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Current United States Security Strategy:
Underestimation of Afghanistan's State of Affairs
and Resulting Impacts on American Freedom

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Introduction

The current United States Security Strategy must evolve to meet the developing threats posed by Afghanistan's reconstitution as a terrorist haven under Taliban leadership. The new security strategy will need to specifically focus on the repercussions of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the shifting political landscape. The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance and the Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community developed by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence briefly and vaguely summarized the condition of Afghanistan but did not make provision for Afghanistan's reconstitution as a terrorist haven. The current condition of Afghanistan is volatile and ripe for a new era of violent extremism and pervasive ideology that will have critical impacts on American freedoms. Due to the shifting focus of the current administration, the United States has been left unprepared for the cultural, social, and political impacts of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. With a critical assessment of the current security strategy and a profound shift in American political and militaristic goals, the United States can develop proper prevention and containment tactics to combat the reconstitution of Afghanistan as a terrorist haven and deter possible actions that might be taken against the United States and her allies.

Current Condition of Afghanistan

After the calculated terrorist attack on the United States in 2001, American forces entered Taliban-controlled Afghanistan to combat Al-Qaeda leaders and operatives within the country. America did not withdraw from Afghanistan after the Taliban regime fell and the insurgents receded to the Afghan mountains and Pakistan. For many years, the political and militaristic landscape of the United States' interactions with Afghanistan entailed extensive political, economic, and operational resources to aid in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism. It is now likely that Al-Qaeda and other radical groups will once again use Afghanistan as a haven for terrorist activities.

Analysis of Taliban Efforts

The current condition of Afghanistan is volatile and ripe for a new era of violent and pervasive extremist ideology. In years past, the United States government has provided a significant amount of economic, militaristic, and humanitarian support to the nation in an attempt to contain and further prevent the spread of terrorism and violent extremism. With American support now gone, the Taliban and their associates have the ability to invade and control the government.

As the National Intelligence assessment predicted, “Al-Qaeda regional affiliates will exploit local conflicts and ungoverned spaces to threaten US and Western interests, as well as local governments and populations abroad.”¹ According to a report developed by the United Nations in September of 2021, in Afghanistan’s interim government, at least fourteen of the thirty-three cabinet members are on U.N. sanctions lists.² These members hold strong leadership positions within the government and have great influence; therefore, posing a serious threat to the United States and her allies. One of the most well-known amongst the cabinet members is Sirajuddin Haqqani, Afghanistan’s new interior minister. This position places him in charge of the police, security, and combating opposition within the nation. Haqqani is currently on the FBI’s most wanted list and is a designated global terrorist as leader of the Haqqani network, known to have strong links to Al-Qaeda.³ Intelligence reports developed in June, before the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, described the Haqqani network as the “primary known liaison between the Taliban and Al Qaeda.” As a result of holding the position as interior minister, Haqqani is capable of successfully integrating the Al-Qaeda network within the nation and reestablishing Afghanistan as a terrorist haven without resistance from outside actors.

With the protection and support of the Haqqani network, the Taliban will be able to grow more radical and threatening over time. During the many years of collaboration leading up to this point, the Haqqani network has pushed for increasingly sophisticated, high-causality attacks by the Taliban. Today, suicide bombings with mass civilian casualties are the weapon of choice for the group. With Sirajuddin Haqqani as the Taliban’s primary military strategist, foreign nations are at great risk due to the strong anti-United States ideology the group possesses. In the wake of the 2021 Kabul attacks, Sirajuddin delivered a speech in which he alluded to his role as the strategist behind the attacks and honored the “martyrs” who conducted the bombings. He also suggested more attacks were on the horizon for Taliban enemies, including the United States. Additionally, there has been an increase in connection between the Haqqani network and Pakistani

¹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence. *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*. April 9, 2021. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>

² United Nations Security Council. United Nations Security Council Consolidated List. September 2021. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/un-sc-consolidated-list>

