

# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

*Form Approved*  
**OMB No. 0704-0188**

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.

<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 12-05-2023		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> FINAL		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> N/A	
<i>Implications of Nuclear Weapons on Strategic Competition</i>				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b>  CDR Charles Gough, JAGC, USN				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b> N/A	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b> N/A	
				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b> N/A	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  N/A				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b> N/A	
				<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.	
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b>					
Nuclear weapons change the nature of strategic competition in two key ways. First, by making direct conflict between two nuclear-armed powers much less likely, and second by making low-level activities "below the threshold of conflict" more likely. Of these two factors, the first is the more significant; it represents a fundamental change in the nature of strategic competition compared to the millennia preceding it. The consequence of this thesis is that conflicts within strategic competitions are more likely to play out in economic and diplomatic realms or in peripheral theaters using proxy states or forces than before the nuclear age.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words)</b>					
Nuclear Weapons, Strategic Competition, Atomic					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
<b>a. REPORT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> UNCLASSIFIED			Director, Writing Center
			N/A		<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)</b> 401-841-6499

## INTRODUCTION

The manner in which policymakers strategically communicate U.S. intentions during war termination has an impact on the conflict region and may, in some cases, worsen the security situation if messages are improperly timed. The Department of Defense Joint Integrating Concept defines strategic communication as “the alignment of multiple lines of operation (e.g., policy implementation, public affairs, force movement, information operations etc) that together generate effects to support national objectives.”<sup>1</sup> During war termination, the U.S. generally seeks to leave behind a stable security environment and conduct an orderly U.S. exit, with minimal refugees fleeing the conflict region. On April 6, 2023, the Biden Administration released a detailed account of decisions made in the run up to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communication, retired Admiral John Kirby, stated the document “provides our perspectives on the withdrawal and outlines in broad strokes some of what we learned, as well as how we are already implementing some of those lessons.”<sup>2</sup> The U.S. withdrawal of troops in Afghanistan in 2021 ended an almost 20-year war. Yet how it ended will be a source of consternation for some time to come. The U.S. successfully airlifted approximately 124,000 U.S. citizens, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants, and refugees in a herculean effort described by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin as “the largest airlift conducted in U.S. history.”<sup>3</sup> But images of civilians desperately clinging to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Joint Requirements Oversight Council. 2009. “Strategic Communication Joint Integrating Concept.” [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/jic\\_strategiccommunications.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162005-353](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/jic_strategiccommunications.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162005-353).

<sup>2</sup> The White House. 2023. “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby.” The White House. April 6, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/04/06/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-council-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-9/>.

<sup>3</sup> Garamone, Jim. 2021. “Austin Gives Senate Hard Truths of Lessons from Afghanistan.” U.S. Department of Defense. September 28, 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2791808/austin-gives-senate-hard-truths-of-lessons-from-afghanistan/>.

wheel well of a C-17 taxiing from Hamid Karzai International Airport remains imprinted in the American zeitgeist. Today, there are approximately 700,000 displaced people in Afghanistan, with 95% living in severe food insecurity, according to the Council on Foreign Relations.<sup>4</sup> This desperate situation may have been inevitable with the Taliban in power, but how, when, and with whom the U.S. strategically communicates its intentions during war termination could influence the security situation at the time of departure. As demonstrated in Afghanistan, the mass refugee migration created a resource demand that even the largest American airlift in history was challenged to satisfy.

This paper examines U.S. strategic messaging in the run up to withdrawal utilizing two historical case studies in Vietnam and Lebanon, and analyzes how strategic messaging during war termination in Afghanistan coupled with the Taliban's rapid return to power, contributed to the humanitarian situation at Kabul airport during the final days of the U.S. withdrawal. Field study research was conducted to capture general observations regarding the demand for military logistic support in a simulated humanitarian crisis. Regardless of where a future conflict takes place, policymakers should consider the strategic implications of messaging for a more efficient, less tumultuous troop withdrawal.

