How to End a Military Intervention

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It was a failed ending to a failed war. Chaos and confusion reigned as the United States scrambled to get the last Americans out of Afghanistan. Former troops, ex-officials, journalists and non-profit employees frantically tried to coordinate the safe evacuations of Afghan colleagues, translators, advocates and friends who had helped the US war and nation-building efforts. Just as the hasty exit from Saigon in 1975 marked the end of a failed war in Vietnam, the desperate 2021 endgame in Kabul served as a grim coda to America’s presence in Afghanistan. But despite the messy withdrawal, the poorly planned and executed exit was not the reason the United States failed to install a stable, democratic and friendly government in Kabul and prevent the Taliban’s return. The war was lost long before the United States decided to leave, and even after years of fighting, it still did not know when or how to end a foreign intervention.

After spending trillions of dollars and waging war for nearly two decades, the longest in US history, the Taliban was back in charge in Afghanistan. The Afghan military and police forces collapsed, the economy declined, and advances in human rights were lost, particularly the rights of women and girls to attend school, work, or social gatherings independently. Hundreds of thousands of lives were lost, including more than 2,000 US troops, millions of Afghan civilians were displaced, and any chance to build a new nation that could survive without US military support was squandered amidst ignorance, inadequate plans, unclear objectives, and an unwillingness to include or negotiate with the Taliban. The intervention’s early failings were exacerbated when Washington distracted itself with another war in Iraq, and three US presidents ultimately missed opportunities to exit the war under better circumstances.
America’s botched exit confirms the truism that it is easier to start a war than to end one. The United States, and all other intervening countries, would be wise to learn from its past mistakes, so future withdrawals do not end so badly. The American military is still present in some 80 countries around the world and the United States remains an interventionist global power prone to using its military to effect change, so the withdrawal from Afghanistan will not be its last. Future interventions can be ended more effectively, and the United States should be careful when it ultimately decides to withdraw troops from Iraq and Syria and removes counterterrorism forces from the Sahel and other regions of concern.

Nor is the United States the only country that should heed lessons from past withdrawals. After Hamas attacked and terrorized Israel in October 2023, the Israeli military entered Gaza without a clear or realistic idea for how to leave victoriously. Russia, too, soon recognized that its 2022 invasion of Ukraine was going to be harder than it initially thought and may eventually acknowledge that the intervention is not worth extending. Both Israel and Russia can protect their own national interests by ending their interventions rather than compounding the damage they have already done. And beyond the widely covered wars between Israel and Hamas and Russia and Ukraine, the majority of today’s civil wars are also attracting foreign military forces, all but guaranteeing that many outsiders will sooner or later want to leave even if victory remains out of reach.

Foreign interventions are often a mistake from the outset, but given their popularity and leaders’ proclivity to rely on military force, there needs to be a better understanding for when and how to end a military intervention. Ideally, exits can occur after a war has been won, lasting peace has been established, and an allied government has consolidated control, preserving any gains from the intervention. In reality, this will rarely happen. Exits are more likely to occur under less-than-ideal circumstances and be the least-bad option available. As a general rule, decisions of whether to stay or leave should be based on a current cost-benefit analysis. Military interventions should end when the costs exceed the expected gains from remaining or there are more pressing priorities elsewhere. A failure to achieve the initial objectives, an aversion to future risks, or an unwillingness to cut losses are insufficient reasons for prolonging an intervention. Leaders often fail to make the right—sometimes obvious—decision to leave when egos, wishful thinking, or short-
term political considerations get in the way, and these same considerations affect how withdrawals are conducted. When it is time, exit strategies should be formulated using the current realities on the ground, reflect realistic expectations, be communicated clearly and consistently, and prioritize diplomacy and development rather than the military.

