

## **EXPLAINING THE UNITED STATES' POLICY OF MILITARY WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN IN 2021: KEY DETERMINANTS**

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Submitted: August 17<sup>th</sup> 2025 | Accepted: August 27<sup>th</sup> 2025

### **ABSTRACT**

The United States' military intervention and political involvement in Afghanistan persisted for over two decades following the events of 9/11. Under the narrative of the "global war on terror," the US implemented a range of military and diplomatic strategies to counter terrorism threats in Afghanistan. Throughout this period, various policies were enacted to support stabilisation efforts and the eradication of terrorist groups. However, the US decision to withdraw all military forces from Afghanistan in 2021 marked a critical turning point in its foreign policy, symbolising the end of a long and controversial military intervention. This study aims to analyse the key factors driving the US decision to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. Employing a qualitative methodology and utilising secondary data through library research, this research applies William D. Coplin's decision-making theory to map the influence of various actors and variables within the policy process. The findings indicate that the withdrawal was primarily driven by considerations related to domestic political dynamics, economic and military capabilities, and the international context. These findings confirm that the troop withdrawal policy cannot be divorced from the broader considerations of US long-term national interests.

Keywords: troop withdrawal, Afghanistan, United States, decision-making

### **ABSTRAK**

*Intervensi militer dan keterlibatan politik Amerika Serikat di Afghanistan telah berlangsung selama lebih dari dua dekade sejak peristiwa 9/11. Dengan mengusung narasi "global war on terror", Amerika Serikat menerapkan serangkaian strategi militer dan diplomatik untuk merespons ancaman terorisme di Afghanistan. Selama periode ini, berbagai kebijakan dilaksanakan untuk mendukung misi stabilisasi dan pemberantasan kelompok teror. Namun, keputusan Amerika Serikat untuk menarik seluruh pasukan militernya dari Afghanistan pada tahun 2021 menjadi titik balik dalam arah kebijakan luar negerinya yang menandai berakhirnya intervensi militer yang panjang dan kontroversial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis faktor-faktor yang mendorong keputusan penarikan pasukan militer Amerika Serikat di Afghanistan. Penelitian dilakukan melalui metodologi kualitatif dan teknik pengumpulan data sekunder berbasis studi kepustakaan (library*

*research). Teori pengambilan keputusan William D. Coplin digunakan untuk memetakan pengaruh berbagai faktor dan variabel dalam proses kebijakan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa faktor-faktor yang mendorong kebijakan penarikan pasukan adalah pertimbangan dari situasi politik domestik, kapabilitas ekonomi dan militer, serta konteks internasional. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kebijakan penarikan pasukan tidak dapat dipisahkan dari kalkulasi kepentingan nasional jangka panjang Amerika Serikat.*

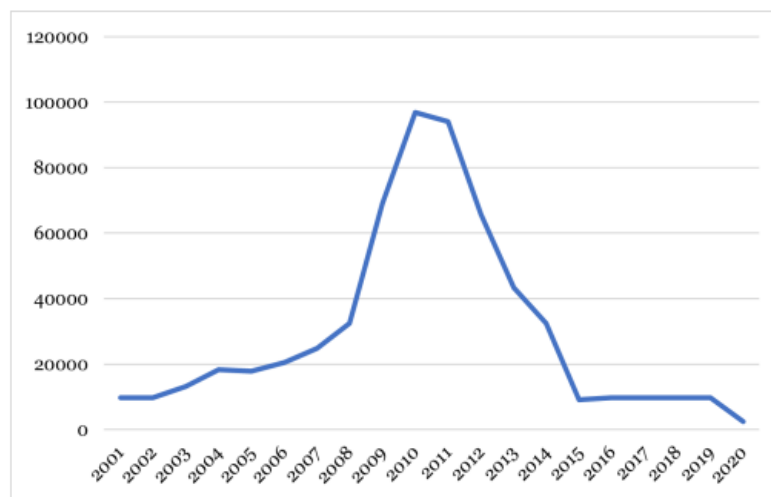
*Kata kunci: penarikan pasukan, Afghanistan, Amerika Serikat, pengambilan keputusan*

## INTRODUCTION

For more than two decades, the United States' military and political involvement in Afghanistan has constituted an integral part of the global security landscape in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The tragedy served as the primary catalyst for the declaration of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) by President George W. Bush's administration, which subsequently led to a series of military operations against extremist groups in the Middle East, particularly in Afghanistan (Guler & Demir, 2024). Through Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the United States launched a military invasion aimed at capturing Osama bin Laden and toppling the Taliban regime. The operation swiftly achieved its initial objectives, as marked by the fall of Taliban control in Mazar-e-Sharif in November 2001 (Thomas, 2017).

