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## INTRODUCTION

**I**t is more than a year since the US withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban returned to power in Kabul. During that time, Washington's policy on the country has vacillated between limited diplomatic engagement and an "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism strategy<sup>1</sup>.

In the aftermath of the killing in July 2022 of Al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al-Zawahiri in a US drone strike in Kabul, Washington's policy of limited engagement with the Taliban's de facto regime, and varying degrees and types of counterterrorism cooperation with neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, will continue<sup>2</sup>.

The precision of the drone strike that eliminated Al-Zawahiri was in sharp contrast to the erratic drone attack in August 2021 in the capital that was supposed to target suspected militants from Islamic State in Khorasan Province but instead killed innocent civilians<sup>3</sup>. It remains to be seen whether similar strikes in the future will

retain the same level of accuracy and precision as the attack on Al-Zawahiri.

The main concern of the US in Afghanistan is to ensure that the threat of transnational terrorism from Al-Qaeda and ISKP is kept under check, both by working with and without the cooperation of the Taliban regime.

On Oct. 8, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Thomas West met the Taliban's intelligence chief, Abdul Haq Wasiq, and other regime officials in Qatar for the first time since Al-Zawahiri's killing<sup>4</sup>. They discussed the release of frozen Afghan funds held by the US, along with counterterrorism cooperation against the ISKP.

The Taliban are more likely to cooperate, albeit covertly, with the US in targeting ISKP than they are to assist with efforts to crack down on Al-Qaeda, which is still closely allied with the insurgent regime and enjoys safe haven in Afghanistan.

The US-Taliban meeting in Qatar was preceded in September by the Taliban's release of US contractor Mark Frerichs, who had been held for almost three years. The



*Washington can neither embrace nor abandon Afghanistan, and so it is currently pursuing a policy of limited engagement.*



Biden administration had demanded that he be freed as a precondition for continued, though limited, engagement with the Taliban. Frerichs was freed in exchange for the release of pro-Taliban warlord Haji Bashir Noorzai, who had been sentenced to life in prison for drug trafficking.

This approach underscores the delicate path the Biden administration is treading in its dealings with the Taliban regime<sup>5</sup>.

Due to a lack of viable alternatives, the US has no option but to pursue limited engagement with the Taliban regime on selected issues, such as the illegal movement of migrants, drug trafficking, global terrorism and human rights<sup>6</sup>. Washington believes a complete abandonment of Afghanistan would precipitate civil war, resulting in the return of warlords and the expedited growth of transnational terrorism.

On the other hand, a complete embrace of the Taliban regime by recognizing their government and unfreezing Afghan foreign reserves parked in the US banks would legitimize the Taliban government, setting a bad precedent.

**Members of the Taliban delegation arrive for a meeting with foreign diplomats in Qatar's capital Doha, on October 12, 2021, in an attempt to pursue a diplomatic push for international support.**  
 AFP

Similarly, regime change in Afghanistan by replacing the Taliban with a US-friendly government is neither affordable nor desirable. If the US was to support regime change, it would have to financially help the new Afghan government remain in power, which the Biden administration cannot afford. Meanwhile the Taliban would return to a campaign of fighting the new regime, which would suck the US military back into Afghanistan.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief maps out the US policy on Afghanistan by analyzing its main concerns and goals in the months since the Taliban took over, and for the future.

## MAIN CONCERNS AND STRATEGIES OF THE US IN AFGHANISTAN

### Transnational terrorism

The killing of Al-Zawahiri in a safe house in Kabul not only confirmed Washington's suspicions and vindicated its concerns that the Taliban was failing to abide by the terms of the 2020 Doha Agreement, it offered



Taliban fighters ride in a convoy near the US embassy in Kabul chanting victory slogans as they celebrate the first anniversary of their return to power in Afghanistan. AFP

further proof that the regime is still closely allied with Al-Qaeda<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time, while ISKP lacks the operational strength to pose a direct threat to US homeland security, the Taliban's inability to rein in the group, despite lofty claims, is equally worrying to Washington.

Reports by the UN Security Council's Monitoring Committee offer additional proof that the Taliban remain closely allied with Al-Qaeda. Since the Taliban's return to power, Al-Qaeda has enjoyed greater freedom of movement and assembly in Afghanistan. The presence of Al-Zawahiri and his family in Kabul established that fact. Furthermore, the frequency with which Al-Zawahiri released video messages increased soon after the Taliban takeover. Until recently, Al-Qaeda was providing strategic guidance and training to the Taliban<sup>8</sup>.

Publicly, both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda downplay their ties and even go so far as to disown each other. The Taliban continue to deny that Al-Qaeda is present on Afghan soil, for example. Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda maintains a low profile and distances itself from the Taliban regime so as not to create any legal or political challenges for them, and to provide them with enough space to consolidate their grip on power and effectively deal with challenges from the National Resistance Front and ISKP.