³ Turak, Natasha. “Terrorism will increase under Afghanistan’s newly appointed Taliban government, experts warn.” *CNBC*, September 8, 2021. <https://www.cnb.com/2021/09/08/terrorism-to-increase-under-afghanistans-new-taliban-government.html?qsearchterm=Terrorism>

Taliban members as well as Central Asian jihadists. A recent report published by the Congressional Research Service concluded that there are more than 10,000 jihads operating in Afghanistan who have ties to the Taliban through the Haqqani network.⁴

The Current United States Strategy

Biden Administration INSSG

Presently, the United States Security Strategy does not take into account the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban in August of 2021. The current Interim National Security Strategic Guidance was produced by the Biden Administration in March of 2021. Throughout the report, there is a significant focus on the increasing tension within the United States in the wake of the most recent election. The Biden INSSG appears to invert traditional national security strategy formulations, focusing on perceived shortcomings in domestic social and economic policy rather than external threats as its analytic starting point.⁵ The key priorities listed in this report are to protect the security of the American people, expand economic prosperity and opportunity, and realize and defend the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life by reinvigorating American democracy.⁶

On an international front, the INSSG focuses on a shift in the distribution of power and steadily increasing threats from China, Russia, and North Korea. The strategy notes that “both Beijing and Moscow have invested heavily in efforts meant to check U.S. strengths and prevent the nation from defending interests and allies around the world.”⁷ Briefly, the INSSG mentions that the United States “also faces challenges within countries whose governance is fragile, and from influential non-state actors that have the ability to disrupt American interests. Terrorism and violent extremism, both domestic and international, remain

⁴ Thomas, Clayton. “Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan.” *Congressional Research Service*. August 17, 2021. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10604.pdf>

⁵ McInnis, Kathleen J. “The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance.” *Congressional Research Service*. March 29, 2021. [https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11798#:~:text=The%20full%20NSS%20is%20likely,\(FY\)%202022%20budget%20submissions](https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11798#:~:text=The%20full%20NSS%20is%20likely,(FY)%202022%20budget%20submissions).

⁶ Biden, Joseph R. *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. March 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

significant threats.”⁸ This language does allude to the threats posed by regional entities within the Middle East and Central Asia, but it is clear to see that these threats are not within the primary focus of the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance.

ODNI Assessment

In early April of 2021, the Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community developed by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence vaguely summarized the condition of Afghanistan. The report surmised the prospect for a peace deal with Afghanistan would remain low during the next year due to the conflict and instability present within the country. The assessment stated, “The Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support.”⁹ The assessment did suggest the potential for an absence of American troops, but the report did not elaborate on what would happen once the United States withdrew from Afghanistan. In a separate section of the report, the assessment briefly outlined the threat posed by Al-Qaeda. “Al-Qaeda regional affiliates will exploit local conflicts and ungoverned spaces to threaten US and Western interests, as well as local governments and populations abroad.”¹⁰ As the assessment predicted, the Afghan government was unable to withstand the forces of the Taliban without the aid of American troops. Shortly thereafter, the regional affiliates of Al-Qaeda were able to ascertain strong seats of leadership within the interim government established by the Taliban within Afghanistan.

1986 Reagan NSDD

The current administration’s approach to national security seems to have lost sight of some of the significant foundational elements included in strategies of the past. The 1986 Reagan National Security Decision Directive is a valuable benchmark for comparison with current and upcoming directives. The Reagan administration faced many complex international issues that required strategic, resilient, and innovative diplomatic thinking which were reflected in the 1986 NSDD. The 1986 directive was forward and concise in language with clearly defined and described goals, objectives, and strategies. The document summarized the success of the strategy was dependent on the “ability to wage a

⁸ Biden, Joseph R. *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. March 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

⁹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence. *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*. April 9, 2021. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid.

successful competition for influence among less developed countries, the ability to influence events beyond direct American control, and the ability to project military power abroad in defense of United States interests.”¹¹ These foundational principles are still valuable and relevant decades later, but the current strategy seems to invert traditional national security strategy formulations. The present national security guidance places an emphasis on perceived shortcomings in domestic social and economic policy rather than external threats and opportunities that could have critical impacts on United States national security and policy.