The leadership transition to President Barack Obama marked a shift in the United States' military approach, moving from offensive strategies to a more structured counterinsurgency strategy. This shift was reflected in the troop escalation known as the 'Afghanistan Surge,' which involved the deployment of an additional 17,000 military personnel in 2009 (Witte, 2025). This strategy enabled the United States to succeed in the mission to capture Osama bin Laden. The elimination of Osama bin Laden in 2011 marked a turning point that strengthened the rationale for initiating the withdrawal process. In 2012, approximately 30,000 personnel began to be withdrawn, although the majority of troops remained in Afghanistan until 2014 to maintain security stability (Indurthy, 2011). The following figure illustrates the number of United States troops in Afghanistan.

Figure 1. Number of United States Troops in Afghanistan (2001–2020)



Source: Broto Wardoyo (2024), "Great Power Politics and United States' Withdrawal from Afghanistan", Retrieved from

<https://e-journal.unair.ac.id/JGS/article/view/565465> on February 14, 2025

Figure 1 illustrates a consistent decline in troop deployment. The data reveal that the number of United States military personnel declined significantly after 2011, reaching its lowest point in 2020. This trend indicates that the drawdown of military forces was initiated during President Obama's administration and subsequently continued by the subsequent administrations.

Following the conclusion of Barack Obama's presidency, the United States entered the administration of President Donald Trump. US counterterrorism policy under Trump reflected a transition from a long-term stability-oriented strategy to a condition-based framework, prioritizing short-term operational effectiveness (Caro, 2017). Accordingly, in order to advance the troop withdrawal policy formulated under the Obama administration, President Donald Trump pursued an end to the United States' longest war through a series of negotiations held in Doha, Qatar. The talks were conducted between the United States, represented by Zalmay Khalilzad, and the Taliban, represented by Mullah Abdul Ghani. These negotiations resulted in the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, which stipulated a commitment to the complete withdrawal of US forces within 14 months (U.S. Department of State, 2020b). Nevertheless, the implementation of the agreement was impeded by the Taliban's failure to comply, most notably their rejection of political reconciliation with Afghanistan's legitimate government (Biegon & Watts, 2020).

By the conclusion of his presidency, Donald Trump had failed to secure peace between Afghanistan and the Taliban, leaving the agreement incomplete and thereby obstructing the continuation of the troop withdrawal policy. Following his defeat in the 2020 United States presidential election, Trump was succeeded by President Joe Biden in 2021. The Biden administration chose to proceed with the withdrawal process without undertaking a reassessment of the previous agreement. This decision was consistent with President Biden's remarks in his State of the Union address on August 31, 2021, wherein he stated:

“Either follow through on the commitment made by the last administration and leave Afghanistan, or say we weren't leaving and commit another tens of thousands more troops. Going back to war. That was the choice, the real choice. Between leaving and escalating. I was not going to extend this forever war. And I was not extending a forever exit” (The New York Times, 2021).

In his address, President Biden emphasized that adhering to the withdrawal commitment was a strategic decision aimed at preventing the further prolongation of an already protracted conflict (The New York Times, 2021). The complete withdrawal of United States forces was carried out by September 2021, symbolically marking the end of two decades of military intervention in Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to power.

President Joe Biden's decision to continue the policy formulated by the previous administration without substantial modifications raises its own set of questions. As an opposition figure to the Trump administration, this course of action appeared politically contradictory. It is within this context that the academic urgency of this study lies, namely, to explain the factors underlying the Biden administration's decision to withdraw US troops, with particular attention to the primary determinants that served as the foundation for implementing this policy.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Decision-Making Theory by William D. Coplin**

In his book *Introduction to International Politics: A Model of the Decision-Making Process*, William D. Coplin emphasizes that the state functions as the primary actor in pursuing its national objectives. This approach explains that a state's foreign policy constitutes a response to the actions of other states. Furthermore, it highlights that every decision in foreign policy is based on rational calculations that consider various strategic factors. According to Coplin, foreign policy decisions are shaped by three principal factors influencing the decision-making process: domestic politics, economic and military capabilities, and the international context. These three factors collectively determine the direction of a state's foreign policy (Coplin, 2003).

#### **Domestic Politics**

Domestic politics constitutes one of the key factors shaping a state's foreign policy. Within domestic politics, several determinants influence decision-making through various policy influencers. These include bureaucratic influencers, referring to the role of bureaucratic actors in the policy process; partisan influencers, reflecting the impact of political parties and ideology; interest influencers, encompassing interest groups seeking to shape policy; and mass influencers, associated with public opinion and societal dynamics in determining the direction of a state's foreign policy.

#### **Economy and Military Capability**

A state must possess the capacity and readiness to develop the capabilities necessary to support its foreign policy. In terms of economic capacity, two primary factors influence foreign policy: productive capacity and dependence on international trade and financial systems. Meanwhile, in terms of military capacity, four determinants can be identified: the number of available personnel, the level of military

training, the adequacy of armed forces' weaponry, and the state's ability to maintain domestic stability.

