

Counterterrorism in Afghanistan After US Reduces Footprint

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Key Points

- The Afghans will need military support against terrorists.
- The presence of allied nations in Afghanistan could sustain an effective counterterrorism capability.
- An “Over the Horizon” option is both costly and time consuming.
- The US should make agreements to have a base near Afghanistan or preferably promote joint counterterrorism center from which to operate.
- Uzbekistan is a central location to combat VEOs in Afghanistan.
- India is another option for a counterterrorism location.

Introduction

After the US reduces presence in the AOR, especially in Afghanistan, as directed by the President Biden, the US will lose Access Basing and Overflight (ABO) and agile counterterrorism capability in the region.¹ This is basically a challenge for US SOCOM, but Afghans will still need some sort of military support against terrorists, that can be provided at short notice.² A good option would be to have allied presence on the ground, but it is challenging to find a willing stability provider who would be accepted by the Afghan government and Taliban. From the US part, since the “over the horizon” option is both costly and time consuming, efficient counterterrorism would require a base somewhere in the near area. Looking around Afghanistan there are not many suitable places when considering a need to reduce the overall presence in the region.

¹ Gordon Lubold and Warren P. Strobel, “Biden Trimming Forces Sent to Mideast to Help Saudi Arabia,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Apr 1, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-trimming-forces-sent-to-mideast-to-help-saudi-arabia11617279687> (accessed May 20, 2021).

² U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress. p 3. May 6, 2021, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS21048.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2021).

Options for Presence in Afghanistan

Pakistan has a will to be significant actor in the country without sending troops but is rejected by the Afghan government.³ Iran has improved relations with the Taliban and has previously offered Shiite militias to Afghanistan,³ but would likely create more instability and hinder counterterrorism activities. Beijing's interests are both economic cooperation and counterterrorism in the Wakhan Corridor.⁴ However, China is not willing to be a peacekeeper and is rejected by both western countries and Afghans themselves.⁵ India has also tried to engage Afghan Taliban with the intent of sending its troops to Afghanistan, but was rejected⁷ and Indians in Afghanistan were even attacked by the Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan together.⁶

Turkey is the one country that might be accepted by the majority of parties involved in the Afghan Peace process and also be beneficial to counterterrorism. Both the Afghan government and the Taliban have friendly relations with Ankara.⁷ President Erdoğan stated in 2015 that Turkish troops in Afghanistan will stay there for as long as the Afghan administration desires.⁸ Last December, the Turkish parliament approved an extension of the deployment of troops in Afghanistan for 18 months, which would take them to June 2022, Turkey would like to continue their mission in a NATO framework.⁹ Turkey has also called on the Taliban to take advantage of the peace efforts and engage in comprehensive dialogue with the Afghan government.¹⁰ Last March, Afghan Foreign Minister Atmar said that Turkey's role in the

³ Munir Ahmed, "Pakistan military: Fence bordering Afghanistan nearly done," *AP News*, Jan 11, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-pakistan-islamabad-taliban-8500851371d8a1ce1d47e65b8f84d3c9> (accessed May 22, 2021).

³ Roshan Noorzai and Zafar Bamyani, "Iran's Suggestion of Using Shiite Fighters in Afghanistan Seen as Risky," *VOA News*, Jan 14, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/irans-suggestion-using-shiite-fighters-afghanistan-seen-risky> (accessed May 23, 2021).

⁴ *Pajhwok*, "China offers Afghanistan counter-terrorism cooperation," May 18, 2021, <https://pajhwok.com/2021/05/18/china-offers-afghanistan-counter-terrorism-cooperation/> (accessed May 24, 2021).

⁵ *Ariana News*, "Ghani says Taliban no longer has an 'excuse' to continue the war," Apr 19, 2021, <https://ariananews.af/ghani-says-taliban-no-longer-has-an-excuse-to-continue-the-war/> (accessed May 23, 2021). ⁷ Hamid Mir, "Enough is enough — Pakistan not happy with Afghan Taliban," *The News (Pakistan)*, Apr 27, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/827112-enough-is-enough-pakistan-not-happy-with-afghan-taliban> (accessed May 24, 2021).