### **CASE STUDIES ON U.S. WITHDRAWAL**

The following case studies highlight two instances where U.S. strategic communication impacted war termination. In the first case, President Nixon struggled to effectively communicate his policy objectives due to his relationship with the press. In the second instance, the Reagan Administration successfully completed its objectives and withdrew forces ahead of schedule in Lebanon but was challenged to clearly define the mission of a subsequent

---

<sup>4</sup> Maizland, Lindsay. 2022. "A Look at Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis." Council on Foreign Relations. January 12, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/article/afghanistan-humanitarian-crisis-famine-foreign-aid-taliban>.

redeployment. These case studies demonstrate that the U.S. has faced historical challenges with communicating objectives for war termination prior to the Afghanistan withdrawal.

### **Vietnam, 1973**

Throughout the conclusion of the Vietnam War, President Nixon sought to achieve a “Peace with Honor” strategy, but faced an adversarial relationship with the press and struggled to win the public narrative at home or achieve a meaningful peace settlement with the North Vietnamese. During his reelection campaign, in January 1972, he made an announcement that half of the 139,000 troops deployed in South Vietnam would return home by 1 May.<sup>5</sup> However, before this promise could be realized, the North Vietnamese began the Easter Offensive in March. President Nixon countered with massive air force and naval reinforcements, significantly increasing troop levels.<sup>6</sup> The efficacy of Nixon’s Vietnamization plan and his credibility was challenged by press. In war termination, the enemy gets a vote and making time-based declarations regarding troop levels, rather than conditions-based decisions proved ineffective in this instance.

Further exacerbating the situation, CBS war correspondent Bob Simon covered the Easter Offensive, showing images of refugee children killed or injured by mines laid by the South Vietnamese, resulting in heightened public discontent.<sup>7</sup> President Nixon believed that journalists had “a vested interest in seeing the United States lose the war.”<sup>8</sup> Concerned with the reelection ahead, Nixon wrote to White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman, “my feeling much more than any single issue we are going to emphasize, the discrediting of the press must be our major

---

<sup>5</sup> Chester Pach, “Our Worst Enemy Seems to Be the Press”: TV News, the Nixon Administration, and U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Vietnam, 1969–1973, *Diplomatic History*, Volume 34, Issue 3, June 2010, Pages 555–565, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00869>

<sup>6</sup> State Department Office of the Historian. 2018. “Milestones: 1969–1976 - Office of the Historian.” [state.gov. 2018. https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/ending-vietnam.](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/ending-vietnam)

<sup>7</sup> Chester Pach, “Worst Enemy”, pg 563.

<sup>8</sup> Chester Pach, “Worst Enemy”, pg 564.

objective over the next few months.”<sup>9</sup> It is telling that in retrospect, the President’s focus was on the media, rather than the North Vietnamese. His relationship with the media was so adversarial that it took focus away from the strategic narrative on the war, fueled domestic protests, and made his attempts at strategic communication less effective overall.

This was followed by the administration revealing that Kissinger had secretly met with North Vietnamese leadership six times in Paris and arranged to have U.S. prisoners of war returned within six months of a peace agreement- but South Vietnamese President Thieu rejected the settlement based on NVA troop presence in South Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> This situation may have been avoided if South Vietnamese leaders were brought into the Paris meetings. Throughout the troop withdrawal, Nixon blamed the media for political woes. In reality, extricating U.S. troops from ongoing conflict overseas has proven inherently difficult.

### **Beirut, 1982**

The conflict in Beirut was the first major combat event to be televised in the age of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, viewed by people all around the world.<sup>11</sup> President Reagan had campaigned on the platform that America should overcome the so-called “Vietnam syndrome” which characterized the U.S. as reluctant to intervene in support of its strategic interests and allies.<sup>12</sup> His decision to send 800 Marines to Lebanon in a peacekeeping capacity to quell factional violence between the Israeli Defense Force, Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Syrian forces was a time-bound 30-day deployment. All key stakeholders agreed to a PLO evacuation plan and the scope of U.S. participation was defined ahead of the deployment. This is an example of the U.S. establishing and publicizing a clear exit strategy prior to troop

---

<sup>9</sup> Chester Pach, “Worst Enemy”, pg 564.