### **International Context**

Three principal elements shape the impact of the international context on a state's foreign policy: geographical, economic, and political factors. In addition, economic and political relations established with other states also constitute an important determinant in shaping the direction of foreign policy.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative method with an explanatory approach. The purpose of this approach is to describe and analyze a phenomenon in depth while elucidating the dynamics underlying its occurrence. As noted by Sugiyono (2019), the explanatory approach is employed to gather narrative and contextual data, thereby facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the research problem's substance. Within this context, the approach is utilized to explore the quality and meaning of the troop withdrawal phenomenon, with a particular focus on identifying and analyzing the determinants of the policy. This method is designed to capture the complexity of the factors influencing the decision-making process, particularly in the domain of foreign policy. The data collection method applied in this research is library research, which involves the systematic collection and analysis of secondary sources. These sources include presidential speeches, scholarly articles, academic journals, reference books, official reports, websites of international organizations, and credible media coverage related to the issue of the United States' military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The stages of analysis in this study consist of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and interpretation. Data were obtained from a wide range of secondary sources, including academic journals, official reports from the United States government, policy documents, research institute publications, and credible media outlets, all of which addressed the US troop withdrawal policy in Afghanistan. The collected data were subsequently selected and categorized based on their relevance to the research focus. The process of data reduction aimed to filter out significant information and eliminate less relevant data, ensuring a more systematic and targeted analysis (Miles et al., 2014). The organized data were then presented in the form of explanatory narratives to identify patterns, trends, and interrelationships among factors. The analysis was conducted using Coplin's framework, taking into account the dimensions of domestic politics, military and economic capabilities, and the international context. The interpretation of the findings aimed to uncover the underlying determinants of the US military withdrawal policy. This approach is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics behind the United States' decision-making process concerning its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Key Determinants Driving the United States' Military Withdrawal Policy**

William D. Coplin, in his book *Introduction to International Politics: A Model of the Decision-Making Process*, emphasizes that the state serves as the primary actor in pursuing its national objectives (Coplin, 2003). Furthermore, this approach emphasizes that every decision in foreign policy is based on rational calculations that consider

various strategic factors. Each foreign policy decision is shaped by three principal factors influencing the decision-making process: domestic politics, economic and military capabilities, and the international context.

### **Domestic Politics**

From Coplin's perspective (2003), domestic politics exerts a significant influence on the direction of a state's foreign policy. This is due to the interaction between policymakers and various domestic actors who possess the interest and power to affect the decision-making process. Coplin identifies several primary forms of policy influencers, namely bureaucratic influencers, partisan influencers, interest influencers, and mass influencers.

**Bureaucratic influencers** refer to individuals or groups within the executive branch of government who play a crucial role in shaping and executing foreign policy. Several bureaucratic factors shaped President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw US military forces from Afghanistan. A key figure in this process was Zalmay Khalilzad, a senior US diplomat who played a strategic role in the intra-Afghan peace process. In September 2020, Khalilzad conducted a diplomatic visit to Pakistan as part of efforts aimed at mediating and negotiating a peaceful resolution in Afghanistan (Gul, 2020). In his capacity as a diplomatic representative, Khalilzad advanced the military withdrawal as a key agenda item, reflecting the national interest of the United States in ending its long-term military engagement in the region.

In addition, another key figure was Antony Blinken, the United States Secretary of State. One form of his intervention involved a letter sent to the President of Afghanistan (Torfeh, 2021). The letter was sent in February 2021 and was published by the Afghan media outlet TOLONews on March 7, 2021. In the letter, Blinken expressed that the United States supported the resolution of the conflict between the Taliban and Afghanistan. Beyond formal communication, Blinken consistently conveyed support for President Joe Biden's decision to continue the troop withdrawal through formal forums, including meetings with members of Congress and sessions of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee (VOA, 2021). In his statement, Blinken emphasized that the continuation of military operations in Afghanistan would require the deployment of additional troops in significant numbers to maintain stability and prevent the Taliban from returning to power. Furthermore, he highlighted that the protracted conflict had resulted in escalating casualties, while the United States' efforts over two decades had failed to establish a durable and practical defense structure (Gramer, 2021).

Beyond the key figures previously discussed, a crucial factor influencing the United States' decision to withdraw military forces from Afghanistan in 2021 was the role of the decision maker, namely, the central figure in foreign policy decision-making. In this context, President Joe Biden's perceptions and outlook regarding the United States' prolonged military engagement in Afghanistan over two decades exerted a significant influence. President Biden has maintained a skeptical view of the effectiveness of long-term military interventions, a stance consistently demonstrated even during his tenure as Vice President under the Obama administration. At that time, Biden opposed the troop surge strategy in Afghanistan and instead advocated for a limited counterterrorism approach rather than a large-scale counterinsurgency strategy (Cronk, 2021).