Even the best-laid exit plans cannot make up for a failed war. Exits cannot magically achieve the original war aims, and they should not be blamed for past sins. Neither the fall of Kabul nor future terrorist attacks are necessarily a sign of a flawed exit strategy—they are the result of a failed war and ineffectual nation building. While the tragic and avoidable disorder in America’s final days in Afghanistan does not invalidate President Joe Biden’s decision to leave, the United States still made plenty of unnecessary missteps as it exited the country. It relied on faulty intelligence assessments that did not fully appreciate how the US departure would affect the decisions of Afghans and the balance of power on the ground, overestimating the government and underestimating the Taliban, and failed to correctly sequence a withdrawal based on clear priorities in order to ensure all supporters could safely evacuate in advance.

While there is a great deal of research and academic literature on why conflicts begin and how wars are won or lost, there is comparatively less on the best ways to end military operations. Much more ink has been spilled on starting wars than ending them. The United States, and all intervening countries, need to learn how to end a military intervention before they repeat the same mistakes yet again.

Using America’s experience in Afghanistan, this paper draws lessons on how interveners can know when and how to end a foreign military intervention. Some combination of domestic political considerations, a failure to let go of original war aims, sunk costs in both blood and treasure, and worries about international reputation or credibility often cause interventions to last too long. Military interventions should end when the expected costs outweigh the benefits, and there are four keys to crafting an exit strategy that will maximize the potential of retaining any gains from the intervention and minimize the inevitable risks of departing. Withdrawing forces need to carefully evaluate the latest realities on the ground and gauge how removing troops will alter others’ strategies and upset the balance of power, determine clear and attainable objectives that are distinct from the initial war aims, cautiously communicate the plan publicly to support its efforts, and prioritize non-military options for future engagement.

The Quagmire in Afghanistan

Years after President Barack Obama reluctantly sent tens of thousands of additional US troops into Afghanistan to push back Taliban advances and
empower the Afghan government to defend itself, he said, “I think Americans have learned that it's harder to end wars than it is to begin them.” The so-called surge of US forces starting in 2009 failed to convince Obama that America’s war in Afghanistan was winnable or worth the cost. Obama decided to begin gradually drawing down forces in 2011, ten years after the United States intervened, and it was clear he wanted completely out by 2014. But the United States did not know how to exit without permitting al-Qaeda’s return under a new Taliban regime. Neither Obama nor his successor, President Donald J. Trump, managed to end the intervention in Afghanistan despite their stated desires to leave.

Military interventions go beyond sending weapons and money to friends. Military forces are sent abroad to help a preferred side win a war (or at least prevent the other side from winning too easily), contain strategic and security risks, or get closer to non-state armed groups posing a threat. A military presence increases influence, but putting troops on the ground also makes it harder to change course—logistically, politically and strategically. While there is a huge range in the size and scope of military interventions, and not all military forces are sent into active warzones, it can be incredibly tricky to pull forces out of insecure environments without endangering the lives of the troops, leaving a security vacuum in their wake, or producing new security concerns. Any progress made during the intervention can soon be lost and old threats can resurface once military forces are pulled out. In Afghanistan, it was not clear how US troops could leave without dooming the Afghan government to failure, losing hard-earned gains in human rights and economic development, and delivering the Taliban an opening to retain control and run the country however it fancied. Regardless of how much Americans wanted out or how low the country fell on its list of foreign policy priorities, US president after US president was unwilling to suffer the political consequences of Afghanistan’s presumed fate or risk another terrorist attack originating from within its borders.

America’s war in Afghanistan did not need to end this way—nor did it need to last so long. After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the United States entered Afghanistan in pursuit of al-Qaeda. US-backed groups were able to quickly chase the Taliban out of the capital and force al-Qaeda’s leaders to flee toward the border with Pakistan. While Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda’s founder, avoided capture, President George W. Bush soon believed the war was won. In the early years, the United States missed one of its best opportunities, refusing to negotiate with the Taliban at its weakest point. The US missed one of its best opportunities, refusing to negotiate with the Taliban at its weakest point.
opportunities to help build a new strong Afghan government and get out of the country, refusing to negotiate with the Taliban when the group was at its weakest point. Soon, the United States got distracted by its war in Iraq, causing it to muddle through its intervention in Afghanistan—neither investing enough to help build an Afghan state and competent military nor pulling its troops out to focus on other priorities.