<sup>10</sup> Chester Pach, “Worst Enemy”, pg 563.

<sup>11</sup> Naval War College National Security Affairs Department. 2023. “Navigating the Theater Security Enterprise.”

<sup>12</sup> Case Study, Lebanon Revisited, pg 219.

engagement. Once tensions were mollified, U.S. troops were quickly withdrawn without major incident- fourteen days ahead of schedule.<sup>13</sup> Although this deployment was not without risk, having a departure plan in place with agreed-to terms helped expedite U.S. departure once conditions were achieved.

A second deployment to Lebanon did not prove so fortunate. Following the assassination President-elect Gemayel and subsequent massacre of Palestinian civilians in retribution, U.S. forces were redeployed to Beirut in order to “enable the Lebanese government to resume full sovereignty over its capital” and allow for Israeli troop withdrawal.<sup>14</sup> These terms were less defined and no specific withdrawal timeline was established. The Reagan administration argued that the War Powers Act was not applicable due to the peacekeeping role where “imminent involvement in hostilities” was not clearly evident.<sup>15</sup> Tragedy struck in October when a suicide bomber attacked the Marine Corps Barracks in Beirut. A few months later, American troops were withdrawn. By contrast, the first withdrawal from Lebanon was accomplished ahead of schedule, under clear terms. Although some blamed the events that followed on the expeditious withdrawal, America successfully completed the terms of its engagement and the PLO was evacuated, as agreed. This is a relevant case to examine given the outcome of redeployment: almost twenty five percent of the U.S. troops initially deployed were killed in the Marine Corps barracks bombing. The strategic communication regarding the second deployment was more nebulous and conditions for U.S. withdrawal were less clear. As noted by Senator Gibbons “if we are there to fight, we are far too few, if we are there to die, we are far too many.”<sup>16</sup> When

---

<sup>13</sup> Case Study, Lebanon Revisited, pg 227.

<sup>14</sup> Case Study, Lebanon Revisited, pg 248

<sup>15</sup> Case Study, Lebanon Revisited, pg 238.

<sup>16</sup> Sahimi, Muhammad. 2009. “The Fog over the 1983 Beirut Attacks.” FRONTLINE - Tehran Bureau. October 24, 2009. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/10/the-1983-beirut-bombing-attack.html>.

President Reagan was asked in an interview to identify his greatest mistakes in office he replied, “One glaring one would be the terrible tragedy of our Marines in Beirut.”<sup>17</sup>

## AFGHANISTAN WITHDRAWAL

The strategic messaging from each administration, beginning with President Obama’s declaration of American withdrawal dating back to 2011, communicated withdrawal objectives with varying degrees of effectiveness. President Obama’s stated policy was to “continue to train and partner with Afghan National Security Forces in order to “responsibly implement a drawdown.”<sup>18</sup> President Trump sought to “stop the resurgence of safe havens that enable terrorists” and shifted from a time-based approach to one “based on conditions.”<sup>19</sup> President Biden “judged that it was not in the national interest of the United States of America to continue fighting this war indefinitely” and initiated Operation Allies Refuge to evacuate SIV applicants and other at-risk civilians.<sup>20</sup> The following section assesses how each President influenced key actors and events in Afghanistan.

### The Obama Administration

After the capture and killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, President Obama declared that the principal objective of the war was accomplished and troop withdrawal would be complete by

---

<sup>17</sup> Archives, L. A. Times. 1986. “Reagan Reveals Worst Mistake: Putting 241 Marines in Harm’s Way.” Los Angeles Times. August 28, 1986. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-08-28-mn-14131-story.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Obama, Barak. 2009. “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” Whitehouse.gov. December 1, 2009. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

<sup>19</sup> Trump, Donald. 2017. “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia – the White House.” Trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov. August 21, 2017. <http://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia>.

<sup>20</sup> Biden, Joseph. 2021. “Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan.” U.S. Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. August 16, 2021. <https://nato.usmission.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan>.