This perspective continued into his presidency. In his speech on April 14, 2021, President Biden explicitly stated, "It is time to end America's longest war." This statement reflects that the decision to withdraw troops was not merely a continuation of the previous administration's agreement. Instead, it represents his conviction regarding the scope and limits of US military engagement abroad. This position was reaffirmed in his speech on July 8, 2021, where Biden stated that the main objectives of the US military presence in Afghanistan, namely dismantling al-Qaeda and preventing threats to US national security, had been accomplished (Yawar, 2024). Consequently, President Biden assessed that the continued deployment of US forces in the region no longer aligned with the nation's strategic interests and that committing additional troops would be detrimental to domestic priorities. The fundamental choice faced was between withdrawing and escalating tensions. Ultimately, President Biden opted to withdraw and terminate the United States' military engagement in Afghanistan (DW News, 2024). Thus, President Biden's perspective played a pivotal role in shaping the direction of the United States' military withdrawal policy from Afghanistan.

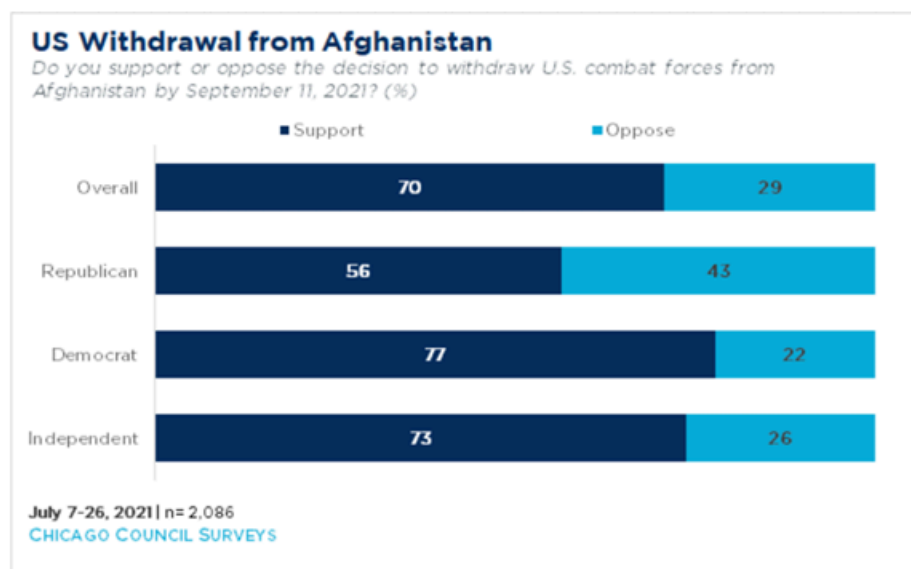
**Partisan influencers** refer to the role of political parties in transforming societal aspirations into political issues that are subsequently pursued within the public policy arena. In a democratic system, political parties play a critical role by exerting pressure on legislators to engage directly in the decision-making (Coplin, 2003). A concrete example of this dynamic can be observed in the political responses that shaped considerations and influenced the direction of the United States' military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. These responses generated divergent perspectives that affected President Joe Biden's decision to continue the troop withdrawal initiated during the Trump administration. In this context, differing viewpoints emerged within both major U.S. political parties, namely the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.

The Democratic Party tended to support the withdrawal, considering that the United States' military involvement in Afghanistan had persisted for an extended period. They argued that the continuation of military operations represented a waste of national resources, given that the outcomes achieved were disproportionate to the sacrifices made. The Democratic Party explicitly expressed its support for the troop withdrawal through its official account on the platform X (@TheDemocrats). In their statement, they asserted that President Joe Biden had made the right decision to end the protracted war in Afghanistan. This position was further reinforced in a subsequent post on X, stating that "President @JoeBiden made the right call in stopping the endless war in Afghanistan—there is nothing low grade, low risk, or low cost about any war" – September 3, 2021 (@TheDemocrats, 2021b). The quotation reflects the Democratic Party's belief that the continued military intervention in Afghanistan is no longer aligned with the United States' national strategic interests. They assessed that the conflict had imposed burdens on the country in multiple aspects, including budgetary constraints, human resources, and political legitimacy in the international arena. Furthermore, the Democratic Party viewed the troop withdrawal as a strategic measure to ease tensions in the South Asian region (Green & Doherty, 2021).