Modifications to the Current Strategy

Global Posture Review

The Global Posture Review, published by the Department of Defense during the conclusion of 2021, left many questions unanswered and created a sense of confusion according to public review outlets. The public summary of the classified review did suggest the Pentagon assessed the evolving counterterrorism efforts required in the wake of the DoD operations in Afghanistan but did not give substantial indication for how the United States would proceed.¹² Throughout the summary, there appeared to be a lack of recognition for critical failures and shortcomings that took place during 2021. Rather, there was a focus on returning to normal military posture around the world and furthering American strategic policy planning and decision making. In the wake of the Global Posture Review, there appears to be a consensus among military and policy leaders in Washington to prevent conflicts that will force the United States to display a show of strength or engage militarily. This strategic intent is rather alarming considering the current world circumstances which have developed during recent months. Foreign actors like China and Russia are actively demonstrating increased military power and strategic political advantage while conditions in the Middle East provide the perfect environment for terrorism to grow, flourish, and gain power undisturbed.

Threat Reassessment: Political Interaction

The United States government will need to reassess the threats posed by the Taliban takeover and develop modifications to the current security strategy. These modifications will need to encompass a wide array of tactics to ensure the

¹¹ Reagan, Ronald W. National Security Decision Directive Number 238. September 2, 1986

¹² U.S. Department of Defense. “DoD Concludes 2021 Global Posture Review.” November 29, 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2855801/dod-concludes-2021-global-posture-review/>

security of the nation and American foreign interests. Presently, the United States government does not view the Taliban as a terrorist organization. For this reason, negotiations and interactions are not prohibited. Shortly after the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan, diplomatic leaders were arriving to have discussions with the newly appointed Taliban leadership. These conversations centered around the recognition of legitimate governance, international aid, and regional stability. This development poses risks and creates an increasing threat to national security due to the known associates of Afghanistan's Taliban leadership. The effort to legitimize this new government is invalid due to countless threats by known terrorists across the region. Since August of 2021, the Taliban has allowed Afghanistan to provide a haven for known terrorist organizations, such as the Haqqani network and Al-Qaeda once again. Politically and procedurally, the United States should approach the interim Afghan government with more reservation than has been previously displayed since the Taliban rise to power. Engaging in negotiations and cordial diplomacy with terrorist organizations only legitimizes the goals and means of the group.

Threat Reassessment: Over-the-Horizon Presence

In the INSSG, it states the current administration does not view military action as the first option for counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan. "In advancing America's interests globally, the leadership will make smart and disciplined choices regarding the national defense and the responsible use of the military, while elevating diplomacy as the tool of first resort."¹³ As a result of this declaration, the Biden administration has turned to an over-the-horizon presence for counterterrorism efforts within the country. These over-the-horizon capabilities can apply pressure to terrorist organizations within Afghanistan, but they are not a long-term solution. Counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan are not one of the top priorities for the current administration. Because of this, fewer resources are allocated to this operation. Consequently, there is a greater risk for critical error or inadequate results. For operational access, the United States must maintain a strong presence in the surrounding land and sea which will require collaboration with regional associates and high-value American resources. Due to limited resources, any intelligence collection will be minimal and sparse in nature. This can have critical short and long-term impacts. Mistakes in airstrikes within Afghanistan could cause innocent civilian casualties during over-the-horizon operations. Over time, there might also be a lack of sufficient indications and warnings for an imminent attack on the United States or her allies.