2014.<sup>21</sup> When NATO's combat mission in Afghanistan officially completed on December 28th of that year, approximately 13,000 troops stayed behind in order to train and support the Afghan military.<sup>22</sup> The administration pushed for a bilateral security agreement with the Afghan government, but then-President Hamid Karzai refused to sign due to lingering concerns over U.S. raids on Afghan homes.<sup>23</sup> However, shortly after Ashraf Ghani took office in 2014, an agreement was struck which set U.S. troop levels at approximately 9,800, accompanied by 2,000 NATO troops, to remain in theater and support Afghan Security Forces as they continued to fight the Taliban.<sup>24</sup>

By announcing the withdrawal in 2011, President Obama signaled two things- 1) the Afghan government must be prepared to defend itself within three years and 2) the Taliban had three years to stage a takeover. This ample timeline was sufficient for President Karzai to take the necessary steps, however, it may in fact have provided too much time. As evidenced in Iraq, America has a track record in the Middle East for announcing war termination and not departing. President Karzai may have reached the reasonable conclusion that the United States would remain in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. This suspicion would have been confirmed in 2014, when President Obama released an updated timetable for U.S. withdrawal, citing 2016 as the new withdrawal date.<sup>25</sup> This fueled Taliban propaganda regarding the indefinite U.S.

---

<sup>21</sup> Obama, Barak. 2009. "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan." Whitehouse.gov. December 1, 2009. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>.

<sup>22</sup> Zeidan, Adam. 2022. "Withdrawal of United States Troops from Afghanistan | Explanation & Impact | Britannica." [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com). August 1, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/event/withdrawal-of-United-States-troops-from-Afghanistan>.

<sup>23</sup> Bobin, Frederic . 2022. "Hamid Karzai: 'the United States Behaves in Afghanistan like a Colonial Power.'" [Le Monde.fr](http://LeMonde.fr), March 23, 2022. [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/archives/article/2022/03/23/hamid-karzai-the-united-states-behaves-in-afghanistan-like-a-colonial-power\\_5979047\\_113.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/archives/article/2022/03/23/hamid-karzai-the-united-states-behaves-in-afghanistan-like-a-colonial-power_5979047_113.html).

<sup>24</sup> Evans, John R. 2014. "Bilateral Security Agreement: A New Era of Afghan-U.S. Cooperation." Brookings. September 30, 2014. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/09/30/bilateral-security-agreement-a-new-era-of-afghan-u-s-cooperation/>.

<sup>25</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. 2021. "A Timeline of the U.S. War in Afghanistan." Council on Foreign Relations. 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>. n

occupation of Afghanistan and converted some moderate Afghans to the cause.<sup>26</sup> The Obama decision to announce withdrawal three years in advance did not create sufficient urgency for the Afghan government to take action and a shorter timeline may have been more effective in this instance.

### **The Trump Administration**

President Trump campaigned on ending the war in Afghanistan, but found similar challenges with the practicalities of troop withdrawal. When security conditions deteriorated in the Khorasan Province, President Trump authorized a troop surge in Afghanistan in the first year of his presidency.<sup>27</sup> In justifying the move, he argued that “a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists, including ISIS and al Qaeda, would instantly fill.”<sup>28</sup> Troop levels remained fairly consistent through 2019.<sup>29</sup>

On December 17, 2018, the Trump Administration met with representatives from the Taliban, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and United Arab Emirates to discuss the prospect of a peace process.<sup>30</sup> Shortly after, the United States announced that thousands of U.S. troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan. The Doha Agreement, signed in February 2020 between the Trump Administration and the Taliban, called for reduction in violence, the withdrawal of foreign troops, negotiations with Afghan government, and the guarantee Afghanistan would not

---

<sup>26</sup> Steve, Coll. 2021. “The Taliban.” [Www.cfr.org. 2021. https://www.cfr.org/taliban/#](https://www.cfr.org/taliban/#).

<sup>27</sup> Byman, Daniel, and Steven Simon. 2017. “Trump’s Surge in Afghanistan.” *Foreign Affairs Magazine*. September 18, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2017-09-18/trumps-surge-afghanistan>.

