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Conditions-based negotiations, renewed NATO troop commitments needed in Afghanistan

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It would be a grave mistake for the U.S. to pull out of Afghanistan entirely, or without plenty of pre-warning.



The last Canadians involved in the NATO training mission in Afghanistan board an American Chinook helicopter on March 12, 2014 as they leave Kabul, Afghanistan. Conditions-based negotiations, renewed and smaller NATO troop commitments, as well as a commission that disarms the parties could lead to success in Afghanistan over time, writes Erika Simpson. *Canadian Armed Forces photograph by Patrick Blanchard*

OPINION | BY [ERIKA SIMPSON](#) | February 22, 2021

NATO defence ministers held discussions last week to address the military alliance's mission in Afghanistan, reaffirming its commitment. The Taliban insurgent group has no incentives to compromise right now, and Afghanistan President [Ashraf Ghani's national army](#) is intent on taking the war from the inner urban precincts to the districts in the unprotected countryside, ruled by roving bands of cut-throat insurgents. We cannot expect a breakthrough in Afghan peace talks in Doha, Qatar for months to come unless the United State's future troop withdrawals take a [conditions-based approach](#), instead of a time-based deadline approach.

The Afghan government was allowed to take part in the Taliban talks in Doha last September, and [initially there was hope they could negotiate an end](#) to four decades of war. This month alone, at least [209 security forces and 51 civilians](#) have been killed by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Now it looks like Ghani's government is giving up hope, and sees the Doha talks as

a stalling tactic, while the Taliban continues to slaughter soldiers and civilians, whose deaths will somehow someday be paid for in yet more violent retributions.

The only breakthroughs in the talks are [procedural](#), related to the rules governing their negotiations. Meanwhile, U.S. officials must decide whether to abide by the current May 1 deadline and withdraw the remaining 2,500 American forces. Indications this week are that U.S. President Joe Biden [may be more positive](#) about extending the May 1 troop withdrawal deadline, stipulated in the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban deal.

U.S. force reductions should logically move in parallel with peaceful steps taken by the Taliban and the Ghani government. But former [President Donald Trump's illogical and inconsistent announcements](#) lent an air of impulsivity and incoherence to the U.S. Pentagon's strategy. When he was in power, Trump inconsistently [announced withdrawals](#) followed by troop build-ups, and further drawdowns, [which risked putting both peace and progress in the country in danger](#).

A mounting wave of disillusionment led Canada to pull out of Afghanistan after 14 years, unilaterally. Yet it would be a grave mistake for the U.S. hegemon to pull out entirely, without plenty of pre-warning. [Over \\$US 2-trillion](#) spent on securing Afghanistan, and [thousands of American soldiers' lives lost](#), has meant the United States cannot return all its soldiers to the homefront. Moreover, the Afghan people are fed-up and desperate for peace, yet if left alone—a situation that is highly unlikely to happen—they would probably fall into grievous civil war

The U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III said he [was pleased with the discussions](#), held via teleconference between [Feb. 17 and 19](#), and that [NATO defence ministers reaffirmed the alliance's commitment to Afghanistan](#). Reports from the warfront suggest the Afghan Air Force is improving its aerial capabilities, with assistance from American companies like [Insitu Inc](#); the Afghanistan national army is bolstering its troop numbers and training and attempting to root out endemic corruption; and the defense department is setting up accountability departments in the military corps with clearer chains of command.

The German military was set to withdraw in March, but now Germany says its troops [may stay longer](#). The [Afghanistan Study Group](#), established by the U.S Congress, concluded on Feb. 3 that “a rash and rushed approach could increase the chances of a breakdown of order in Afghanistan that would threaten the security and interests of the U.S. and its allies.”

Rather than expect NATO allies to commit to Afghanistan, for many more decades, the United Nations could deploy a [new UN Rapid Deployment](#) capability. However, a poorly-trained and under-equipped UN force would likely be killed by Taliban forces. And, there is no UN-negotiated ceasefire to monitor, no UN agreement to keep in force, and the minimum criteria for humanitarian intervention under UN auspices have not been put in place. A new UN rapid-reaction operation right now—although idealistic, well-intentioned, and [worth pursuing over the long-term](#)—would turn into a bloody commitment, worse than Mali; perhaps another UN failure, like Somalia or Kosovo.

We need a new [international commission](#) that disarms the warring parties, much like how Canadian [General John de Chastelain forged a decommissioning agreement](#) among Northern Ireland's obdurate paramilitary groups that committed them to disarm as set out in the Good Friday agreement on May 22, 2000. Canada's former chief of the defence staff helped forge the Belfast Agreement, the blueprint for peace, and the formation of a new power-sharing government from a [perspective shaped by "outside involvement."](#)

The Taliban wants all foreign troops to withdraw, and to establish a non-secular government, while Ghani's government wants a [democratic united government](#) and [peace](#), at the same time as both sides seek to stamp each other out using military solutions, not necessarily diplomacy. All the adversaries' purported time-lines and expected milestones are nebulous, deliberately, or haphazardly set. Conditions-based negotiations, renewed and smaller NATO troop commitments, as well as a commission that disarms the parties based on the Northern Ireland template, could lead to success over time.

Yet the U.S. administration has a concrete deadline less than four years hence when the Democratic administration must run for power, perhaps with Donald Trump bleating from the sidelines or centre stage. Negotiators must arrive at some kind of end-game, not necessarily a triumph, and like the classical adage attributed to Roman emperors' August and Titus, they must make haste slowly.

Associate Professor Erika Simpson has been a public speaker on the war in Afghanistan for the media since 2006. She is the author of NATO and the Bomb and the president of the Canadian Peace Research Association.

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