

Pentagon Struggles to Wean Afghan Military Off American Air Support

Afghan commanders are asking for more help from American warplanes, illustrating their dependency on American air power.



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KABUL, Afghanistan — The United States has continued limited air support to Afghan national security forces in recent days, launching a half-dozen airstrikes as Taliban fighters stepped up an offensive in the country's south before the full withdrawal of American troops ordered by President Biden.

Even so, Afghan ground commanders are asking for more help from American warplanes, exposing a stark reality of the war there: Even in the twilight days of the American involvement, the Afghan dependency on U.S. pilots and warplanes as backup is unquestionable.

The Pentagon is now weighing how it will wean Afghan security forces from their dependency, something that it has failed to do since 2015, when the United States formally ended its combat mission in the country. On Thursday, Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III suggested that it would be up to Gen. Austin S. Miller, the top American commander in Afghanistan, to decide when to turn off the spigot.

"In terms of when he does what, there's a reason he's a four-star commander," Mr. Austin said during a news conference.

The Biden administration has sought to portray Afghan security forces as well equipped to handle the war on their own, but that view appears starkly different than the reality on the ground. Since May 1, when the United States formally began its withdrawal, the Taliban has taken territory in practically every corner of the country.

Six military bases collapsed in northern Baghlan Province Thursday. On Monday, in the western province of Farah, a military base was overrun. In the south, aside from nearly encircling the capital of Helmand Province, the Taliban seized a key dam in neighboring Kandahar.

At least 139 pro-government forces and 44 civilians were killed in Afghanistan the past week, the highest death toll in a single week since October, according to data gathered by The New York Times. The fighting has displaced thousands of families, and an important hospital in the country's south has had a fresh influx of wounded and dead.

But according to top Biden administration officials, the Afghan government is still holding its own.

"We are hopeful the Afghan national security forces will play a major role in stopping the Taliban," Mr. Austin said. He spoke of Afghan military forces "performing fairly well" in Lashkar Gar, where much of the fighting has been concentrated in recent days.

Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that the Afghan air force was handling about 90 percent of the effort, although it was unclear exactly how he was measuring the statistic. On the ground in Afghanistan, commanders say that they depend heavily on American bombers, fighters, drones and other warplanes, particularly for attacking Taliban forces that close to Afghan troops.

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General Milley stressed that "it's not a foregone conclusion that the Taliban automatically win."

The United States, Mr. Austin said, will continue to support the Afghan military and government with financial aid and what the Pentagon calls “over the horizon” support — a military term for drone strikes and other efforts launched from aircraft carriers or warplanes from distant ground bases.

But the Biden administration has insisted in recent weeks that such strikes will be limited to advancing American counterterrorism aims. While the administration could say that providing air support from a distance for Afghan forces fighting the Taliban furthers those aims, that is not how the administration has presented the Afghanistan withdrawal to the American public.

The United States may also continue to train Afghan security forces — but in other countries — after the American withdrawal, General Milley said. He said that officials are still working out plans for how to continue support to Afghan security forces.

The Pentagon is looking at whether some maintenance contracts — provided by American contractors — can be turned over to Afghan control, officials said. The Afghan air force is dependent on American contractors to maintain and repair its fleet of warplanes.

Even though air support to the Afghan security forces has dropped considerably after the peace deal the Taliban and the United States reached in February 2020 — which only allowed U.S. forces to defend Afghan troops in desperate situations — American reconnaissance drones and planes have been critical in helping the Afghans target insurgent positions with their own aircraft.

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.

As part of the withdrawal effort, F/A-18 jets, AC-130 gunships, drones, F-16s and hulking B-52 Cold War-era bombers based in Qatar have all been brought to bear to provide cover as U.S. forces shut down the dozen or so remaining bases in the country.

But as the Taliban ramp up their attacks and Afghan forces call for help, American commanders will have to decide where the support is allocated, an especially difficult decision given that Afghan security forces have a record of calling for air support at the first sign of danger.

General Miller, the commander of the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan, stays in touch with the Afghan corps commanders spread across the country, frequently over WhatsApp, as they request support or keep him abreast of the situation.

Rules of engagement of American air power are extremely restrictive, according to a U.S. official, meaning that in some cases approval to strike could take longer than some jets can stay airborne. Many targets need to be preplanned and watched for hours, if not days, by drones and other surveillance aircraft, meaning immediate support for Afghan forces under siege is increasingly difficult.

U.S. officials have noted the gains made by the Afghan air force in recent years. Their fleet of small helicopters and armed propeller planes — that look more at home in a World War II movie — have become increasingly capable, though civilian casualties caused by their attacks have spiked.

But with about 17,000 military contractors also leaving with U.S. and NATO troops, the Afghan government is panicking on how to continue to maintain their aircraft. Almost the entire air force, minus some aging Soviet-era helicopters, is nearly completely dependent on contractor support for maintenance. The contractors even control the supply of fuel, one Afghan pilot said, because it has been siphoned and sold off by Afghan troops in the past.

Addressing the contractor issue, General Milley said that much would be determined by the security conditions on the ground. “The intent,” he said, “is to provide them with continued support.”

Thomas Gibbons-Neff reported from Kabul, Afghanistan, and Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt from Washington. Reporting was contributed by Fahim Abed and Najim Rahim in Kabul, Taimoor Shah in Kandahar, Zabihullah Ghazi in Nangarhar and Farooq Jan Mangal in Khost.