism authority. The Constitution provides in Article I, Section 8 that “Congress shall have the power to declare war.”²⁵ Congress used this constitutional power when it authorized the 2001 AUMF. After the attacks on 9/11, Congress authorized the president to use force against the people who initiated those attacks. Since then, presidents have used that authority to combat Al Qaeda and its affiliates around the world.

Section 2(a) of the 2001 AUMF authorizes the use of force in response to the 9/11 attacks:²⁶

Sec. 2. Authorization For Use of United States Armed Forces

(a) In GENERAL.—That the President is authorized 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, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.

The 2001 AUMF was intended to give the president authority to enter into an international armed conflict in Afghanistan against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The US government believed that Taliban-controlled Afghanistan was harboring terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda, which was responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

The US government should have the “necessary and appropriate” authority to exercise its right to self-defense, but there should be limitations on the authority of the president to take military action without congressional approval. The text of the AUMF does not name or specify terrorist organizations nor provide geographic limits. The Obama Administration interpreted the scope of the 2001 AUMF to fit within the president’s Article II powers as commander in chief and chief executive to use military force against those who pose a threat to US national security.²⁷ This interpretation expanded the scope of the 2001 AUMF from authority to go after Al Qaeda and the Taliban to include “associated forces” of those organizations.

Currently, the United States is engaged in counterterrorism operations across the globe, far exceeding the original intent of the 2001 AUMF.²⁸ The 2001 AUMF has been used to deploy US troops in Afghanistan, the Philippines, Georgia, Yemen, Djibouti, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, and other countries.²⁹ Presidents have claimed that the 2001 AUMF also allows them to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) even though ISIS was not involved in the 9/11 attacks.³⁰

In June 2019, in response to President Trump's reckless actions against Iran and US support of Saudi Arabia in the Yemen civil war, the US House of Representatives voted to repeal the 2001 AUMF.³¹ Although the bill died in the Senate, the vote was nonetheless significant; votes on House panels regarding similar language have continued.³² The passage of the repeal is the first time since 2001 that Congress has voted in favor of ending the permission slip granted to Presidents Bush, Obama, and Trump.³³ While President Bush and President Obama's actions forced some Members of Congress to file bills ending the current AUMF, it was President Trump's irresponsible actions combined with a Democratic majority in the House in 2018 that galvanized the vote.

Comparison of Legislation in the 116th Congress to Repeal the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force

	CAN USE "NECESSARY AND APPROPRIATE FORCE" AGAINST...	WHAT AUTHORIZES CURRENT COUNTERTERRORISM EFFORTS?	THE AUTHORIZATION SUNSETS IN...	HOW DOES THIS AFFECT PREVIOUS AUMFs?	WHAT ARE THE LIMITATIONS ON COMBAT OPERATIONS?	PROCESS FOR ADDING OTHER GROUPS TO AUTHORIZATION OF FORCE	WHAT ARE THE PROCEDURES FOR MODIFYING AUTHORITY?	REPORTING PERIOD	MOST RECENT ACTION
Lee (D), Repeal of 2001 AUMF, 6/24/2019, Amdt. 368, H.R. 2500 ^{**}	Nations and organizations to be determined by Congress under a new AUMF	A new AUMF with a clear and specific expression of objectives and targets	Within eight months of enactment	Repeals 2001 AUMF	A new AUMF passed by Congress must include a clear and specific expression of objectives, targets, and geographic scope	Requires Congress to debate and pass an updated AUMF that increases transparency and reporting requirements	This amendment does not include a process for modifying authorities	This amendment does not include a reporting period	This amendment passed the House 237-183
Spencer (D), limits 2001 AUMF to countries where US military is currently engaged in hostilities under the authorization at the time of enactment of this act, 7/9/2020, Amdt. 415 in H.R. 6395 ³	Only nations and organizations where the United States is currently engaged under the 2001 AUMF	The 2001 AUMF	This amendment does not sunset the 2001 AUMF	Limit engagement to countries where the US is currently engaged	The United States can only engage in current combat operations but may not expand to other countries or groups under the 2001 AUMF	President cannot expand military operations against other nations or groups under the 2001 AUMF; Congress must pass a new AUMF for additional groups	This amendment does not include a process for modifying authorities	This amendment does not include a reporting period	This amendment was submitted to H.R. 6395 and did not receive a vote
Schiff (D), Sunsets 2001 and 2002 AUMFs, 6/24/2019, Amdt. 565, H.R. 2500 ¹	Nations and organizations when the notification of the need to use military force is submitted to Congress by the President	An updated debated and passed AUMF by Congress	The 2002 AUMF will sunset immediately. The 2001 AUMF will sunset on 9/14/2021	Repeals 2001 AUMF. Repeals 2002 AUMF	New AUMF must identify each nation, person, organization, and description of every operation	A legal analysis in a formal notification is needed to add new groups	Required presidential submission of the reason for new additions	This amendment does not include a reporting period	This amendment was submitted to H.R. 2500 and did not receive a vote
Engel (D), Improves Congressional Oversight of 2001 AUMF, 6/24/2019, Amdt. 509, H.R. 2500 ⁴	Al Qaeda and associated forces as detailed by the 2001 AUMF	The 2001 AUMF	This bill does not sunset the 2001 AUMF	Amends 2001 AUMF by instituting stricter reporting requirements	Notifies Congress of all combat operations and lethal actions which the United States participated in	The president must report to Congress whether the new group against which hostilities will occur is covered under the 2001 AUMF	President must report to Congress during the 180-day reporting period of any new modification to authority	Once every 180 days	This amendment was submitted to H.R. 2500 and did not receive a vote
Dosch (D), Authorization for Use of Military Force, P.L. 107-40, 9/14/2001 ^{**}	Al Qaeda and associated forces	This AUMF provides the US the authority to engage in counterterrorism efforts	This bill does not include a sunset provision	N/A	This AUMF does not set limitations on geography, organizations, and activities	The executive branch can decide which groups to add under this AUMF	This AUMF does not have a process for modifying authority	This AUMF does not include a reporting period	This AUMF has been enforced since 2001