<sup>28</sup> Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, August 21, 2017. Retrieved from [trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia](http://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia).

<sup>29</sup> Garamone, Jim. 2021. “U.S. Completes Troop-Level Drawdown in Afghanistan, Iraq.” U.S. Department of Defense. January 15, 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2473884/us-completes-troop-level-drawdown-in-afghanistan-iraq/>.

<sup>30</sup> Sediqi, Abdul. 2018. “Afghan Taliban Meet U.S. Officials as Peace Efforts Intensify.” *Reuters*, December 17, 2018, sec. Top News. <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-usa-afghanistan-taliban-idCAKBN1OG086-OCATP>.

again become a safe haven for terrorists.<sup>31</sup> The agreement stipulated an initial drawdown of U.S. forces from approximately 12,000 troops to 8,600 within 135 days.<sup>32</sup> It provided for a full withdrawal over a 14 month timeline on the condition that the Taliban would begin peace talks with the Afghan government and prevent al-Qaeda and ISIL from operating within Afghanistan. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated that U.S. troop withdrawal would be “conditions-based,” and stated that such a withdrawal would only take place “if the Taliban abide by their promises.”<sup>33</sup> There was no stipulation in the Doha Agreement that required the Taliban to reach an agreement with the Afghan government.

The Long War Journal states that “Shortly after the Trump administration signed its accord with the Taliban on February 29, Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada declared ‘victory’ on behalf ‘of the entire Muslim and Mujahid nation.’”<sup>34</sup> According to then-National Security Council senior director for South and Central Asia, Lisa Curtis, the peace deal “was a U.S. withdrawal process.... all the Taliban really did was agree not to attack U.S. forces on their way out.”<sup>35</sup> As a result, the agreement likely led Taliban leaders to seek a resolution to its conflict with the Afghan government on the battlefield rather than through peace talks. In March 2020, following the signing of the agreement, the Taliban increased attacks against the Afghan

---

<sup>31</sup> Maizland, Lindsay. 2020. “U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know.” Council on Foreign Relations. March 2, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war>. r

<sup>32</sup> State Department Office of the Historian. 2018. “Milestones: 1969–1976 - Office of the Historian.” state.gov. 2018. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/ending-vietnam>.

<sup>33</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Why the Afghan Government Collapsed”, pg 7.

<sup>34</sup> Joscelyn, Thomas . 2020. “Analysis: Taliban Leader Declares Victory after U.S. Agrees to Withdrawal Deal | FDD’s Long War Journal.” [www.longwarjournal.org](http://www.longwarjournal.org). March 4, 2020. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/03/analysis-taliban-leader-declares-victory-after-u-s-agrees-to-withdrawal-deal.php>.

<sup>35</sup> Curtis, Lisa. n.d. “The Middle East and the Islamic World How the Doha Agreement Guaranteed US Failure in Afghanistan.” [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/curtis\\_webreadypdf.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/curtis_webreadypdf.pdf).

National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) to levels above seasonal norms and the frequency of attacks spiked.<sup>36</sup>

The Trump Administration sought an agreement that would allow for the peaceful withdrawal of U.S. troops and pushed hard for a peace deal with the key prosecutors of violence. Ideally, a negotiated agreement would have included all stakeholders- including the Afghan government. However, the Taliban were unwilling to negotiate with the Afghan government.<sup>37</sup> This concession undermined the Afghan government and may have contributed to the rapid surrender of ANDSF in the final days of the republic.

### **The Biden Administration**

When President Biden took office in January 2021, approximately 3,500 U.S. troops remained in Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> Although President Biden remained committed to upholding the principals of the Doha Agreement, his administration needed more time to execute the withdrawal. In April of 2021, President Biden announced that the “United States will withdraw its troops in a safe, deliberate and responsible manner and in full coordination with its partners and allies in Afghanistan” by September 11th of that year.<sup>39</sup> The nature in which future events unfolded proved otherwise.