¹³ Biden, Joseph R. *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. March 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

Critical Elements

Media Awareness

Politically, religiously, and otherwise motivated radicalization and violent extremism is a topic of high priority within the United States. For this reason, intelligence and policy measures need to be taken to combat the pervasive ideology that is being disseminated through the use of mass media. The use of open-source intelligence would be a strong tactic to combat the reconstitution of Afghanistan as a terrorist haven. In the present day, media is the optimal way for terrorists to seek new recruits, garner transnational support, and collect financial aid for operations. Mass media allows for instant interaction and communication within select and otherwise unreachable communities. The internet has been an invaluable host for terrorist groups to provide propaganda, reporting, and public relations. The media also allows for a socially constructed reality which is an increasing threat to national security. This construction is established through force multipliers such as media coverage and religion. News frames allow terrorists to “mediatize” the presentation of their nefarious activities to garner support and become politically important. Religion allows terrorist groups to transcend normative political and social boundaries to connect with others who will support and further their cause. In the future, the US intelligence community should place more emphasis on monitoring the media and online interactions within the United States, Afghanistan, and other critical regions.

Transnational Infrastructure Protection

There are numerous threats posed by the reconstitution of Afghanistan as a terrorist haven, but one of the most critical is to American infrastructure supply chains around the globe. These systems require costly investments and are essential to the United States’ economic development and prosperity. If terrorist groups are permitted to take refuge within the borders of Afghanistan, they will have a greater opportunity to exploit the foreign interests and supply chains of the United States in the region. Not only is infrastructure critical and beneficial to American civilians and foreign interests alike, but infrastructure also impacts the global economy as a whole. A proper foundation with strong security is required to effectively keep up with the increasing demands of the supply chain. Unfortunately, most of the United States’ current defenses are outdated and easily exploited by foreign actors who seek to cripple the United States. Fostering relationships with innovative corporations in the private sector would allow for advancements to known vulnerabilities as well as reducing possible attack points to create a more defensive environment. With access to various borders, trading routes, resources, and connections, the threat of terrorism posed by the Taliban within Afghanistan endangers American supply chains and the economy. The new

National Security Strategy should construct prevention methods to accurately reflect this need for the protection of American critical infrastructure.

American Freedoms

Cultural Impacts

When the United States left Afghanistan in late 2021, there were many cultural implications which were not considered. In Afghanistan, there was an immediate humanitarian crisis that occurred upon the American exit, many citizens faced extreme danger or even death. Men, women, and children were no longer safe within their homeland. Due to this crisis, many refugees fled the country and dispersed across the globe. More than 76,000 of the Afghan refugees came to the United States seeking refuge. In recent months, these immigrants have been transferred from American military bases to interior parts of the country. This poses several concerns to the integrity of United States national security. Due to the high volume of refugees seeking asylum, only preliminary screenings were conducted before admission. Traditionally, the refugee process takes several years of investigation but, for the sake of time, the current administration decided to grant entrance on temporary humanitarian grounds. This lack of investigation for refugees entering the country coupled with rising anti-American rhetoric by terrorist organizations in Afghanistan creates the vulnerability for radicalization within the homeland. In the years to come, the United States will rapidly become more of a melting pot of cultures, religions, and ideologies. The American homeland is already fraught with chaos and division amongst the people, creating the perfect environment for manipulation towards expanding and increasing terrorist activities and attacks.

Culturally, many young Americans are susceptible to outside influence. Many within the American youth population are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives, feeling alienated from the community around them. Today, there is a significant reliance on the internet for socialization purposes, enterprise, entertainment, and content creation. Various media platforms facilitate the opportunity for dangerous radicalization. The Department of Health and Human Services identified Al-Qaeda and its affiliates “leveraging online tools and resources to propagate messages of violence and division, identify and groom potential recruits, and supplement their physical efforts.”¹⁴ The polarization and

¹⁴ Alava, Séraphin, Frau-Meigs, Divina, and Ghayda Hassan. *Youth and violent extremism on social media: mapping the research*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017.

propaganda present on the internet helps construct a mentality by which individuals believe they are threatened and must defend themselves and the cause they are drawn toward. This manipulation campaign by terrorist organizations allows vulnerable people to dehumanize the world around them, granting clarity for a singular focus on the intended target. While taking refuge in Afghanistan, terrorist organizations are allowed to flourish and threaten the minds of young Americans undisturbed, bolstering the threat to national security and American freedom.