Sources:

¹ United States, Congress, House, Repeal of 2001 AUMF, Congress.gov, <https://rules.house.gov/bill/116/hr-2500>, 116th Congress, 1st session, House Resolution 2500, Amendment 368, introduced 24 June 2019.

² United States, Congress, House, Limits the use of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) to the countries where U.S. Armed Forces are currently engaged in hostilities under the authorization at the time of enactment of this act, Congress.gov, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6395>, 116th Congress, 2nd session, House Resolution 6395, Amendment 415, introduced 9 July 2020.

³ United States, Congress, House, Sunsets the 2002 AUMF immediately; Sunsets the 2001 AUMF on the 20th anniversary of its passage. Clarifies that 2001 AUMF does not apply to Iran; and creates a procedure to provide for expedited consideration of a replacement AUMF, if required. Congress.gov, <https://rules.house.gov/bill/116/hr-2500>, 116th Congress, 1st session, House Resolution 2500, Amendment 565, introduced 24 June 2019.

⁴ United States, Congress, House, Improves congressional oversight of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) by requiring the President to submit reports and provide briefings on actions related to that authority, Congress.gov, <https://rules.house.gov/bill/116/hr-2500>, 116th Congress, 1st session, House Resolution 2500, Amendment 509, 24 June 2019.

⁵ United States, Congress, Senate, Authorization for Use of Military Force, Congress.gov, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/23/text>, 107th Congress, 1st session, Public Law 107-40, passed 18 Sept. 2001.

⁶ This amendment language is similar to Rep. Barbara Lee's standalone legislation "Repeal of the Authorization for Use of Military Force" (H.R. 1274; <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1274/text>). It is also similar to language repealing the 2001 AUMF included (<https://rules.house.gov/news/press-releases/congresswoman-barbara-lee-amendments-to-stop-endless-wars-adopted-by-house-appropriations-committee>) in the DoD Appropriations Act, FY 2021, H.R. 7617.

^{**} This column is included to help the reader compare current legislation against the original text of the 2001 AUMF (P.L. 107-40). It is not a live bill.

 THIRD WAY

Repealing the 2001 AUMF would reassert Congress's constitutional authority over matters of war, limit the potential for unilateral action and unintentional escalation by the president, and encourage the series of checks and balances on presidential military authority intended by the Founding Fathers. Any new AUMF must be narrowly tailored and give Congress the clear authority over where the executive branch is conducting military operations, articulate the

targets for these efforts, and include an expiration date to prevent authorities passed 19 years ago from being continuously used without any input from Congress.

2. Reduce military spending to reflect the end of the mission in Afghanistan, including by ending the blank check for military spending through the use of Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding.