As the Taliban regrouped in Pakistan and reemerged in Afghanistan, making advancements in the south, it was apparent the war was not over and a low-risk exit would be hard to find. Despite his hesitation, Obama authorized the surge in an attempt to regain the advantage. When the gains proved to be too slow and too small to stay, he decided to start pulling troops out. While Obama was wise to belatedly start talking with the Taliban, he did not sufficiently use the pace of the withdrawal as leverage in negotiations, and ended up failing to fully end the war.

Trump seemed even more determined to get out of Afghanistan, but his erratic and impatient leadership made it difficult to reach a good enough deal with the Taliban to withdraw all of the remaining Americans by the end of his term. An imperfect peace agreement, however, had been reached before Biden’s presidency began, although it failed to include the Afghan government and provisions were already being ignored. The stage was set for America to leave the country behind after decades of war, but no plans were actually in place for a final withdrawal. As Biden came into office, it was still not clear if the United States would actually leave.

The underlying problem? The United States did not have a playbook for when or how to exit.

End of the Road

An intervening military should withdraw when the costs of a prolonged intervention outweigh the benefits. While this may seem self-evident, it is rarely observed in practice. Even when it is clear to an unaffected observer that it is time to leave, it can be difficult for intervening countries to depart. Leaders often ignore evidence that goes against their stated desires and fail to fully grasp the current realities on the ground or correctly estimate future prospects for success. Political advisors paint rosy scenarios, minimizing negative news, and military leaders overpromise results. Policy inertia and the persistently strong opinions of the intervention’s original advocates and its current beneficiaries make it harder to reverse course. Leaders are reluctant to admit failure or defeat, worrying that it will reduce their chances of maintaining domestic control, and are afraid of being blamed for anything that goes wrong in the future, making the
continuation of the status quo the easier decision to make. Mistakes are even harder to acknowledge when egos are involved, particularly for the leader who initiated the intervention or made the case for war in the first place. Ego and fear frequently impede wise strategic decisions.

Three Reasons Why Interventions Are So Sticky

Arguments in favor of an immediate withdrawal are often criticized for at least three distinct, although related, reasons: because the initial war aims have not yet been realized (regardless of how ambitious, unattainable or ambiguous the original goals were), because significant resources have already been invested and military lives have already been lost, and because admitting defeat would somehow damage the state’s credibility and ability to win future wars. However, none of these arguments are sufficient for continuing a failing intervention. In the case of Afghanistan, it was clear after the surge that additional years of fighting were neither going to defeat the Taliban nor ensure the Afghan government’s survival. Spending more money and lives would not diminish the previous losses, and everyone—both inside and outside of Afghanistan—already knew the United States couldn’t win the war. An endless invasion wasn’t fooling anybody.

Leaders tend to articulate far-reaching goals when initiating an intervention. Lofty rhetoric amplifies the threat and exaggerates the expected benefits, helping to sell the war back home. But wars tend to be harder and longer than originally anticipated, and if the likely gains were oversold at the outset, it makes them that much harder to achieve. Regardless of the stated objectives, decisions about the timing of exits need to be made in the present, soberly assessing the current situation, and calculating the likely consequences of leaving earlier rather than later. Scheduling departures are about today and tomorrow, not yesterday.

In the end, exits are often warranted—both strategically and politically—before the initial goals of the intervention are achieved. While exits come with short-term political costs, staying too long often ends up backfiring politically and harms the intervening country strategically and militarily. When the interventer becomes unwilling or unable to commit the resources necessary to accomplish the stated objectives, an exit is preferable to extending an undersized and underfunded intervention. If America’s goal was to destroy the terrorist sanctuaries...
that al-Qaeda used in Afghanistan, then its initial objectives were mostly achieved within the first few months. The problem is that the goals soon morphed into building a new democratic, liberal, and stable government in Afghanistan, and preventing all future transnational terrorist threats. While it should have been apparent that those overly ambitious goals were unachievable before the 2009 surge, it was clearly evident afterwards.14

