

A Top Democrat Warns Against a Hasty Withdrawal of U.S. Troops From Afghanistan

Senator Jack Reed said he favored seeking an extension of the May 1 deadline for withdrawing troops that President Donald Trump and the Taliban negotiated last year.



By Eric Schmitt

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WASHINGTON — The new chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee said on Wednesday that the Biden administration should not withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan to meet a May 1 deadline negotiated by the Trump administration and the Taliban.

Instead, said Senator Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat who took control of the panel this month, the United States should seek an extension of the deadline to give diplomats more time to negotiate an agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

“To pull out within several months now is a very challenging and destabilizing effort,” Mr. Reed told reporters on a video conference call organized by George Washington University.

Mr. Reed, a former 82nd Airborne Division officer who has visited Afghanistan 18 times as a lawmaker in the past two decades, added his voice to a growing number of national security specialists, including those on a bipartisan, congressionally appointed panel, who argue, in essence, for abandoning the May 1 timetable. They say that the Taliban have not met the conditions for a U.S. withdrawal as set by the Trump-Taliban agreement last February.

“I would expect some extension,” Mr. Reed said, even if that ultimately meant more time for the United States to withdraw the 2,500 troops in the country now.

Supporters of an extension say it would buy time for the new administration to bolster the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government in Qatar; rally support from other states in the region, including Pakistan; and conduct a new assessment of the future terrorism threat in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, however, have rejected the idea of a monthslong delay, and have threatened to resume attacks against American and other NATO forces if the United States unilaterally decides to keep its 2,500 troops in the country beyond the May deadline. The American forces are now hunkered down on about a dozen bases and perform two main missions: conducting counterterrorism operations and advising Afghan security forces at various headquarters.

Mr. Reed underscored that a top American national security priority should be to prevent terrorist organizations, such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, from using Afghanistan as a safe haven from which to carry out strikes.

“We’ve got to be able to assure the world and the American public that Afghanistan will not be a source of planning, plotting to project terrorist attacks around the globe,” Mr. Reed said. “That’s the minimum. I’m not sure we can do that without some presence there.”

The Taliban have recently issued orders to their fighters to stop foreign militants from entering their ranks. The orders, reported earlier by the Afghan channel ToloNews, are believed to be at least part of an attempt to show the United States that the Taliban are taking steps toward breaking from Al Qaeda, or propaganda to make it seem that is the case, according to experts.

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By all accounts, President Biden will be guided by his own long, personal experience with Afghanistan, and he has yet to make a decision. “We remain committed to ensuring that Afghanistan never again provides a base for terrorist attacks against the United States and our partners and our interests,” Mr. Biden said on Friday in virtual remarks at the Munich Security Conference.

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.

Top Biden aides have said they are not rushing such a critical decision, and the administration is holding regular, high-level meetings on the matter, American officials said.

"I told our allies that no matter what the outcome of our review, the United States will not undertake a hasty or disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan that puts their forces or the alliance's reputation at risk," Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III told reporters on Friday after meeting virtually with other NATO defense ministers.

"At this time, no decisions about our future force posture have been made," Mr. Austin said. "In the meantime, current missions will continue, and of course, commanders have the right and the responsibility to defend themselves and their Afghan partners against attack."

Preparing for the possibility of renewed attacks against Americans, the military's Central Command has been ordered to draw up a wide range of options to cover whether troops stay or go, and to counter even higher levels of Taliban violence, Pentagon officials say.

One option would be to increase the number of American airstrikes against Taliban targets across the country, including the fighters threatening major Afghan cities such as Kabul and Kandahar. This could require sending more strike aircraft to operate in the Middle East or ensuring that an aircraft carrier with its strike wing is operating in the Persian Gulf region.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan.