

# U.S. Military Begins Final Withdrawal From Afghanistan

The top American commander, Gen. Austin S. Miller, says he is often asked whether the Afghan forces are ready to fight the Taliban alone. His answer? ‘They must be ready.’



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Published April 25, 2021 Updated April 30, 2021

KABUL, Afghanistan — The U.S. military has begun its complete withdrawal from Afghanistan, the top American commander there said Sunday, marking what amounts to the beginning of the end of the United States’ nearly 20-year-old war in the country.

“I now have a set of orders,” said Gen. Austin S. Miller, the head of the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan, to a news conference of Afghan journalists at the U.S. military’s headquarters in Kabul, the capital. “We will conduct an orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan, and that means transitioning bases and equipment to the Afghan security forces.”

General Miller’s remarks come almost two weeks after President Biden announced that all U.S. forces would be out of the country by Sept. 11, the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks that propelled the United States into its long war in Afghanistan.

Mr. Biden’s announcement was greeted with uncertainty in Afghanistan, as it prepares for a future without a U.S. and NATO military presence despite a Taliban insurgency that seems dead set on a military victory despite talks of peace.

If the Taliban return to power — either through force or being incorporated into the government — they are likely to roll back rights for women, as they did during their harsh rule in the late 1990s.

Holding the line for now are the Afghan security forces, which have endured a particularly difficult winter. Taliban offensives in the south and repeated attacks in the north despite the cold weather have meant mounting casualties ahead of what could be a violent summer as U.S. and NATO forces withdraw. Though the Afghan military and police forces together are said to have around 300,000 personnel, the real number is suspected to be much lower.

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“I often get asked how are the security forces? Can the security forces do the work in our absence?” General Miller said. “And my message has always been the same: They must be ready.”

General Miller added that “certain equipment” must be withdrawn from Afghanistan, “but wherever possible” the United States and international forces will leave behind matériel for the Afghan forces.

There are roughly 3,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan and around 7,000 NATO and allied forces. Those NATO forces will probably withdraw alongside the United States, as many countries in the coalition are dependent on American support.

## Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Atop the international military forces in Afghanistan, there are also roughly 18,000 contractors in the country, almost all of whom will also depart. General Miller said that some of the contracts “will have to be adjusted” so that the Afghan security forces, which are heavily dependent on contractor assistance — especially the Afghan Air Force — will continue to be supported. The thousands of private contractors in Afghanistan are tasked with a range of jobs, including security, logistics and aircraft maintenance.

Under last year's peace agreement with the Taliban, U.S. and international forces were supposed to withdraw from the country by May 1. Under the agreement the Taliban have refrained — for the most part — from attacking U.S. troops. But what remains unclear is if the insurgent group will attack the withdrawing forces following Mr. Biden's decision to set the final deadline later, in September.

"We have the military means and capability to fully protect our force during retrograde, as well as support the Afghan security forces," General Miller said.

American troops are still spread out in a constellation of around a dozen bases, most of which contain small groups of Special Operations forces advising the Afghan military. To cover the withdrawal, the American military has committed a significant amount of air support, including positioning an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf, in case the Taliban decide to attack.