

# Reading National Security Strategies shows that US involvement in Afghanistan has simply been a staging post for larger ideological conflicts



*For almost 35 years, US presidential administrations have set out their foreign policy and national security approaches in National Security Strategy reports. [James D. Boys](#) looks at what these reports can tell us about the US approach to Afghanistan since the 1980s. He finds that focus on Afghanistan has come and gone, showing how US involvement there has always been in the context of wider conflicts such as the Cold War and the War on Terror.*

In his testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on September 29, General Mark Milley conceded that the War in Afghanistan had been lost through [miscalculation spanning multiple administrations](#). The flaws in the evacuation that prompted Milley's appearance reflect long-standing defects in the American engagement in Afghanistan, which have been embedded in the National Security Strategies issued by successive administrations. George W. Bush's decision to [jettison the Powell Doctrine](#) (which centered on defined objectives and the exhaustion of other non-violent measures), which proved successful in the 1991 Gulf War, ensured that a sufficient force was never adequately deployed. The subsequent decision to open a second front in the War on Terror in Iraq revealed that, despite being the initial focus of military attention, Afghanistan was a mere sideshow for grand strategy. President Obama's 2014 [announcement of a withdrawal timescale](#) ensured that the Taliban merely needed to bide their time and await the eventual departure before toppling their country's democratically elected leaders. The flawed [peace deal of the Trump administration](#), unveiled in February 2020 and designed to end what the administration viewed as having become an ['endless war.'](#) exacerbated a sense that long-term thinking was a relic of a bygone era, a sentiment confirmed by Biden's withdrawal [announcement](#), heralding the attending [loss of life and international prestige](#).

## Insights on Afghanistan from the US National Security Strategy

President Biden recently asked, ["What interest do we have in Afghanistan at this point, with al-Qaeda gone?"](#) This sentiment reflects the ambiguous approach that the United States has adopted towards Afghanistan, an ambiguity that is evident if we study the [National Security Strategy](#) (NSS) reports that have been produced over the past three decades. As mandated by the [1986 Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act](#), the NSS was an attempt by Congress to encourage the White House to formulate a coherent approach to foreign policy and [national security](#).

The sense that Afghanistan has long been a theater of operations for a broader ideological engagement is apparent from the [first NSS, released by the Reagan administration in 1987](#). The report committed the United States to "Support for Freedom Fighters" and pledged "to advance the cause of freedom and democracy, and to demonstrate to the Soviets that their actions aimed at spreading Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism will bring them no enduring gain." The ensuing withdrawal of Soviet forces ensured that Afghanistan received scant reference until the [1998 NSS](#), when the Bill Clinton administration noted its strike against "terrorist facilities and infrastructure in Afghanistan," targeting a new adversary, Osama bin Laden, and his "network's infrastructure" which had "served as a training camp for literally thousands of terrorists from around the globe." The Clinton administration's final report from [December 2000](#), noted that the United Nations and the United States had sanctioned the Taliban for harboring bin Laden, but to no avail. As its time in office expired, and in keeping with [Clinton's Grand Strategy](#) approach, the administration stressed its efforts to pursue "diplomatic efforts, including through the United Nations and with Russia and other concerned countries, to address these concerns on an urgent basis."

## Afghanistan comes to the fore after 9/11

The first [NSS of the post-9/11 era, issued in 2002](#), acknowledged that prior to the attacks, Afghanistan had been “low on the list of major planning contingencies.” It observed that while Afghanistan had “been liberated; coalition forces continue to hunt down the Taliban and al-Qaeda.” The 2002 report concluded that as the United States continued to target terrorists within Afghanistan, it would “continue to work with international organizations such as the United Nations, as well as non-governmental organizations, and other countries to provide the humanitarian, political, economic, and security assistance necessary to rebuild Afghanistan so that it will never again abuse its people, threaten its neighbors, and provide a haven for terrorists.” This was the only forward-looking observation regarding the future of Afghanistan and the need to ensure democratic government as a goal of national security. [By 2006](#), the language of the report was triumphant, noting that “al-Qaeda has lost its safe haven in Afghanistan,” while recognizing that “winning the War on Terror requires winning the battles in Afghanistan and Iraq.” Addressing Iraq and Afghanistan in this manner reflected the direction of travel for grand strategy, as Afghanistan became less of a focus. The report concluded that the “successes already won...must be consolidated,” noting that while Afghanistan had “the Afghan people deserve the support of the United States and the entire international community.” Beyond such platitudes, however, the report issued no indication of intent.