Meanwhile, the Republican Party opposed the United States' military withdrawal policy from Afghanistan implemented by the Biden administration. The Republican Party adopted a more critical stance toward this policy, arguing that the

U.S. military presence in Afghanistan remained necessary to maintain stability and prevent the reemergence of threats to national security. From the Republican perspective, the decision to withdraw should not be driven solely by political timelines but should be grounded in actual security needs on the ground (Detrow, 2021). Furthermore, they argued that troop withdrawal should be conducted gradually with proper coordination to ensure sustainable security and stability in Afghanistan. Such coordination refers to reaching a fair agreement among the conflicting parties, namely the Taliban and the Afghan government. The Republican Party criticized President Biden's withdrawal decision as being hasty and insufficiently attentive to post-withdrawal security stability (Sprunt, 2021). The following presents data from a survey on the opinions of partisan groups regarding the United States' troop withdrawal policy from Afghanistan.

Figure 2. Survey of Partisan Group Opinions Regarding the United States' Troop Withdrawal Policy from Afghanistan in 2021



Source: Chicago Council Surveys (2021), "US Public Supports Withdrawal From Afghanistan" Retrieved from

<https://globalaffairs.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/us-public-supports-withdrawal-afghanistan> on June 5, 2025

The survey on partisan group opinions regarding President Joe Biden's troop withdrawal policy was conducted from July 7 to 26, 2021, with 2,086 respondents. Based on Figure 2, it can be concluded that the majority of Democratic Party members, amounting to 77%, expressed support for President Biden's decision to withdraw U.S. military forces from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, support among Republican Party members stood at 56%. Independent Party members showed a relatively high level of support, at 73%. Overall, the data indicate that approximately 70% of U.S. party members supported the military withdrawal policy. This reflects a broad public consensus in favor of ending the United States' military involvement in Afghanistan.



**Interest Influencers** are individuals or groups that share common economic or social interests and actively seek to influence the direction of a country's policy. Although they are not always directly involved in the formulation of foreign policy, these groups play a significant role in applying pressure or offering criticism regarding policy decisions (Coplin, 2003). The decision to withdraw U.S. military forces from Afghanistan was influenced by the role of interest influencers. In this context, the groups involved included military veteran communities, Muslim organizations in the United States, and human rights groups, all of which possessed strong moral legitimacy in urging President Joe Biden to continue the troop withdrawal policy from Afghanistan (Brown, 2021).

The first influence came from the United States military veteran community. Support from this group was grounded in their personal experiences, which included significant psychological and physical impacts such as war injuries and prolonged trauma resulting from involvement in the Afghanistan conflict. They expressed their support through an open letter addressed to President Joe Biden. In the letter, the veterans affirmed their confidence in President Biden's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan. The letter stated that:

"We the undersigned are resolute in our support of President Biden's decision to end the war in Afghanistan. There is no clean way to exit another country's civil war, especially as one government falls and another takes power. The images out of Afghanistan are heartbreaking, especially for those of us who served there" (VoteVets, 2021).

The statement emphasized that President Biden's decision represented a necessary step to end the United States' military involvement, which no longer served a clear strategic purpose.

The next influence came from the Muslim community in the United States, organized under the United States Council of Muslim Organizations (USCMO), a coalition of national organizations and Islamic institutions across the country (Aliyev, 2021). The USCMO urged President Joe Biden to withdraw all military forces deployed over the past two decades in Afghanistan through a written statement addressed to Congress. In its statement, the USCMO emphasized that an expedited troop withdrawal was an urgent measure necessary to prevent further loss of life. Furthermore, the USCMO called upon all parties in Afghanistan to pursue a fair and just reconciliation. The statement asserted that:

"We particularly exhort the Taliban leadership to now materially demonstrate the godly and compassionate human values of Islam, which they have long proclaimed to be guided by and desired to implement in bringing about a sincere and just reconciliation that includes all the indigenous parties, groups and people of Afghanistan, especially women, whose God-given rights must be respected and protected" (Aliyev, 2021).

The subsequent influence came from human rights advocacy groups. Support for the troop withdrawal was voiced by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the human rights sector. These groups argued that the United States' prolonged military involvement in the Afghanistan conflict had resulted in serious

human rights violations (VOA, 2020). In this context, Human Rights First urged President Biden to prioritize the protection of human rights for Afghan civilians by ending the war. This position was articulated by Mike Breen, CEO of Human Rights First and an Afghanistan war veteran, who stated that:

“Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have led to numerous human rights violations and the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. The war-based approach to national security that has defined the post-9/11 era should end. But we must acknowledge that American withdrawal will almost certainly further jeopardize the human rights of vulnerable Afghans. This is a tragic and painful reality, but a reality nonetheless. It is imperative that the Biden administration prioritize the protection of Afghan civilians and meet its obligations to the interpreters, translators, and wartime allies who have faithfully served the United States” (Human Rights First, 2021).