As difficult as it is, the cost-benefit analysis for deciding when to end an intervention should be done irrespective of previous expenditures. Sunk costs or any desire to honor fallen soldiers are also not sufficient reasons for staying. When victory proves elusive, it can be argued that troops died in vain, and money and resources were wasted. Whether this is true or not, sunk costs—in both blood and treasure—do not demand more losses if the anticipated benefits are not high enough.15 Lives lost do not justify more deaths; money spent does not justify more resources wasted. The United States lost thousands of troops in battle and spent trillions of dollars trying to develop new government institutions, train a national army and police force, and build infrastructure to support economic growth and social development. But a longer military presence was unlikely to produce better results from these sunk costs. Staying longer was likely to cost more lives and waste more resources, increasing the sunk costs even further for limited benefits and little chance of future breakthroughs.

Finally, admitting defeat and going home before a war is won can theoretically harm a country’s international reputation.16 Adversaries will question the intervener’s resolve and defeated belligerents are less feared in the future. Opponents may become that much harder to deter and may believe that they can win wars of attrition if only they can hang on long enough. Policymakers are naturally hesitant to admit failures, worrying about the domestic political implications and international reputational effects. But a refusal to lose graciously is not the same as winning the war.

In terms of a country’s reputation and credibility, a loss is more important than acknowledging a defeat. The United States was not winning in Afghanistan, and accepting the reality of the situation did not further harm its global standing. It was better to cut its losses earlier rather than later, which would have compounded the damage. Leaving did not make it harder for the world’s strongest military to deter al-Qaeda and other like-minded groups from carrying out terrorist attacks, and it did not make the Taliban or similar regimes more likely to provide sanctuary to terrorist groups. This is a controversial point, with many warning that America’s exit both increased the threat of terrorism and compelled adversaries to take advantage of a perceived weakness from withdrawal (for instance, Moscow could have theoretically concluded that the United States did not have the resolve or staying power to fight back if it invaded Ukraine). But this thinking elevates the importance of the withdrawal over losing the
war itself—America’s credibility and standing were more damaged by its failure in Afghanistan than its decision to leave after its loss was apparent to all. Staying in Afghanistan indefinitely would not have prevented all future terrorist attacks nor precluded all adversaries from taking aggressive actions.

The Challenges of Cost-Benefit Analysis When Leaving
The trickiest aspect for Afghanistan (and any intervention) is determining the best way to measure the expected costs and benefits. It is not simply a financial question, as evaluations need to consider the possible strategic, diplomatic and humanitarian consequences of ending an intervention. In all circumstances, there are potential downsides in exiting. This means departing interveners need to accept risk, as there will always be the possibility that things can go wrong and there is no way to guarantee that enemies or problems will not emerge or reemerge after troops depart. If the United States, or other countries such as Israel in Gaza, insists on staying in locations until all security risks are permanently eliminated, then the military will never be able to come home. Waiting for a strong, stable and friendly democratic government with a modern military to take hold leads to an endless intervention.17

The question is not if threats can develop, but whether or not they are enough to justify a longer intervention. Both presidents Obama and Trump hesitated to leave, fearing they would be blamed for any future terrorist attack originating out of Afghanistan.18 The potential security threat felt too real and too high—it was less risky and easier politically to leave troops in the warzone. While pulling troops out of the country makes it more difficult to track and target terrorist groups, the strategic threat in Afghanistan was low and manageable. The successful drone strike that killed al-Qaeda’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in Kabul almost a year after US forces left demonstrates America’s continued ability to disrupt terrorist operations from outside of the country.19 Maintaining troops inside Afghanistan both increased the chances they would be targeted and arguably increased the long-term animosity toward the United States which fuels terrorist recruitment and future attacks.

Interveners cannot avoid risk when departing. There is a reasonable case to be made that a continued US presence in Afghanistan defended essential human rights that were worth preserving. After all, once the United States left, repression increased and women and children lost many basic rights and freedoms.20 The war in Afghanistan, however, was not a humanitarian mission. While the importance of protecting women’s rights should never be overlooked (even though it
usually is), most of the money spent on the war did not help people living in the country. Nor was there a clear plan for maintaining rights. It would have been better to redirect military expenditures to humanitarian programs and ensure Afghans who feared the Taliban’s return could be safely evacuated and resettled (more on that below). If human and women’s rights are truly going to be a guiding principle for US foreign policy—as they should be—then a wasteful military intervention as in Afghanistan is not the best or most effective policy choice.