As Congress rescinds its war authority permission slip, it should also revoke its blank check for military spending by eliminating Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) funding. OCO provides the Pentagon with funding not subject to sequestration mandated by the Budget Control Act of 2011 (BCA), a law that capped federal defense and non-defense spending and was designed to reduce defense spending by \$1 trillion over 10 years.³⁴ Congress has the constitutional “power of the purse” to make decisions on funding for the federal government.³⁵ OCO funding has been used since the 9/11 attacks to provide the Pentagon with “emergency” war funding for US operations in Afghanistan, as well as in other places such as Syria and Iraq.³⁶

There are two major categories of defense funding that are typically considered by Congress during the federal budget process. The first is the “base budget,” which covers funding for activities that DoD would conduct if US forces were not engaged in overseas operations. The costs for these activities can be forecasted annually; therefore, DoD can incorporate these costs into their annual budget request. The DoD base budget falls under the spending limits set by the BCA.³⁷

The second major category is known as OCO funding, which is excluded from the spending limitations in the BCA. OCO funding was established as an “emergency” fund for war-related costs because war-related costs cannot be forecast. It largely ballooned after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to cover spending for overseas combat operations such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁸ The majority of OCO funding goes to DoD, with only a small portion going to the Department of State.³⁹ It has often operated as a type of “slush fund.” With the base budget under spending limitations, the Pentagon moves traditional base budget activities to OCO as a loophole to sequestration. For FY2021, the Pentagon is requesting roughly \$16 billion of OCO funding for base budget activities and another \$32.5 billion in “enduring costs” to support in-theater costs even after combat operations end.⁴⁰ Parking base budget activities in OCO funding hides the true cost as it is typically not included in overall federal spending and deficit projections.⁴¹

OCO funding has ballooned over the years. Between 1970 and 2000, non-base budget funding only accounted for about 2% of DoD’s total spending. In 2007 and 2008, OCO funding peaked

at 28% (\$205 billion in 2007 and \$222 billion in 2008).⁴² Since 2001, close to \$2 trillion has been spent in OCO funding alone.⁴³ OCO funding has turned into a secondary defense budget.

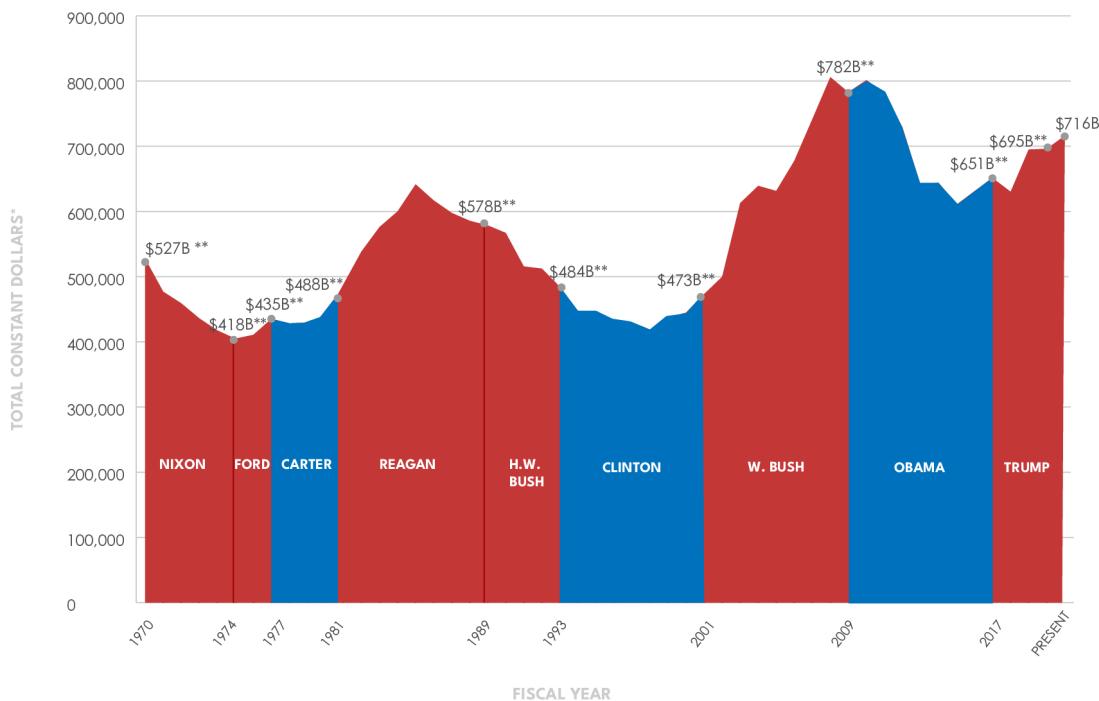
With President Trump's stated desire to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and Syria, the blank check for OCO funding must end. Congress must work to fold all Pentagon spending back into the DoD base budget so it can adhere to BCA limitations.