In recent propaganda publications, Al-Qaeda has announced it will not use Afghan territory for external operations and indicated that such operations will instead continue to be managed from other locations in which the group has a more formidable presence. This is a further indicator of the close ties between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

The US assessment is that that if not checked or confronted, Al-Qaeda could regain the capability to mount an international terrorist attack against the US or its Western allies within two years<sup>9</sup>.

The current strength of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan is estimated at 400-550 fighters and it lacks the operational strength to carry out an international terrorist attack. Under the Taliban's protection, however, Al-Qaeda could rebuild its external operations by increasing recruitment and enhancing its financial resources. By closely monitoring Al-Qaeda's trajectory in Afghanistan through over-the-horizon counterterrorism strikes

— in other words, remotely controlled operations that avoid the need for forces on the ground — the US aims to deny it that capability.

At the same time, ISKP has emerged in the past year as the main threat to the new Taliban regime<sup>10</sup>. The US security assessment is that ISKP could become capable of mounting an international terrorist attack from Afghanistan within 12-18 months, if it is not disrupted through counterterrorism operations.

ISKP has between 2,500 and 3,000 militants operating in parts of Afghanistan in discreet cell formations. Despite multiple claims by the Taliban regime that it has decimated the group, ISKP has shown resilience, adaptability and a tremendous regenerative capacity<sup>11</sup>.

It has continuously targeted religious minorities, particularly the Hazar Shiite community, along with Taliban foot soldiers, places of worship and other soft targets, to undermine the regime's claim that it is restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan.

ISKP gained global notoriety in August 2021 when it killed 13 US marines in a suicide attack at Kabul International Airport during the evacuation process. This remains the deadliest attack on the US military by any Daesh franchise. The Taliban not only lack the requisite counterterrorism capacity to downgrade and eliminate the ISKP threat but also risk losing their fighters and factions to it if the regime shows signs any leniency toward the international community on human rights, political inclusivity or granting women access to work and education<sup>12</sup>.

ISKP has smartly placed itself as the main anti-Taliban militant group and a tempting alternative for aspiring militants who are discontent following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

## **AVERTING AFGHANISTAN'S ECONOMIC AND HUMANITARIAN IMPLOSION**

Aside from the presence of Al-Qaeda and ISKP, the second major US concern in Afghanistan is the possibility of a full-scale economic and humanitarian crisis resulting in a civil war. This would send waves of Afghan migrants toward Europe and the US.

The West is already grappling with the

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This picture provided by the IntelCenter monitoring group shows al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, killed by a US drone strike last July. AFP/HO/SITE Intelligence Group

fallout from the human displacement caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At this juncture, the US and its Western allies have neither the political bandwidth nor the economic space to accommodate more refugees. As a result, the US is following a policy of “lowest common denominator” in Afghanistan, where it wants to avoid both unwanted outcomes<sup>13</sup>.

Following the assassination of Al-Zawahiri, the US decided not to release the \$7.5 billion of Afghanistan’s cash reserves parked in the US banks<sup>14</sup>. Prior to this, the US had been contemplating the option of granting the Taliban regime limited access to the reserves under third-party control<sup>15</sup>. However, such proposals have been shelved for now.

Meanwhile, US humanitarian aid and assistance to Afghanistan continues. Washington is mindful of the fact that the Afghan people should not suffer for the alleged excesses and crimes of the Taliban regime.

At the same time, the Biden administration is aware that it will be blamed by the international community should a humanitarian crisis emerge in Afghanistan. Hence, under its policy of limited engagement, the US has exempted humanitarian groups from the sanctions imposed on the Taliban regime, so that they can continue their

operations in Afghanistan<sup>16</sup>.

Besides this, the US has contributed \$770 million to aid organizations operating in Afghanistan and earmarked \$30 million in development assistance through international development agency USAID.

Washington has also established the Afghan Fund for the targeted disbursement of \$3.5 billion of Afghan central bank money that was frozen by the US after the Taliban took over. It is jointly managed by the Swiss government. Importantly, however, the funds have not yet been released because Washington does not believe there is a trusted partner institution to receive it that can ensure the money will benefit the Afghan people.

In September, the US State Department also established the Alliance for Afghan Women’s Economic Resilience, a public-private initiative designed to benefit Afghan women<sup>17</sup>. Meanwhile, financial services company Western Union has been permitted to resume its operations in Afghanistan to facilitate humanitarian assistance efforts and enable the Afghan diaspora to send money to their families<sup>18</sup>.

At the same time, however, the US does not diplomatically recognize the Taliban’s de facto regime and does not allow it to send representatives to the UN.

The UN Development Program estimates that 97 percent of Afghanistan’s population could fall below the poverty line this year<sup>19</sup>. Amid this rising poverty, about 70 percent of Afghan households can no longer meet their basic food and non-food needs, with particularly devastating effects for families headed by widows and the elderly.

Washington’s limited-engagement policy allows it to work to prevent the humanitarian and economic crises from imploding, because an unstable and volatile Afghanistan is not in the best interests of the US, whoever rules in Kabul.