By the time Biden became president, it was long past time for the US military to leave Afghanistan. American forces had stayed without clear political objectives or a realistic strategy for achieving success. An unwillingness to admit defeat or accept the risk of leaving the country to prioritize more pressing national security threats kept the military in place for years with no clear end in sight. The costs of staying in the country any longer outweighed the potential benefits. Some critics of the US withdrawal argued that recent expenses were reasonable and well worth the cost if they prevented the Taliban’s return, but this ignored the Taliban’s recent gains and the hollowness of the Afghan regime, which was made painfully clear when its military collapsed without putting up much of a fight. The United States was still paying billions of dollars annually and time was always on the Taliban’s side. Delaying the inevitable for a few more years was not the answer; nor was perpetuated imperial rule.

Put simply, the United States and other interveners should conclude foreign military interventions when the anticipated costs—financial, human, diplomatic and strategic—surpass the projected gains, taking into account the hierarchy of foreign policy goals and the humanitarian risks of leaving local populations behind. An unpromising battle plan or more urgent external threats are likely indications that the price tag for staying longer will be too high to pay. If the original intervention’s goals have not been achieved and a new intervention would be unlikely, unwise or unwarranted under the current conditions, then it is probably time to seriously consider leaving. And if staying longer will likely make matters worse, it is definitely time to go. When it is time to leave, a country should devise an exit strategy that maximizes the chances of preserving the gains of the intervention and minimizes the risks of new threats emerging in the aftermath of the military’s departure.

But is it even possible to leave without chaos, confusion and uncontainable threats? Previous cases, including in Afghanistan, indicate a limited number of key factors for maximizing the benefits and minimizing the risks of ending interventions when the time comes.

**Four Keys to a Graceful Exit**

As the US military was rushing to evacuate more than 100,000 people from Afghanistan before a self-imposed deadline in the final weeks of August 2021,
Biden said in an interview, “The idea that somehow, there’s a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing—I don’t know how that happens.”23 Like the war before it, an exit will not be something an intervening military can fully control. Almost by definition, as a country pulls out troops it reduces its ability to influence the kinetic actions of others. But America’s exit from Afghanistan did not need to be so unruly. Careful planning and execution can reduce the likelihood of a tumultuous withdrawal, even under less-than-ideal circumstances. When the United States finally decided to leave Afghanistan, it did not correctly assess the situation on the ground, and it did not formulate or communicate a plan to accomplish realistic and identifiable goals as it withdrew. Domestic political considerations continued to interfere with proper planning and effective execution. The United States needed a better playbook. While each exit strategy will be unique depending on the situation, four essential aspects must be included regardless of the size or duration of an intervention.

First, strategies for military disengagement should reflect the latest situation on the ground. Things have undoubtedly changed since the military intervention began, and strategies that are based on outdated information or original goals will not work. After the Cold War, it became popular to argue that exit strategies were a prerequisite for interventions, as it seemed only logical that troops should not be sent to fight wars before knowing how and when they will come home.24 But the start of a major intervention is too early to have a realistic exit strategy, as any pre-baked schedule or plan will quickly become obsolete and must be redone.25 Exit strategies should not be confused with preferred end states or fixed objectives for the intervention itself. Initial plans for winning the war and preserving the peace are obviously important, but they are not the same as determining how to withdraw forces when it is time to leave. So, even though the surge in Afghanistan or in Iraq are sometimes sold as exit strategies, they are quite the opposite, really. Clear and achievable objectives for military interventions are essential because they help guide military strategy and diminish the chance of mission creep. However, what is critical for ending an intervention is an accurate appraisal of the current battlefield dynamics and how they will be altered as forces are pulled out.