⁶ Nayanima Basu, "Barely noticed story of why India shut key Jalalabad, Herat missions & why they may stay shut," Mar 29, 2021, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/barely-noticed-story-of-why-india-shut-key-jalalabad-herat-missions-why-they-maystay-shut/630515/> (accessed May 23, 2021).

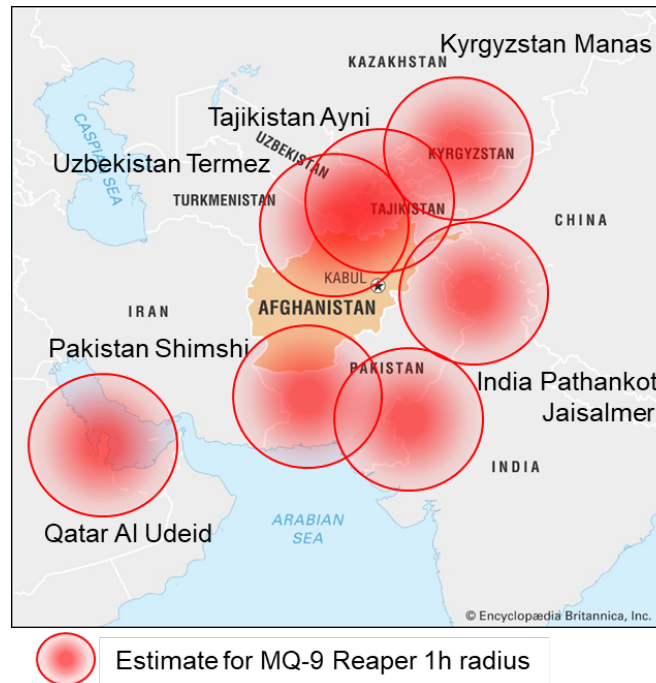
⁷ *DW*, "Can Turkey broker peace in Afghanistan?" Jan 7, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/can-turkey-broker-peace-inafghanistan/a-46985146> (accessed May 23, 2021).

⁸ Nurbanu Kizil, "Turkish troops to stay in Afghanistan, as long as Kabul wants, Erdoğan says," *Daily Sabah*, Dec 24, 2015, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2015/12/24/turkish-troops-to-stay-in-afghanistan-as-long-as-kabul-wantserdogan-says> (accessed May 24, 2021).

⁹ Menekse Tokyay, "Turkey considering troop withdrawal from Afghanistan: Report," May 11, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1857411> (accessed May 24, 2021).

¹⁰ *Tolo News*, "During a visit to Kabul, the Turkish prime minister said his country was working to host a trilateral meeting between Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan," Apr 8, 2018, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/turkey-asks-taliban-takeadvantage-peace-offer> (accessed May 24, 2021).

success of the peace process is essential.¹¹ Turkey is a NATO country and as such would provide some continuation and maybe the basis for subsequent operations if needed.



Options for Over the Border

The current sense is that the nearby countries of Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan are unlikely to agree to host US forces.¹² Pakistan have even stated this publicly,¹³ which is unfortunate as Shamsi air base from where the C.I.A. used to operate is conveniently located.¹⁴ Russian sources claim that Uzbekistan has also denied access.¹⁵ Uzbekistan would be a central location to combat VEOs. Uzbekistan, who is executing its multi-vector approach might still be persuaded to host a US base again, as they did for “Camp Stronghold Freedom” between 2001 and 2005. Although the base should be different as that one was reported to be heavily contaminated with chemicals and radioactive material. One possibility is Termez, where Germany maintained an

¹¹ Shadi Khan Saif, “Turkey’s role deemed pivotal in Afghan peace process,” *Anadolu Agency*, Mar 2, 2021,

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/turkey-s-role-deemed-pivotal-in-afghan-peace-process/2161293> (accessed May 24, 2021).

¹² Zachary Cohen, Katie Bo Williams, Barbara Starr, “Afghanistan withdrawal will likely dismantle a CIA intelligence network built up over 20 years,” *CNN*, Apr 18, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/18/politics/afghanistan-withdrawal-cia-intelligence-network/index.html> (accessed May 20, 2021).