Furthermore, one non-governmental organization (NGO) played a significant role in influencing the continuation of the troop withdrawal decision from Afghanistan. This organization, America Relief, operates in the humanitarian and human rights sector. It actively urged the U.S. government to end military intervention in Afghanistan through a series of demonstrations, public advocacy, and digital media campaigns conducted from 2020 to mid-2021. In one of these campaigns, Peter Lucier, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran affiliated with America Relief, stated that “The prolonged military presence not only extends the suffering of Afghan civilians but also exacerbates the humanitarian crisis, which should be prioritized for resolution” (Gypson, 2023).

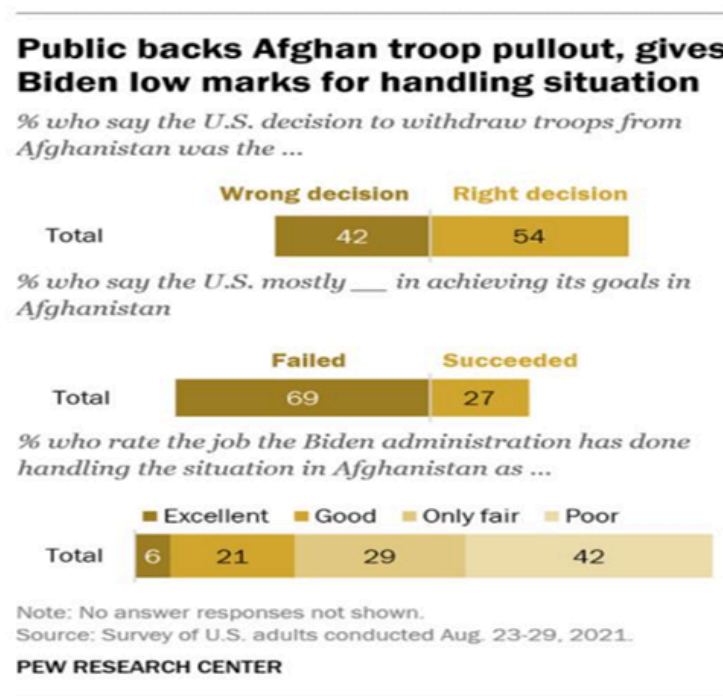
**Mass Influencers** represent public opinion shaped through mass media constructions. In the context of foreign policy, public opinion does not directly formulate policy but functions to rationalize decisions already made by policymakers (Coplin, 2003). Support from public opinion for the implementation of troop withdrawal cannot be separated from campaign promises made by Joe Biden prior to assuming the presidency. On multiple occasions, Biden consistently expressed his commitment to ending what he referred to as the 'forever wars' in the Middle East (Barrow, 2019). Joe Biden also expressed his commitment to repatriate all U.S. troops from Afghanistan (Wise et al., 2021). This campaign rhetoric subsequently shaped public expectations regarding the direction of foreign policy under his administration. Upon assuming office, this promise became a benchmark for governmental accountability while simultaneously reinforcing public legitimacy for the troop withdrawal policy. Biden's campaign pledge functioned as a normative foundation, shaping public opinion and intensifying political pressure on the administration to implement the policy.

The transformation of public opinion was further reinforced by the influence of mass media as mass influencers, which play a critical role in shaping societal perceptions of foreign policy (Coplin, 2003). During the troop withdrawal period, various mainstream media outlets in the United States actively produced narratives highlighting the social, economic, and moral burdens of prolonged military involvement in Afghanistan. These narratives contributed to the formation of a more critical public opinion toward interventionist policies and intensified pressure on the government to terminate military presence in the conflict zone. For instance, The

Associated Press, in its article titled “Costs of the Afghanistan War, in Lives and Dollars”, emphasized that over \$2 trillion had been expended over two decades, with more than 2,400 U.S. military personnel losing their lives. The article underscored how the protracted conflict depleted national resources that could otherwise have been allocated for domestic development, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Knickmeyer, 2021). Meanwhile, The Washington Post published an article titled “After 20 years and billions of dollars, the U.S. leaves behind a fractured and failed Afghanistan”, which highlighted the structural failures in building the Afghan state’s capacity. The article raised doubts regarding the effectiveness of military intervention as a tool for state-building and stability. This narrative of failure reinforced the argument that U.S. military involvement not only imposed financial burdens on the nation but also contributed to collective fatigue among the American public (The Washington Post, 2021).

