

# Policy Options for Securing U.S. Interests in Afghanistan

By Jonathan Schroden, PhD

Since the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, the U.S. has faced the challenge of formulating policies that safeguard its interests there while navigating the complex security, humanitarian, and diplomatic landscape of the South and Central Asian regions. After the withdrawal, the Biden administration implemented a policy of counterterrorism operations, limited diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, humanitarian assistance delivered indirectly through non-governmental organizations, and the maintenance of targeted economic sanctions against the Taliban government and specific Taliban leaders. With President Donald Trump's return to office in January 2025, these approaches are subject to review and modification in accordance with the new administration's priorities.

## The Biden Administration's Approach

Since ending its military's combat mission in Afghanistan at the close of 2014, the U.S.'s primary security interest in the region has been countering terrorist threats. From 2015 to 2020, it did so

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via both unilateral means (e.g., special operations raids and drone strikes) and partnered operations with Afghan security forces. As the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan was in motion during 2021, the Biden administration shifted to "over-the-horizon" (OTH) counterterrorism, involving the collection of intelligence and airstrikes against terrorist targets in Afghanistan via drones flown from air bases located on the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>1</sup>

After the dissolution of Afghanistan's government and security forces, the U.S. was left with only the OTH approach. In July 2022,

the Biden administration used this approach to conduct a single drone strike in Kabul, resulting in the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda.<sup>2</sup> Following that strike, U.S. officials, including Director of the National Counter Terrorism Center, Christine Abizaid, assessed that al-Qaeda was at a “historical nadir” in the region, though this assessment has been disputed by the United Nations terrorism monitoring team.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to this strike on al-Qaeda, the Biden administration did not conduct any direct operations against what most observers see as the most virulent terrorist threat in Afghanistan--the Islamic State’s Khorasan affiliate (known as IS-K).<sup>4</sup> Rather, it monitored (and indirectly supported<sup>5</sup>) the Taliban’s conduct of substantial operations against IS-K, with mixed degrees of effectiveness.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond its counterterrorism activities, the Biden administration maintained limited diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, primarily through discussions with the group’s political office in Doha, Qatar. These discussions focused on counterterrorism cooperation, human rights (especially those of women and girls), and economic stabilization. While the Biden administration did not officially recognize the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan (nor has any other country), it did engage with them diplomatically in support of U.S. interests. Having little success pressuring the Taliban to change their policies on women and girls, and recognizing the deteriorating humanitarian situation, the Biden administration supported aid efforts through international organizations rather than by providing direct assistance to the Taliban’s de facto government. The administration appropriated over \$2 billion in humanitarian aid while maintaining financial sanctions against Taliban leaders and restricting the group’s access to the country’s frozen central bank assets.<sup>7</sup> Overall, the Biden administration’s policy aimed to prevent external terrorist attacks from Afghanistan, maintain pressure on the Taliban to change its draconian human rights stance, and balance that pressure with efforts to prevent economic collapse and the mass suffering of the Afghan population.

## Trump Administration Statements and Actions

Since President Trump’s return to the White House in early 2025, his administration has focused on reducing the size of the federal government and rescinding many Biden-era policies. The new administration has not yet fully established its policy on Afghanistan, though it seems likely that in so doing it would reassess Biden’s policies and consider alternative approaches.

Throughout his third presidential campaign, Trump frequently described the 2021 withdrawal as a “disaster” and pledged to take a stronger stance against the Taliban by leveraging economic and military pressure more aggressively.<sup>8</sup> He emphasized reasserting U.S. influence in the region, ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a base for terrorist operations, and his belief that the Taliban should

face greater consequences for harboring terrorist groups. Trump also made statements hinting at the possibility of regaining access to Bagram Air Base, which he argues is a strategic asset that should not have been abandoned. He has suggested that re-establishing a U.S. military presence there could serve as a deterrent to terrorist groups and provide leverage against regional adversaries such as China. Additionally, Trump has spoken about recovering U.S.-made weapons captured by the Taliban, asserting that allowing them to remain in Taliban hands poses a security risk and undermines U.S. credibility.<sup>9</sup>

Other senior officials in Trump’s second administration, such as Secretary of State Marco Rubio, have advocated for a tougher diplomatic posture, including placing increased bounties on Taliban leaders if they continue to wrongfully detain Americans.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Secretary of Defense Peter Hegseth said he would seek “full accountability” for the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> National Security Advisor Michael Waltz stated the Trump administration would take “a hard look” at its counterterrorism and intelligence capabilities to ensure no surprises emanate from Afghanistan. In his words, “I wouldn’t interpret that as, ‘We’ve got to go back and fight in Kandahar.’ I would interpret it as, ‘I don’t want to wait until a Kansas City is hit.’”<sup>12</sup>