The Taliban, emboldened by the ongoing U.S. withdrawal and the end of confrontations with U.S. forces, rapidly took control of dozens of districts from May to June and closed in on

---

<sup>36</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. 2022. “Why the Afghan Government Collapsed .” November 2022. <https://www.sigarmil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-05-IP.pdf>. SIGAR, Quarterly Report, SIGAR-2020-QR-2, p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> Brooking, Steve. 2022. “Making Peace Possible .” <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/pw-184-why-negotiated-peace-always-out-of-reach-afghanistan.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Garamone, Jim. 2021a. “U.S. Completes Troop-Level Drawdown in Afghanistan, Iraq.” U.S. Department of Defense. January 15, 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2473884/us-completes-troop-level-drawdown-in-afghanistan-iraq/>.

<sup>39</sup> Cronk, Terri Moon . 2021. “Biden Announces Full U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan by Sept. 11.” U.S. Department of Defense. April 21, 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2573268/biden-announces-full-us-troop-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-by-sept-11>.

several provincial capitals. On 13 July, Secretary Blinken received a dissent cable signed by 23 members of the State Department stating that Afghan government was on the verge of collapse and the administration was not adequately prepared to manage a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces.<sup>40</sup> President Biden initiated the Non-combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) and ordered the deployment of additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan to support the evacuation on 14 August.<sup>41</sup> By 15 August, the Taliban had captured Kabul and President Ghani had fled. The Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated on August 18, 2021, “[the collapse] unfolded more quickly than the Intelligence Community anticipated.”<sup>42</sup> Some reports estimate that approximately 78,000 SIV applicants were left behind.<sup>43</sup> A year later, in August 2022, six million people were “on the brink of famine” following the government’s collapse and withdrawal of international aid.<sup>44</sup>

The Biden Administration struggled to find an optimum communication strategy for the much-needed NEO. Had the NEO been announced in April, this could have signaled that the U.S. believed the Afghan government was on the verge of collapse. This may have triggered an earlier start to the humanitarian catastrophe that unfolded. Alternatively, waiting until 14 August to declare the NEO resulted in the frantic, chaotic scenes at Kabul airport and laid the foundation

---

<sup>40</sup> Gramer, Robbie. 2023. “House Republicans Subpoena Blinken for Key Afghan Dissent Cable.” *Foreign Policy*. March 28, 2023. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/28/congress-biden-afghanistan-subpoena-blinken-dissent-cable-mccaul-republicans/#:~:text=A%20top%20Republican%20lawmaker%20issued>.

<sup>41</sup> The White House. “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby.” The White House. April 6, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/04/06/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-council-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-9/>.

<sup>42</sup> White House Report on U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan, pg. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Staffeiri, Kim, Matt Zeller, and Michael Trudeau. 2022. “The Left behind Afghans One Year Later.” The Association of Wartime Allies. August 15, 2022.

[https://www.wartimeallies.co/\\_files/ugd/5887eb\\_55744a02be434163a5f60c09a89648b9.pdf](https://www.wartimeallies.co/_files/ugd/5887eb_55744a02be434163a5f60c09a89648b9.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. “War in Afghanistan.” *Global Conflict Tracker*. October 19, 2021.

<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan>. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan>

for the security environment exploited by the Islamic State suicide bomber at Abbey Gate.<sup>45</sup> The Biden Administration blamed the previous administration for State Department cut-backs which slowed SIV processing. However, this problem could have been identified sooner and bureaucratic work-arounds could have been put in place to mitigate. For instance, the State Department could have sought assistance from the Department of Homeland Security to augment capacity. If such options were not feasible, the administration should have begun the NEO in mid-July, in response to State Department employee reports.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

Reflecting on U.S. war termination, it is observed that how, when, and with whom troop withdrawal is negotiated shapes how the withdrawal unfolds. If signaled too early, stakeholders may not believe the veracity of U.S. intent. If communicated too late, it may exacerbate a refugee situation and create chaos on the ground. If policymakers communicate bilaterally and omit key stakeholders, it may unintentionally undermine those in power. As demonstrated in the case study examples, challenges in war termination are not limited to Afghanistan- withdrawal of forces is challenging in most conflicts. Delaying withdrawal in order to “prevent another Vietnam” may inadvertently induce the security conditions for history to repeat itself.