Social Impacts

The rapid influx of immigrants to the United States from across the globe maintains numerous social implications for the American government and the various homeland systems operating in the United States. Upon entrance to the country, each immigrant receives a starter package including cash and government benefits. Currently, the United States is experiencing a significant strain due to social and medical welfare programs, rising taxes, rapidly increasing national debt, rising levels of unemployment, and depleting resources. According to statistical evidence from government spending reports, in 2021, upwards of eight trillion dollars were projected to be spent on welfare programs, taxes increased across the board, and the national debt jumped to more than twenty-eight trillion dollars.¹⁵ Additionally, due to various circumstances, the nation experienced a disturbing increase in the unemployment rate and a significant increase in the prices of valuable resources. Unfortunately, the American systems are unprepared for the current demands and the perceived weaknesses of these systems has created a sense of unrest and distrust amongst the American people. This unrest prompts national security implications on both a domestic and foreign scale.

These various social impacts create weaknesses that can be easily exploited by foreign actors. Due to social demands within the homeland, the American government must reallocate resources away from expanding maintenance and advancement projects in other areas such as the American military and intelligence community. While foreign actors across the globe are innovating and prospering, the United States must address only the most pressing needs and threats while rapidly increasing the national debt. The United States is now faced with the challenge of rapidly emerging innovation from various actors in other parts of the world. As it stands, the United States is not prepared for

¹⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury. *Guide to America's Finances*. 2021.
<https://datalab.usaspending.gov/americas-finance-guide/>

intense innovative competition from actors like China and Russia and their affiliates which creates a lack of preparedness for upcoming global and domestic challenges. This reallocation of resources and increasing strain on the United States provides the perfect opportunity for terrorist organizations to plan, infiltrate, and execute critical strikes against the United States and her allies.

Political Impacts

After the United States withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, many countries were left to consider if the United States could commit and be consistent. The various failures of American interactions in Afghanistan only reinforce doubts about the reliability and influence of the United States on an international scale. This complex question prompts intense scrutiny and brings to light the volatile situation present in the Middle East. Due to unfortunate circumstances and complications in the two decades the United States maintained a strong presence, many countries are left questioning the capabilities and partnerships of the United States. Simultaneously, adversaries of the United States are strategically assessing the situation for their own gain. Specifically, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia are plagued by discord and unrest that pose substantial threats to the United States and her allies. These countries are known havens for global terrorist actors and their destructive activities. The United States must assess how these countries affect and contribute to the threat of terrorism and which counterterrorism measures must be taken to prevent future destruction to the United States and her allies as well as preserve beloved American freedom.

China's recent interest in Afghanistan should also be examined due to the potential political impacts that could arise. After the United States removal from Afghanistan, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan to discuss the opportunity for China to strengthen its influence in the region and manage potential threats due to the close proximity of the two countries.¹⁶ China does not want to commandeer Afghanistan or transform the country into a Chinese model of governance, but the country does have considerable interest and investment within the region that could provide significant advantage and opportunity for the Chinese government in the future. According to a report by the European Council on Foreign Relations, there have been multiple discussions about the potential involvement of Afghanistan in the

¹⁶ Oertel, Janka, and Andrew Small. "After the withdrawal: China's interests in Afghanistan." *European Council on Foreign Relations*. August 5, 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/article/after-the-withdrawal-chinas-interests-in-afghanistan/?amp>

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁷ This potential for a developing relationship between the Taliban in Afghanistan and China could significantly complicate the United States' national security posture in the future.

Conclusion

The present United States security strategy does not accurately encompass and assess all terrorist threats that could arise from Afghanistan within the next decade. As a result of the shifting focus of the current administration, the United States has been left unprepared for the security, social, and political impacts of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. With a critical assessment of the current security strategy, a profound shift in political and militaristic goals, and a focus on media and infrastructure protection, the United States can develop proper prevention and containment tactics to combat the reconstitution of Afghanistan as a terrorist haven.

¹⁷ Oertel, Janka, and Andrew Small. "After the withdrawal: China's interests in Afghanistan." *European Council on Foreign Relations*. August 5, 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/article/after-the-withdrawal-chinas-interests-in-afghanistan/?amp>

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