The narratives presented by both media outlets further reinforced public perceptions that the protracted war had diverted resources and attention away from domestic national priorities. A majority of the American public viewed military involvement in Afghanistan as a misallocation of national funds. The substantial resources devoted to military operations were considered more effectively utilized for domestic purposes, particularly amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Green & Doherty, 2021). The following presents data from a Pew Research Center survey concerning public perceptions of the U.S. military troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Figure 3. Public Opinion Survey Regarding the U.S. Military Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan



Source: T Green & Doherty (2021), “Majority of U.S. public favors Afghanistan troop withdrawal; Biden criticized for his handling of situation” retrieved from

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/31/majority-of-u-s-public-favors-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-biden-criticized-for-his-handling-of-situation/> on June 6, 2025

As illustrated in Figure 3, despite a majority of the American public supporting the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Pew Research Center survey conducted between August 23 and 29, 2021, revealed that 54% of respondents considered the decision to withdraw as appropriate, while 42% viewed it as misguided. Furthermore, regarding the achievement of U.S. objectives in Afghanistan, 69% of respondents indicated that the United States had failed to meet its goals, whereas only 27% assessed the mission as successful. These findings reflect public disappointment with the ultimate outcomes of two decades of military engagement (Green & Doherty, 2021).

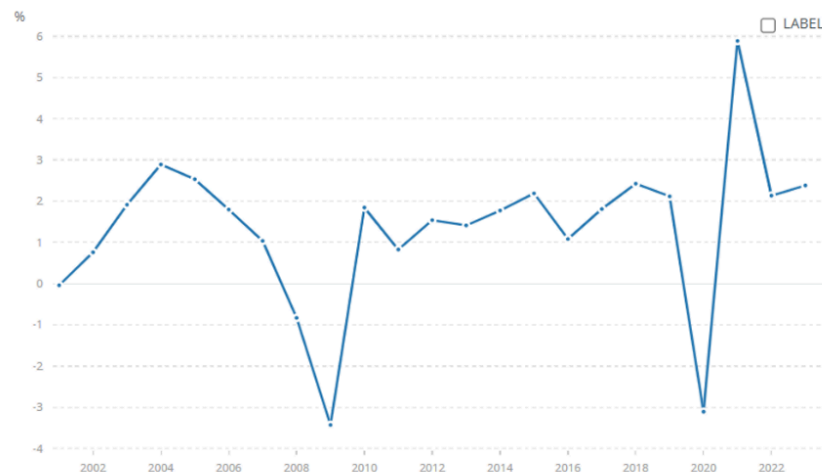
### **Economic and Military Capabilities**

The U.S. military troop withdrawal announced by President Joe Biden in 2021 was shaped by considerations of both economic and military capabilities. From Coplin's perspective, the decision reflects the reality that a country's ability to sustain overseas military engagement is largely determined by the extent to which its economic strength can support military operations, as well as how military capacity is efficiently allocated in accordance with national interests (Coplin, 2003).

#### **Economic Capability**

Economic capability can be analyzed through two main indicators: the national production capacity and the degree of the United States' dependence on the international trade and financial system. The first indicator, national production capacity, is reflected in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which represents domestic economic performance in supporting both national and international trade activities (Coplin, 2003). Amerika Serikat merupakan negara adidaya dengan kekuatan perekonomian yang besar. The United States is a global superpower with a substantial economic capacity. According to data released by the World Bank (2023), the United States' Gross Domestic Product (GDP) accounted for approximately 26.29% of the total global economy in 2023. This significant contribution reflects the United States' dominance within the international economic system and its reliance on the stability of global markets. The following figure presents the per capita GDP growth of the United States during the period of military intervention in Afghanistan, providing an empirical overview of domestic economic capacity in financing and sustaining long-term military operations.

Figure 4. Per Capita GDP Growth of the United States During the Military Intervention in Afghanistan (2001–2022)



Source: World Bank (World Bank, 2023), “GDP per capita growth (annual %) – United States” retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG?end=2023&locations=US&start=2001&view=chart> on June 7, 2025

Figure 4 presents the chronological data of United States per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth between 2001 and 2022, reflecting the different phases of U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan. The data indicate a fluctuating trend in per capita GDP growth. During the early years of military engagement from 2001 to 2004, the U.S. economy experienced positive growth, averaging approximately 3% per year. A sharp decline occurred in 2009, with growth contracting to -3.5%, correlating with the global financial crisis. Subsequently, economic recovery was observed, with a 2% growth rate in 2010, followed by relative stability from 2010 to 2018, maintaining growth above 1%. However, 2019 to 2020 marked a significant downturn, as per capita GDP declined by 3%, before rebounding sharply to 6% in 2021. (World Bank, 2023).