This policy of limited engagement with the Taliban also provides the US some leverage to remain involved without going so far as to recognize the regime. For instance, the provision of humanitarian aid and economic assistance gives the US and its allies an opportunity to monitor the situation on the ground in the country.

It also enables the Biden administration to apply pressure to the Taliban in an attempt



ISKP fighters featured in a June 29, 2019, video entitled “And the Best Outcome is for the Righteous”. Twitter

to get them to fulfill their counterterrorism commitments, accommodate all political and ethnic groups in the nation’s power structure, and respect human rights.

### AVOIDING GREAT POWER COMPETITION WITHOUT GIVING IRAN, RUSSIA OR CHINA A FREE PASS

The US withdrew from Afghanistan to focus on its great power competition with China, in the Indo-Pacific, and Russia, in Eastern Europe<sup>20</sup>. However, the Biden administration was mindful of the fact that completely abandoning engagement with the Taliban regime would leave the way clear for Russia, China and Iran in Afghanistan. Hence the policy of limited engagement was adopted to give the US enough of a presence to remain relevant there and safeguard its interests.

At the same time, Washington is mindful of not putting American boots on the ground in the country as this would ignite a fierce geopolitical contest with Russia, China and Iran<sup>21</sup>. The Biden administration does not want to transform Afghanistan into another arena of great power competition.

Beijing, Moscow and Tehran, and to a certain extent Islamabad, considered the former US military presence in Afghanistan to be not only detrimental to their regional interests but a threat to their own national security as well<sup>22</sup>.

### OVER-THE-HORIZON COUNTERTERRORISM POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN

If one goes by the accuracy of the drone strike that killed Al-Zawahiri, we might assume that, finally, Washington’s “over-the-horizon” counter-terrorism policy in Afghanistan is falling into place<sup>23</sup>. It remains to be seen, however, whether future strikes will retain the same level of accuracy.

Nevertheless, it was quite evident from the targeted killing of Al-Zawahiri that the US has garnered enough support in Afghanistan’s immediate neighborhood to successfully mount remote operations in the country<sup>24</sup>. This support extends to intelligence cooperation, access to airspace, and close monitoring of the cross-border movement of militants.

In October, President Joe Biden signed a new, classified counterterrorism policy that requires his approval for the inclusion of suspected terrorists on any kill lists. In addition, rules concerning counterterrorism drone strikes that had been relaxed under President Donald Trump have been tightened once again.

As per the new policy, the US will only engage in limited drone attacks or commando raids against terrorists outside of recognized war zones. The aim of this return to a more centralized counterterrorism policy is to minimize



Taliban fighters standing next to destroyed armored vehicles along a road in Ghazni, where American dismantled hulks are on display, their weapons removed, their tires flat and frayed. AFP

S Army Combat Medic, Staff Sergeant Dennis Magnasco (L) and US Army Infantryman, Staff Sergeant Colin Sheedy (R) in Ghazni, Afghanistan, 2011. AFP



civilian casualties. Currently, only Syria and Iraq are considered recognized war zones.

In other words, there will now be very limited instances of drone strikes in conflict zones where the US previously launched more frequent attacks, such as Afghanistan, tribal regions of Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.

The new policy states that capture is preferable to killing a terrorist. Furthermore, the permission of the State Department's mission chief in a country is required before an operation takes place there. It also requires "near certainty" that a targeted individual is an operative of a terrorist organization approved for "direct action," in addition to "near certainty" that no civilians will be killed or injured in operations<sup>25</sup>.

Various UN reports indicate that in the year since the Taliban seized control, foreign militants have not returned to Afghanistan in significant numbers. In other words, in contrast to the situation that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, Taliban-ruled Afghanistan has not become a favored destination for foreign militants.

Successful remote operations in other countries against leaders of prominent extremist and terrorist groups, such as Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and Amir Said Abdal-Rahman Al-Mawla, have given the US growing confidence to tackle the threat of transnational terrorism and prevent it spreading from the Middle East to Afghanistan or Africa, without putting American boots on the ground.

## CONCLUSION

Though US forces have withdrawn from Afghanistan, it continues to be a concern in Washington, where the options for dealing with the situation in the country range from bad to worse. Afghanistan is not a priority for the Biden administration but it is a burden, as a result of the continued presence of transnational terrorist groups and a neighborhood that is generally hostile to the US.

Washington can neither embrace nor abandon Afghanistan, and so it is currently pursuing a policy of limited engagement based on a "lowest-common-denominator" approach. There is a realization in the US, however, that this policy of limited engagement has a shelf life. In the longer term, the Biden administration is aware that it will not help secure the cooperation it requires from the Taliban. Eventually the regime's patience will wear thin.

Therefore, while limited engagement remains the best option for dealing with the Taliban for the foreseeable future, it is not a feasible permanent posture.

Fearing the risk of great power competition between the US and the Russia-China combine, the Biden administration does not want to maintain a military footprint in Afghanistan or its immediate neighborhood. At the same time, the policy of limited engagement with the Taliban aims to avoid ceding any geopolitical space in Afghanistan to those two countries, or Iran.

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