When an exit is approaching, a proper assessment of the military balance and capabilities of remaining actors should shape the pace of withdrawal and determine the best—or least-bad—option available for minimizing future threats to an intervener’s interests. Both military and political officials should be aware of the current realities. The incentives of other warring parties are likely to
change, and they are likely to alter their own strategies in response. Defensive strategies can become offensive to take advantage of the new balance of power; seemingly stable defenses can melt away when allies disappear. This was one of the biggest problems with America’s ending in Afghanistan. The United States failed to appreciate how quickly Afghan forces would stop fighting without the promise of US support, and how easily the Taliban could consolidate control. This miscalculation points to a poor understanding of the internal dynamics within Afghanistan that hampered the intervention for decades, and an overly simplistic and optimistic assessment that government forces would fight until the end even if they believed a loss was inevitable. Even if Afghan security forces enjoyed numerical and technological advantages, their capabilities did not indicate a probable triumph over the Taliban. A Taliban victory was a surprise to no one who was paying attention, but the lack of resistance exhibited by the Afghan army appears to have caught the United States off guard, demonstrating the perils of wishful thinking. Instead, the exit strategy needed to be based on the understanding that government forces would not provide resistance without the promise of US force. In the future, interveners should carefully consider the abilities and commitment of allies on the ground, and recognize the risk that capabilities alone will not ensure that previously supported forces will continue on without sufficient support.

Second, an exit strategy must include realistic objectives, including the extent to which local or other international forces can be relied upon to maintain stability. Exits need to have their own achievable goals distinct from the original objectives of the mission. Expectations must be reset. When the US military barracks were bombed in Beirut in 1983, this was not enough to convince the United States to leave Lebanon, despite how the history is often remembered. In fact, proponents and opponents of the intervention seemed to harden their views in response. It was not until Lebanon’s military collapsed that expectations were finally adjusted enough for a departure to proceed. When interveners want to leave, handing over responsibility to local or international security partners may be an ideal option, but their capacity and need for continued support—in funding, training, equipment, logistics, intelligence or manpower—will determine how viable this preference is during and after an exit. If dangers arise after intervening forces are gone, this does not necessarily demonstrate that the exit itself was to blame. A perfect exit strategy cannot make up for a botched intervention. Disengagements should be measured by their effectiveness given the prevailing conditions. In Afghanistan, it was unrealistic for Biden to try to build a stable democratic government in Kabul and prevent all future terrorist attacks coming out of Afghanistan. The time for these goals had long since passed. Likewise, America’s next departure from Iraq should not be held up by outdated desires for a durable democratic ally in Baghdad.
Biden’s options in Afghanistan were limited. It was already clear the United States, backed by the majority of Americans, wanted out. The departure was more a matter of when, not if. Biden could not dictate Afghanistan’s future with one foot already out the door. As a deal had already been reached under Trump, the administration enjoyed little leverage in negotiations unless it was willing to rethink its commitment to leave or at least threaten renewed engagement. But it was unclear what Biden hoped to achieve, if anything. It seems as though he wanted to leave as quickly as possible, never mind the consequences.28 And if that was the goal, it was marginally successful until the terrorist attacks in the final days exposed both the inherent difficulties in exiting insecure environments and the poor execution of its own imprudent exit strategy.29

Biden’s primary goal should have been the safe evacuation of everyone who helped with the war effort; in order to do so successfully, the sequencing of the exit needed to be changed and more military forces would have been needed to maintain security. More ambitious goals may have been feasible, including international plans for supporting refugees fleeing a renewed civil war or deploying a UN peacekeeping force to oversee a peaceful transition, but would have demanded more time and effort than the United States appeared willing to give.30 Washington surely hoped to avoid another tragedy on its watch and any images of a hasty exit akin to the rushed evacuation from Saigon in 1975. When President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, were trying to get the United States out of Vietnam, they wanted to buy themselves enough time in 1973 to leave before Saigon fell to North Vietnamese forces, which did not happen until 1975.31 Biden was surely hoping for at least a similar time cushion, believing the Afghan regime could hold on for a few more years, even though this may have been unwise politically, as it would have kept Afghanistan in the headlines.32