3. Align DoD's budget should with its military commitments.

The size of the defense budget should follow its mission obligations. President Trump recently announced the withdrawal of US troops from Germany⁴⁴ and his intention to speed up the timeline for withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁴⁵ Members of Congress should use their appropriations and authorizing authorities to reject the Trump Administration's call to set defense spending at \$740 billion.⁴⁶ The defense budget should align with the department's mission; if US troops withdraw from global conflicts, military funding should also be reduced. Congress should invest those resources into other tools critical for global stability, such as diplomatic and development engagement. Given the COVID-19 crisis, Congress should evaluate whether America's diplomats, development entities, and other global health initiatives, including the United Nations, have the needed funding to continue their vital work around the globe.

The defense budget should not operate like a one-way ratchet, which only goes up. In fact, there is a recent precedent to wind down the defense budget after the military scales back its operations. In 2013, President Obama reduced funding at the Pentagon as the United States scaled down operations primarily in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴⁷ Congress should follow the same precedent now and ensure the DoD budget is aligned with its global combat missions.

Historical Department of Defense Budget Authority



*Base Budget + OCO Funding

Source: Department of Defense FY 2021 Green Book

**Source: \$695B: Department of Defense FY2019 Green Book, \$651B: Department of Defense FY2019 Green Book, \$782B: Department of Defense FY2009 Green Book, \$473B: Department of Defense FY2001 Green Book, \$484B: U.S. Department of Defense Estimates FY 1993, \$578B: National Defense Budget Estimates - FY 1988/FY1989, \$488B: Department of Defense Annual Report FY1981, \$435B: Annual Defense Department Report FY1976 and FY1977, \$418B: Annual Defense Department Report FY1974, \$527B: The Fiscal Year 1969 - 73 Defense Program and The 1969 Defense Budget

Congressional Democrats should inquire why DoD is scaling up their budget while withdrawing from a number of conflicts and countries globally. In particular, during these processes, Congress must question:

- What are the clear conditions that the Taliban must meet for US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and how will a potentially decreased US troop presence impact national security and the defense budget?
- What are the merits of continuing to increase defense funding if US troops are withdrawing from Afghanistan, and can the money be better spent on combatting climate change, cyberattacks, pandemics, and other critical security threats?

Recent reports of Russians placing bounties on American troops in Afghanistan are disturbing. Trump's refusal to respond to this act of aggression is even more so.

Russia's actions in Afghanistan and the wider region in the last few years have revolved around one goal: speeding up the exit of American forces and working to fill vacuums left by the United States. In June 2020, reports surfaced that a military intelligence unit associated with the Russian government secretly offered the Afghan Taliban money to kill American and coalition soldiers while the United States was negotiating a peace agreement with the militant group.⁴⁸ At least one incident of American service members killed in action is being traced to the bounty scheme.⁴⁹ Worst of all, President Trump knew about the scheme and did nothing to deter the Russians while pursuing negotiations with the Taliban⁵⁰ and continuing to promote Russia's return to the Group of Seven (G7) in direct opposition to America's European allies.⁵¹ In fact, US military and intelligence officials warned the Trump Administration as far back as 2018 that the Russians were arming the Taliban by smuggling small arms and other military equipment over the porous Tajikistan-Afghanistan border.⁵²

Russia's goal is to speed up the exit of US and coalition forces in Afghanistan. Trump's insistence on not punishing Russia and advocating for the Russian government's positions to the international community is wholly unsurprising for a man that has spent the last five years cozying up to Russian President Vladimir Putin. As highlighted in the Russia chapter of this book, Congress must firmly push back against President Trump's support for Russia and take action against Russian President Vladimir Putin, including by:

1. Sanctioning and punishing Putin and his cronies; and
2. Passing legislation to authorize proportionate cyber and other asymmetric non-escalatory responses.

President Trump's top concern should always be the protection of US troops and diplomats serving overseas, not cozying up to dictators. But his refusal to stand up to Putin has needlessly put US service members' lives at risk. Congress should continue to demand answers from the Administration through its oversight authorities, including by issuing any necessary subpoenas, about what the president knew and when he knew it.

Conclusion

The United States entered Afghanistan 19 years ago after the 9/11 attacks to prevent the return of terrorist safe havens that can be used to launch attacks on the American homeland. Now that an agreement has been reached between the United States and the Taliban to end American military operations and withdraw US troops from the country, Congress must conduct proper oversight of such a withdrawal and push the Administration to provide continued support to intra-Afghan negotiations and the Afghan government, as well as develop a clear exit strategy that maintains US support for efforts aimed at promoting such critical priorities as women's rights and governance in the country.

As the United States winds down military operations in Afghanistan, Congress must also repeal the 2001 AUMF, reduce military spending to reflect the end of the mission, and align defense spending to military commitments. Congress must also take action to hold the Russian government accountable for attacks on US military personnel in Afghanistan.

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