

Trump's Decision to Withdraw US Troops From Afghanistan

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Trump's decision to cut the number of US troops in Afghanistan from 4500 to 2500 raised questions about whether he's simply fulfilling a campaign promise out of principle or whether he's hedging his bets in a Machiavellian way by preemptively attempting to obstruct Biden's possible foreign policy in the event that his opponent successfully seizes power after the disputed presidential election.

Americans are divided along partisan lines over whether Trump is a man of his word or just a sore loser after he [decided to cut](#) the number of US troops in Afghanistan from 4500 to 2500. His supporters recall how he previously campaigned on doing just that with the ultimate goal of completely withdrawing the American military presence from Afghanistan while his opponents believe that he's preemptively attempting to obstruct Biden's possible foreign policy [in the event](#) that the Democrat candidate [successfully seizes power](#) after the disputed presidential election. The reality is probably somewhere in between. The President is moving forward with his original plans out of confidence that he'll be certified the winner but also understands very well that this move would make Biden's plans much more difficult to implement in that region in the worst-case scenario that he replaces him.

Although Trump is criticized even among some of his supporters for controversially bombing Syria in 2017 and assassinating Major General Soleimani at the start of this year, he nevertheless holds the distinction of being the first president in nearly four decades not to embroil America in a new war. To the contrary, despite his heavy-handed "America First" policy of so-called "surgical strikes", "maximum pressure", and other coercive measures against his country's adversaries, Trump has remained committed to ending the US' "endless wars" across the world. Nowhere is this more evident than in Afghanistan, which is the longest war in American history. So serious is Trump about executing on this ambitious vision that he even approved talks between his administration and the Taliban, the latter of which is still officially designated as a terrorist group and thus contradicts his 2016 campaign pledge to show zero tolerance towards what he calls "radical Islamic terrorists".

For Trump, pragmatism is more important than politics, which is something that his base in general sincerely appreciates about him in contrast to his predecessors. Unlike what his opponents claim, however, he's not just recklessly withdrawing from a war-torn region without any backup plan in mind, but actually envisions American engagement with that landlocked country and the Central Asian region beyond to be more economically driven in the future as elaborated upon by Pompeo in February. The author analyzed this new vision at the time in a piece about how ["The US' Central Asian Strategy Isn't Sinister, But That Doesn't Mean It'll Succeed"](#). The gist is that the US might expand upon Pakistan's recent

infrastructural gains under [CPEC](#) to use the “[global pivot state](#)” as a platform for pioneering a trans-Afghan trade corridor to Central Asia. This would be a more peaceful way for the US to compete with Russia, China, and Turkey in that strategic region.

Biden, however, has signaled that he might appoint neoliberal war hawk Michele Flournoy as his Secretary of Defense if he “wins” the election. She’s been previously [criticized by many](#) as a warmonger who risks returning the US back to its destabilizing strategy of “endless wars” and “humanitarian interventions”, which would be the exact opposite of how it’s conducted its foreign policy over the past four years under Trump. Democrats are already decrying his Afghan drawdown as dangerous so it’s likely that they intended to at the very least retain the previous troop numbers there for a bit longer than he did, or possibly even expand them under a milder variation of the Obama-era “surge”. It doesn’t seem like there’s much appetite even among those ideologues for doubling down on the war in any traditional sense, especially since the geostrategic situation there has tremendously changed since the Obama era, but their plans would still be less peaceful than Trump’s.

Since it’s still uncertain whether or not the incumbent will remain in office next year, it makes sense that he’d also try to obstruct his potential successor’s policies, not just out of petty spite, but also in order to ensure his own legacy. By reducing the US military presence in Afghanistan by almost half of its current number (which is already much less than what he inherited), Trump would make it more difficult for Biden’s team to sabotage the sensitive peace process that he oversaw across the past four years. That doesn’t mean that they couldn’t still ruin everything in the event that they seize power, but just that they’d have to try harder and their subversive efforts would be much more noticeable. It’s therefore with these points in mind that the author concludes that Trump made his Afghan drawdown decision for both principled and Machiavellian reasons.

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