America’s strategy relied on a significant window of time between the military’s departure and the fall of Kabul, and it did not develop adequate contingency plans for the exit’s last days if insecurity spread. While the administration contends that it adequately considered the worst-case scenarios, and it did manage to rapidly speed up evacuations shortly before its own exit deadline after the Taliban gained control of Kabul, chaos did not need to be the price of withdrawal.33 Instead of simply pulling out as quickly as possible, Biden should have, at the very least, prioritized the safe evacuation of all those—Afghans, Americans and other nationals—who helped the war effort. The administration needed to either significantly speed up the processing of special

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visas to clear the bureaucratic backlog and process new applications, or more realistically, waive the requirements to get Afghans out of the country quickly. A clear idea of who was eligible for evacuation and where at-risk populations could go was a necessary first step. The United States is more than capable of hosting a large influx of Afghans, and all of this could have been done prior to the departure of the remaining military. Non-military personnel should have been evacuated before the military started pulling forces out of bases.

Third, the plan and its goals must be carefully and consistently communicated to all relevant audiences. Lip service is often paid to the importance of effective communication strategies, but messaging is too often an afterthought that is merely left to public relations professionals after a policy has already been chosen. Instead, thinking about how and when to communicate plans needs to be carefully considered as the plans are being made. Military officials and political leaders should incorporate how making the exit strategy public will be interpreted by different audiences and how it will affect the prospects for success into their planning. Setting deadlines, in particular, offers both benefits and downsides, and these should be considered before making them public. How plans are communicated affects the chances of successfully completing an exit, so a drawdown must be discussed delicately. Public pronouncements help determine the level and breadth of domestic support, influence the actions of other actors (including the likelihood that they will participate in or support future activities), and impact the intervener's credibility and image. Erratic messaging complicates exits.

The days when politicians could say completely separate things to different audiences are over, if they ever existed at all. Despite the enormous political incentives to lie—or at least exaggerate what is actually happening—the end of an intervention is not the opportune time to claim success to domestic constituents while snubbing local audiences. It remains invaluable to be able to communicate directly to affected populations in local languages, but international media coverage and social media scrutiny ensure messages and observations spread quickly, no matter where or in what language they are communicated in. All people speaking on behalf of the intervening government need to be sensitive to how public statements will be perceived by different audiences and affect local actors. The tendency to oversell the achievements of an intervention and undersell the risks of a departure needs to be held in check if it will adversely affect the drawdown of forces. In Afghanistan, the administration was cautious not to undermine the government by starting a full-fledged evacuation, but with the military withdrawal announced and widespread predictions that the Taliban would prevail in a matter of months or years, the message was already sent: the Americans thought the government was too fragile to survive on its own.
Withdrawals should be planned before they are discussed publicly, not the other way around. In Afghanistan, setting a final end date without a plan to evacuate civilians was unwise. The benefits of specific timelines are that they provide clarity about the intervener’s intentions to all interested parties, but the risk is that they can offer adversaries advantages or cause problems if timings or conditions change. They can create perverse incentives for opponents to keep fighting in order to better position themselves for when the clock expires. This is an issue the United States repeatedly faced in Afghanistan. Opponents criticized Obama, Trump and Biden for establishing specific timelines, arguing that end dates offered the Taliban a chance to simply wait and survive until the United States was on its way out. The evidence, however, is mixed as to whether or not the Taliban actually altered its strategy as a result.\textsuperscript{39} Obama’s drawdown schedule provided flexibility to account for changing circumstances, but deadlines were ultimately missed because the threat of terrorism trapped him in the country.\textsuperscript{40} Trump, for his part, failed to modify his withdrawal plan based on whether the Taliban and Afghan government were abiding by their commitments. And Biden failed to adequately plan for his drawdown. It is often better to identify specific deadlines internally to ensure necessary steps are taken on schedule and offer easy-to-understand and progressive benchmarks publicly so outsiders can know what to expect.