The Obama administration’s [first NSS was published in 2010](#), by which point the United States had been at war for nearly a decade. The report continued to focus on Afghanistan as a theatre of operations where the United States intended to “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its affiliates through a comprehensive strategy that denies them safe haven, strengthens front-line partners, secures our homeland, pursues justice through durable legal approaches, and counters a bankrupt agenda of extremism and murder with an agenda of hope and opportunity.” Afghanistan, along with Pakistan, was identified as being “the epicenter of the violent extremism practiced by al-Qaeda.” The report warned that the “danger from this region will only grow if security slides backward, the Taliban controls large swathes of Afghanistan, and al-Qaeda is allowed to operate with impunity.” The attention given to Afghanistan in this report was the most extensive to date; never before, and not since, would the nation garner such attention. The report made it clear, however, that the long-term future of Afghanistan would not be the sole responsibility of the United States, and that it expected help from the United Nations “to improve accountability and effective governance.” The report recognized, however, that the United States and its allies could not “shy away from the difficult task of pursuing stabilization in conflict and post-conflict environments,” again conflating Iraq with Afghanistan.



Despite this extensive focus, when Afghanistan was addressed in [the 2015 report](#), it was to announce that the United States had “moved beyond the large ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that defined so much of American foreign policy over the past decade.” Conflating Iraq and Afghanistan once again, the report noted that troop levels in both countries stood at 15,000, down from nearly 180,000 in January 2009. The report noted that the United States had ended the combat mission in Afghanistan “and transitioned to a dramatically smaller force focused on the goal of a sovereign and stable partner.” Having removed the Taliban from power and killed bin Laden in May 2011, the administration noted the importance of increasing life expectancy, access to education, and opportunities for women and girls. The report concluded that the United States remained committed to enacting policies to “mitigate the threat from terrorism and to support a viable peace and reconciliation process to end the violence in Afghanistan and improve regional stability.”

## Afghanistan becomes an afterthought

By the time the Trump administration unveiled its sole [National Security Strategy in 2017](#), Afghanistan had returned to its previous role as an afterthought in grand strategy. The White House announced that it sought “a stable and self-reliant Afghanistan,” but like its predecessors, it failed to explain how this would come about, other than by continuing “to partner with Afghanistan to promote peace and security in the region... to promote anti-corruption reform in Afghanistan, to increase the legitimacy of its government and reduce the appeal of violent extremist organizations.” Both as a candidate, and subsequently as president, Donald Trump insisted that “great nations do not fight endless wars,” but while his administration reduced troop levels to 2,500, it did not end the war. Instead, it instigated the February 29, 2020, Peace Agreement with the Taliban, the United States’ final strategic flaw.

Negotiated over nine rounds of talks, spanning 18 months, the agreement committed the United States to withdraw all personnel within fourteen months and to release five thousand Taliban prisoners by March 10, 2020. The agreement ensured that the United States was committed to leaving the country on a sped-up timescale, during which time the Taliban forces were buoyed by the presence of five thousand former prisoners. The deal committed the Taliban to “send a clear message that those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan,” and to “prevent any group or individual in Afghanistan from threatening the security of the United States and its allies.” Despite such assurance, the agreement was struck without the involvement of the Afghan government, failed to compel the Taliban to end its attacks on the Afghan forces, and relied on the Taliban’s good faith since it lacked any enforcement mechanism. As a result, H.R. McMaster, Trump’s second national security adviser, called it “[a surrender agreement with the Taliban](#).” This was the state of the national security strategy that Joe Biden inherited as president in January 2021.

## Afghanistan was always a means to an ideological end for the US

The history of the National Security Strategy, issued by Republican and Democratic administrations, reveals that Afghanistan has never been more than a staging post for larger ideological conflicts, firstly with the Soviets and subsequently with terrorist groups. Despite having been the initial focus of the War on Terror due to the Taliban’s harboring of bin Laden and his network, Afghanistan was only ever a battleground upon which a war would be waged, never a land to be successfully reshaped and democratized.

As others have suggested, [a withdrawal after bin Laden’s death in 2011](#) would have been understandable. What began as an operation to overthrow a regime and eliminate a terrorist leader and his affiliates, quickly became a Nation Building exercise. That mission has failed miserably, at a cost of [trillions of dollars, thousands of American and allied lives, and countless Afghan fatalities](#). Now Biden, who as vice president [counselled against launching the operation that finally killed bin Laden](#), has withdrawn all remaining forces in the face of potential attacks on American personnel in Afghanistan. When the Biden administration eventually releases its own national security strategy, most likely in 2022, it will be interesting to read if it makes anything more than scant reference to Afghanistan, or to any substantive attempt to secure the peace and democratic values that had been fought for by so many over the past two decades.

The United States’ engagement in Afghanistan, under successive presidents of both parties, lacked cohesion, was defined by short-term thinking, and failed to secure any of its stated ambitions, other than the killing of bin Laden, which occurred a decade ago. This is a sad indictment of the nature of foreign policy decision-making, and the inability to devise an adequate grand strategy in a system that rewards incrementalism, insular policy directives, and jingoistic soundbites.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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