¹³ Ayesha Tanzeem, “Pakistan’s President says his country does not want to become base of US counterterrorism,” *VOA News*, Apr 21, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/voa-exclusive-pakistans-president-says-his-country-does-not-want-to-become-base-us> and <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/pakistan-no-more-military-bases-us-afghanmission-may-11> (accessed May 20, 2021).

¹⁴ *The Economic Times*, “CIA using Pak airbase to attack militants: Report,” Feb 18, 2009,

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/cia-using-pak-airbase-to-attack-militantsreport/articleshow/4151204.cms?from=mdr> See also <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/12/world/asia/cia-leaves-pakistan-base-used-for-drone-strikes.html> and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/27/pakistan-orders-us-leave-shamsi-airbase> (accessed May 20, 2021).

¹⁵ *Top War*, “Uzbekistan rejects the option of placing an American military base in the country,” May 10, 2021,

<https://en.topwar.ru/182815-v-uzbekistane-otvergli-variant-razmeschenija-amerikanskoj-voennoj-bazy-na-territoriistrany.html> (accessed May 20, 2021).

airbase until 2014.¹⁶ A US presence might curb some VEOs in the region. Even though the Kremlin would not welcome this, the move should benefit Russia as it is concerned about drug flows from Afghanistan and non-state actors like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan spreading their ideology and radicalizing the Muslim populations in Russia and surrounding Central Asian states.¹⁷ Moscow could concentrate its support to the Tajik-led Northern Alliance in Afghanistan; the Kremlin should be confident that this will be well received as, for the first time, Russia and Uzbekistan agreed a strategic military partnership program for 2021-2025.¹⁸ Another option is America's vital Indo-Pacific partner India who has great concerns about the Taliban gaining primacy in the region and would likely be willing to provide grounds to operate jointly in the region.²¹ In 2016 they signed a Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Understanding (LEMOA) agreement in place, although it does not provide for the establishment of any bases or basing arrangements.²²

Conclusion

The presence of an allied nation in Afghanistan would sustain effective counterterrorism capability. Also, since an "over the horizon" option is both costly and time consuming for counterterrorism, the US should make agreements to have a base near Afghanistan or preferably promote joint counterterrorism center from where to operate. Instead of providing over the horizon support it would be over the border support in Afghanistan.

Recommendations

- Promote NATO ally Turkey's continued presence in Afghanistan and benefit from close cooperation
- Cooperate with EUCOM to improve relations with Turkey.
- Promote the establishment of a base near Afghanistan to have presence.
- Promote the establishment of a counterterrorism center near Afghanistan.
- Cooperate with INDOPACOM to enable counterterrorism activities from India if needed.

¹⁶ Luke Coffey, "US can't afford to walk away from Central Asia," *Arab News*, Apr 30, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1851721> (accessed May 20, 2021).

¹⁷ Saif Khattak, "How will the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan impact the region?" *Pakistan Tribune*, Apr 20, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/article/97364/how-will-the-withdrawal-of-us-troops-from-afghanistan-impact-the-region> See also Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan was explained by the risks due to the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/763670> (accessed May 20, 2021).

¹⁸ *EurAsia Daily*, "Россия и Узбекистан впервые приняли программу военного партнерства [Russia and Uzbekistan adopt military partnership program for first time]," Apr 28, 2021, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2021/04/28/rossiya-iuzbekistan-vpervye-prinyali-programmu-voennogo-partnerstva> (The ministers signed an agreement on a unified regional air defense system to strengthen the protection of the state border) (accessed May 20, 2021). ²¹ Mk Bhadrakumar, "US could seek 'expeditionary' base deal with India," *Asia Times*, Apr 27, 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/04/us-could-see-expeditionary-base-deal-with-india/> (accessed May 20, 2021). ²² Anurag Trivedi, "Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)," *Shaan Academy*, Feb 24, 2021, <https://www.shaan.academy/blog/logistic-exchange-memorandum-of-agreement-lemoa> (accessed May 20, 2021).