Finally, ending military interventions should not be first and foremost about the military. As counterintuitive as it sounds, the military may not be the focus of a good exit strategy. If there are continuing interests—security or otherwise—then new diplomatic, development or security programs should be initiated and old responsibilities need to be transferred in advance. An external military’s influence will wane as soon as it becomes clear that it is leaving, before falling precipitously after its troops are gone. Their power relative to other forces will decrease, so it becomes harder and harder to affect the political direction of the country or respond to ensuing crises. Waiting to enhance diplomatic engagement or increase development assistance until after a withdrawal is finished only decreases the chances of success.

As always, there must be effective coordination between political and military personnel. Exit strategies should be developed with the active involvement of non-military actors to better determine priorities and recognize opportunities. Diplomacy and development will keep the departing country informed about how circumstances are changing on the ground and defend its interests over the longer term. This is perhaps most true when the intervener wants to continue supporting the government, but the importance of crafting a diplomatic strategy is also relevant when hostile relations are expected. As countries in West Africa, and perhaps others, grow tired of American or French counterterrorism efforts, the departure of military forces will force former interveners to find new ways
to monitor and manage possible terrorist threats. Conceiving of exits as purely military undertakings is therefore a mistake, as this restricts future diplomatic options.

During the intervention in Afghanistan, the military almost always dominated US thinking and actions. This military-first thinking perhaps caused the United States to miss opportunities to better build a new, fairer, and more responsive Afghan state, whereas prioritizing diplomacy could have opened the door to negotiations with the Taliban when the weakened group was at its nadir and more open to joining a broader government; it certainly contributed to the incorrect sequencing of its exit. Instead of first worrying about pulling back from bases and removing military personnel and equipment, the United States needed to ensure the safe evacuation of civilians before removing its troops.

**Ex-Factor**

Ending military interventions is hard, much harder than the attention it receives would suggest. The United States is not alone in its struggles with ending wars and military interventions abroad. Russia’s intervention into Ukraine, for instance, was a mistake from the start, demonstrating how hubris and poor intelligence can lead to strategic errors and damage an intervener’s interests. But regardless of the circumstances, like all intervening countries, Russia would be wise to end its war for its own self-interest. The costs of prolonging a war that offers minimal strategic benefits and may never be won are simply too high to keep paying. Vladimir Putin, however, is unlikely to heed this advice; his ego and consistent fear of admitting (or even hinting at) his initial mistake in waging war, or his military’s failure to win it, will prevent him from changing course to defend Russia’s own national interests. Identifying and choosing the best course of action is difficult whenever a leader’s selfishness, wishful thinking, and short-term domestic political considerations predominate.

Years after an exit would have been prudent, the United States finally left Afghanistan. When Biden announced the final US withdrawal in April 2021, much of the debate back home consisted of rehashing the same arguments for and against the intervention, rather than arguing about what could realistically be achieved now that America’s exit was imminent. Blaming Biden’s withdrawal plan for the outcome of the war is like focusing all your complaints on a coach’s last-second call in a blowout loss in sports—even if the call was unwise in retrospect, the real responsibility for the end result lies with earlier mistakes.
and bad decisions. America’s departure from Afghanistan was not a fiasco because the Taliban won; it was a failed exit because the United States relied on inaccurate intelligence, did not identify achievable goals, and did not properly sequence its drawdown. America’s decision to leave was right (and well overdue), but its strategy was flawed and its exit priorities backward. This deficient exit strategy forced the last Americans to leave amid the pandemonium of the Taliban’s rapid ascendancy, and needlessly left behind thousands of people who had helped the war and faced likely persecution.

Military interventions should end when the expected costs outweigh the benefits. When it’s time to go, it’s time to go—irrespective of anything that happened previously. Even if the original goals are still not achieved or significant expenditures have already been made, interventions will not—and should not —last longer just in case things get better. Bungled exits will diminish the chances that any benefits of military interventions are retained and will harm the long-term national security objectives of intervening countries. The best way to withdraw military forces is to accurately assess the current battlefield dynamics and anticipate the consequences of removing troops, identify clear and achievable goals and priorities, carefully explain the plan publicly, and stop prioritizing the military over everything else in planning.

Notes


40. Ibid, 398.