So far, the Trump administration has taken three actions of note concerning Afghanistan. First, it coordinated with Pakistani government officials to enable the arrest in March 2025 of Mohammad Sharifullah, the IS-K member seen as primarily responsible for the August 2021 attack at Kabul Airport’s Abbey Gate that resulted in the deaths of 13 U.S. service members and around 170 Afghans.<sup>13</sup> Second, the administration devolved counterterrorism targeting authorities to lower levels. The permission to strike emergent terrorist targets, which was held tightly by the previous administration, has been delegated to senior military commanders.<sup>14</sup> This has enabled more aggressive and timely action against terrorist actors, with increased strikes already observed against the Islamic State in Somalia and the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>15</sup> Third, the administration sent a delegation to Kabul, led by Adam Boehler, Trump’s Special Envoy for Hostage Response, and included retired U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, to meet with the Taliban’s acting foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi.<sup>16</sup> While the full nature of that meeting has not been publicly disclosed, the immediate results of it included the Taliban’s release of George Glezzmann, an American citizen who was detained over two years ago, and the U.S.’s removal of the Taliban’s notorious acting minister of interior, Sirajuddin Haqqani, along with two of his close relatives, from the State Department’s “Rewards for Justice” list.<sup>17</sup> This apparent quid pro quo marked a significant step for the Trump administration in its dealings with the Taliban. While only one data point, it may suggest further willingness to work transactionally with the Taliban to pursue core interests of both sides.



## Policy Options for the Trump Administration

As the new administration formulates its policy on Afghanistan, it will likely consider a range of options. The following four are offered to illustrate the breadth of that range.

### *Option 1: Enhanced Regional Military Presence and Counterterrorism Operations*

This option involves expanding the U.S. military footprint in the region (e.g., by securing basing agreements in Pakistan or Central Asia). The administration could, for example, posture small-scale special operations forces in a neighboring country to conduct strategic counterterrorism raids while maintaining OTH capabilities for gathering intelligence and conducting drone strikes. Alternatively, or in conjunction, this approach could entail substantial increases in intelligence-sharing with other governments—possibly including the Taliban—to enable those entities to act against terrorist groups, such as IS-K. This approach would aim to increase pressure on terrorist threats but would require regional cooperation, increased intelligence activities, and significant diplomatic efforts to overcome likely pushback from China or Russia. Reestablishing access to Bagram Air Base could be a key—but likely quite difficult to achieve—component of this option.

### *Option 2: Economic and Political Pressure on the Taliban*

Rather than a military- or intelligence-centric policy, this approach emphasizes economic leverage and political influence. This administration could tighten financial sanctions on Taliban leadership, support Afghan opposition groups, and work with allies to pressure the Taliban into policy concessions (which could include the return of some U.S.-made weapons that remain in their possession). This strategy aligns with Trump's past focus on "maximum pressure" tactics. Such an approach would likely have a limited short-term impact on Taliban policies, due both to the length of time such approaches take to build substantial pressure and to the Taliban's demonstrated ability to absorb or ignore external stressors. It might also exacerbate the poor humanitarian situation already present in Afghanistan before achieving its desired goals. This option would therefore be more of a "long game" approach that factors in short-term deterioration in exchange for expected long-term goals.

### *Option 3: Conditional Engagement with the Taliban*

Primarily pursued by other countries, this option would involve selective engagement with the Taliban in exchange for counterterrorism cooperation and human rights improvements. This could include partial unfreezing of Afghanistan's central bank assets, further exemptions to the application of sanctions, or additional delisting of specific Taliban leaders in response to demonstrated policy and behavior changes under strict conditions. This approach is one of offering incentives as opposed to imposing pressure and

consequences but may be controversial politically. That controversy might be mitigated if this approach is pursued in a purely or mostly transactional sense.

### *Option 4: Deprioritizing Afghanistan in Favor of Higher-Priority Foreign Policy Issues*

Given many competing global priorities and the difficulties associated with the first three options, the administration could choose to effectively ignore Afghanistan and limit its focus to a minimally resourced OTH counterterrorism posture. This option would mean no significant diplomatic or military initiatives beyond what is necessary to monitor terrorist threats and strike any that appear to be reaching the point of conducting external terrorist attacks. Instead, U.S. foreign policy efforts would be focused on more pressing geopolitical challenges, such as securing America's borders and deterring China from militarily pursuing revanchist goals. While this approach reduces requirements for resources and attention focused on Afghanistan, it entails some degree of increased risk of the country once again becoming a launchpad for terrorist attacks against the U.S. or its allies.

## Conclusion

Taliban-controlled Afghanistan presents Trump's second administration with an unenviable set of policy choices, just as it did his predecessor. While the Biden administration relied on OTH operations, limited diplomatic engagement, and indirect humanitarian assistance, Trump's team appears predisposed to take a more assertive approach. Whether it chooses increased counterterrorism emphasis, diplomatic and economic pressure, conditional engagement, deprioritization, or some combination of these options, the Trump administration will find itself having to make some hard decisions to balance the three critical factors of resources, risk, and reward as it pertains to the next four years of U.S. policy on Afghanistan.

## Decision Points

- **Can the U.S. afford to disengage from Afghanistan without strategic consequences?**
- **Can increased foreign pressure on the Taliban overcome the group's notorious ability to withstand it?**
- **Can conditional or transactional engagement with the Taliban progress beyond tactical exchanges and generate strategic outcomes?**
- **Can any of these options achieve U.S. goals while improving, or at least not worsening, the situation for Afghans?**

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## Endnotes

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