As the U.S. withdraws from a conflict environment, a smaller force remains behind to provide security to those deployed- making U.S. forces particularly vulnerable during this period. A natural tension exists between getting troops home safely and the security of those still in theater. Perhaps the best course of action is to use strategic communication to publicly

---

<sup>45</sup> South, Todd, and Jonathan Lehrfeld. 2022. “Marines Look Back 1 Year after the Abbey Gate Attack.” Marine Corps Times. August 23, 2022. <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2022/08/23/1-year-later-after-the-abbey-gate-attack/>.

announce a worst-case withdrawal timeline, while maintaining condition-based metrics, and departing ahead of schedule as demonstrated in the first withdrawal from Lebanon.

### **FIELD RESEARCH: A VIGNETTE ON STRATEGIC MESSAGING**

A limited field study was conducted in order to capture lessons learned regarding the correlation between message timing and refugee need. During a graduate course on foreign humanitarian assistance and disaster response, students participated in a capstone exercise in which they were assigned to NGO groups assisting a dislocated population impacted by flood and regional conflict. Approximately 80 student participants were assigned to 10 NGO groups. The NGOs could request support from a multi-national military coordination cell. Seven of the ten groups interacted with the military cell. Students were briefed on available military capabilities and told to complete a request form if support was needed. Three NGO groups took blank forms and one group completed the form during their initial interaction. Later in the simulation, the military coordination cell communicated to students that they would soon be departing to an “advanced position.” Two NGO groups returned to submit request forms. In this limited data set, it was observed that requests increased once the departure notification was announced.

In economic theory, the concept of ‘scarcity’ refers to the balance between the availability of goods and services and the demand for goods and services.<sup>46</sup> When there is a disequilibrium between goods offered and goods sought, that resource is said to be “scarce.” When a time component is added, this would equate, in market terms, to a “limited time offer.” Psychologists that study decision making within the context of scarcity have found that scarcity

---

<sup>46</sup>Porter, Richard L. “‘Scarcity’ in Economic Theory and Policy.” *Social Science* 40, no. 1 (1965): 22–30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41885066>.

consumes “attention, working memory, and executive function and elicits many counter-productive behavioral responses.”<sup>47</sup> This was exemplified in the field study, when military logistics were offered to NGOs for a brief period. As the offer was expiring, demand increased. Although this is a broad generalization to draw from a study with limited scope, policymakers should consider how the timing of withdrawal announcements may create a sense of scarcity, increasing demand for U.S. services during a war termination period. Scarcity and fear help explain the frantic behavior of the refugees clinging to the C-17s leaving Karzai airport. Understanding this response can help better shape strategic messaging in the future. One potential course of action would be to announce a clear strategy for alternate routes to safety—through the establishment of a humanitarian corridor or by providing additional modes of transportation.

## CONCLUSION

The current humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan may have been inevitable under Taliban rule— but how, when, and with whom the U.S. strategically communicated has influenced conditions on the ground. From historical case studies, it is evident that communicating objectives for war termination has proven challenging. During the first deployment in Lebanon, messaging clear objectives and an exit strategy proved more effective than the redeployment under unspecified terms. The Obama administration’s decision to publicize a three-year withdrawal timeline provided a planning horizon for the Taliban to bide their time and prepare for conflict. The Trump administration should have considered the impacts of delegitimizing the Afghan government by strategically communicating exclusively with the Taliban. The Biden

---

<sup>47</sup> Benton, Sherry. 2021. “Thinking through Perceived Scarcity | Psychology Today.” [www.psychologytoday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com). May 25, 2021. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/reaching-across-the-divide/202105/thinking-through-perceived-scarcity>.

administration could have addressed the SIV processing capacity issue sooner and initiated a NEO in mid-July. During war termination, strategic communication is critically important to the few troops that remain behind in a resource scarce environment. Understanding how, when, and with whom policymakers communicate is key to winning the narrative and winning the peace.