

NEWS ANALYSIS

Biden Sends Dueling Messages on Afghanistan

The administration has sought to reassure Americans that it is ending “forever wars” while signaling to Afghans that the U.S. is not abandoning the beleaguered country.



By Eric Schmitt

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WASHINGTON — To listen to the White House and Pentagon, the exit of the last American combat troops from Bagram Air Base is not the end of the mission in Afghanistan. At least that was the signal to the Afghans.

The United States military will still help Afghan forces, just by teleconference from afar. Armed Air Force drones will still hunt Qaeda and Islamic State terrorists, just from bases eight hours away in the Persian Gulf. The Biden administration still plans to provide the Afghan government more than \$3 billion in security assistance, just with not as much oversight in the country to prevent corruption.

In reality, however, much has changed in the three months since President Biden ordered most of the 3,500 American troops to leave by Sept. 11. There are no more Americans on the ground to advise and assist Afghan troops. Few of the 18,000 Pentagon contractors will remain to repair Afghanistan’s air force and its fleet of American-supplied Black Hawk helicopters. Only two other NATO military allies are staying — Turkey and Britain — and most of their troops will be holed up in fortified embassy compounds or securing Kabul International Airport, that last major gateway out of the country.

Speaking on Friday, Mr. Biden underscored his administration’s dueling messages as it sought to reassure the American public that its so-called forever wars are winding down, at least militarily, while trying to convince beleaguered Afghans that the United States is not abandoning the country at a moment when intelligence analysts assess that the government could fall in as few as six months to a resurgent Taliban.

Asked whether the troop withdrawal he ordered in April was nearly finished, Mr. Biden said that some troops would remain — mainly to secure the United States Embassy in Kabul — but that “we’re on track exactly where we expected to be” on the withdrawal.

Questioned about the risks of the pullout, Mr. Biden said: “Look, we were in that war for 20 years. Twenty years.” He added, “The Afghans are going to have to be able to do it themselves with the Air Force they have.”

That was the same message Mr. Biden conveyed to President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan during his visit to the White House last week. Pentagon officials said on Friday that a few hundred contractors would stay through August — a couple of months longer than expected — but after that they would troubleshoot maintenance issues from afar or bring aircraft out, as needed, for major repairs in Persian Gulf countries.

Pressed by reporters to elaborate on Afghanistan, Mr. Biden cut off a questioner, saying, “I want to talk about happy things,” later citing Friday’s upbeat jobs report.

Mr. Biden remains resolute in his choice, top aides say. According to an Associated Press/NORC poll last year, only 12 percent of Americans said they were closely following news related to the U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

His decision to withdraw American troops by Sept. 11 is one of the most significant of his presidency so far, a deeply personal calculation that comes “from the gut,” as one official put it. And despite the specter of gloomy intelligence reports and the likelihood the White House will confront terrible images of human suffering and loss in the coming weeks and months, Mr. Biden has vowed to press ahead regardless of the conditions on the ground.

Administration officials said at least three major factors had influenced Mr. Biden’s calculus. First was the strong likelihood that peace talks in Doha, Qatar, between the Taliban and the Afghan government would not succeed. That was largely preordained by the Trump administration’s failure to hold the Taliban accountable to the terms of a deal signed in February 2020, administration officials said.



An Afghan National Army soldier at a checkpoint near Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan on Friday. American forces handed over the base, once the military's nerve center in the country, to the Afghans. Mohammad Ismail/Reuters

The second major factor was that if the United States did not honor the peace agreement and left, any remaining U.S. forces would come under attack — an outcome the Taliban had generally avoided since signing the deal. Under the new scenario, American air power could keep the Taliban, as well as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, at bay, but there would be no clear political end in sight to a campaign that American commanders concluded long ago could not be won by military might alone.

Finally, American intelligence officials told Mr. Biden that the threat Al Qaeda and the Islamic State posed to the United States homeland had been greatly diminished — and was likely to take at least two years to reconstitute.

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To keep that threat in check, the Pentagon already has stationed armed MQ-9 Reaper drones at bases in the Persian Gulf to keep watch. But the long distances they must travel are costly and riskier. “It’s going to be extremely difficult to do, but it is not impossible,” Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the military’s Central Command, told Congress in April.

Conditions in Afghanistan continue to worsen, prompting grim assessments from intelligence analysts as well as current and former commanders.

“Afghanistan’s army and police, with material assistance, will be able to function for a period of time,” said Karl W. Eikenberry, who commanded American forces in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007, and later served as United States ambassador to Afghanistan. “But eventually, if the central government fragments and warlordism returns, and Afghanistan’s neighbors begin to support their own favorite militias, the Afghan security forces will collapse.”

Mr. Biden’s decision is also fraught with political risks at home. The president sought to defuse one of the politically volatile issues when he announced last week that his administration would begin moving thousands of Afghan interpreters, drivers and others who worked with American forces out of the country in an effort to keep them safe while they apply for entry to the United States.

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.

“Those who helped us are not going to be left behind,” Mr. Biden told reporters at the White House last week.

The White House has come under heavy pressure to protect Afghan allies from revenge attacks by the Taliban and speed up the lengthy and complex process of providing them special immigrant visas. Officials said the Afghans would be relocated possibly to Guam or somewhere else with close ties to the United States, to await the processing of their visa requests to move to the United States. Many other logistical details must still be ironed out, officials said on Friday.

The departure of troops from Bagram drew criticism from Republican lawmakers who have warned that the American withdrawal from Afghanistan is a strategic blunder as the Pentagon is facing new security threats from Beijing, Moscow and Tehran.

“As our only base sandwiched between China, Russia and Iran, it’s a huge strategic asset,” Representative Michael Waltz, a Florida Republican who served in Afghanistan as an Army Green Beret, said in a Twitter message late Thursday. “Why are we just giving it away?”

“It’s by far the biggest symbol of our 20 years of blood and treasure we have expended for all veterans that have served there,” Mr. Waltz said, in what is likely to be a common refrain for Republicans going into next year’s midterm elections.

But some current and former military commanders questioned how much Afghanistan would resonate with voters.

Jeffrey J. Schloesser, a retired two-star Army general who commanded U.S. forces in eastern Afghanistan from 2008 to 2009, reflected on a conflict that involved three generations of his family. His father, a veteran, served as a Defense Department contractor in Afghanistan. His son served there as an Army Special Operations Forces officer.

General Schloesser, the author of a new book, “Marathon War: Leadership in Combat in Afghanistan,” expressed disappointment with Mr. Biden’s decision to withdraw American troops, and predicted that Afghanistan would devolve into civil war. But he acknowledged his views might not be widespread.

“The broader population in America has forgotten about Afghanistan unless they lost someone they know there,” General Schloesser said. “The vast majority of Americans aren’t paying attention.”

In the end, that may be what Mr. Biden is betting on.