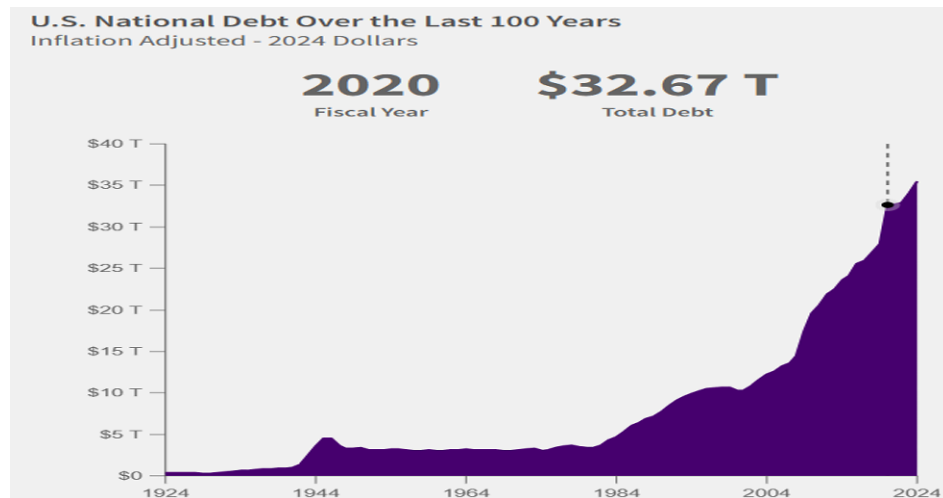
The observed decline in U.S. per capita GDP in 2020 can be attributed primarily to the global COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (2024), real U.S. GDP contracted sharply, falling approximately 9% below pre-recession levels at the onset of the pandemic. This contraction was considerably deeper than the roughly 4% decline experienced during the trough of the Great Recession between 2007 and 2009. Such a severe economic downturn precipitated a substantial slowdown in domestic economic activity, underscoring the vulnerability of national economic capacity and its implications for sustaining prolonged military engagements abroad.

The crisis resulting from the global pandemic has led to various economic challenges in the United States. Lockdown policies caused the U.S. economy to lose 20.5 million jobs, pushing the unemployment rate to its highest level since 1948, approximately 14.7% (Tappe, 2020). This high unemployment rate significantly reduced consumer purchasing power, thereby exerting substantial deflationary pressure on the national economy. In response to this situation, the United States sought to redirect policy priorities and budget allocations to address the crisis, including the implementation of large-scale fiscal stimulus measures and the

strengthening of healthcare systems (McCracken & Amburgey, 2021). This situation further underscores the urgency of alleviating the financial burden associated with prolonged military engagement in Afghanistan, which for two decades constituted one of the largest contributors to defense sector expenditures. Estimates indicate that the total cost of the war from 2001 to 2020 exceeded USD 2.26 trillion, adding further strain to domestic fiscal pressures (Saukani, 2023). In this context, the decision to withdraw troops helped mitigate the economic burden on the United States during its post-COVID-19 recovery period.

The second indicator analyzed is the United States' reliance on the international financial system. This dependence is reflected in the continuously increasing national debt. Specifically, between fiscal years 2019 and 2021, government expenditures rose by approximately 50% due to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Fiscal Data, 2024). Deflationary pressures on the domestic economy during the pandemic prompted the U.S. government to expand public spending, resulting in a sharp surge in national debt. This situation illustrates that the fiscal sustainability of the United States is highly contingent upon global financial flows and the stability of the international economic system. The following graph presents the surge in U.S. national debt over the past one hundred years.

Figure 5. United States National Debt Burden (1924–2024)



Source: Fiscal Data (2024), “America’s Finance Guide” retrieved from <https://fiscaldata.treasury.gov/americas-finance-guide/national-debt/#the-national-debt-explained> on June 8, 2025

Figure 5. illustrates the trend of the United States’ national debt growth over the past one hundred years (1924–2024). The national debt burden experienced a significant increase in 2008, surpassing USD 15 trillion and continuing an exponential upward trend in the following decade. The peak surge occurred in 2020, marked by a drastic rise due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, total national debt reached USD 32.67 trillion, an increase of more than USD 8 trillion in less than two years since 2019 (Fiscal Data, 2024). This situation indicates that the United States relies not only on domestic economic strength but also on the international financial system. Such dependence exerts pressure on fiscal sustainability and domestic economic stability. Consequently, the economic burden resulting from prolonged military involvement in Afghanistan becomes increasingly unsustainable. In this context, the decision to withdraw troops represents a strategic measure to alleviate economic pressures while redirecting national focus and resources toward post-pandemic recovery efforts.

### **Military Capability**

From Coplin’s (2003) perspective, the dimension of military capability encompasses several strategic determinants that influenced President Joe Biden’s decision to continue the United States’ troop withdrawal policy from Afghanistan. These determinants include the human resource capacity within the military (personnel), the quality and intensity of training undertaken by personnel, the comprehensiveness of weapons systems and combat equipment, as well as the military institution’s ability to maintain domestic security stability in a sustainable manner.

The first dimension pertains to the human resource capacity of the military. According to the Watson Institute for International Public Affairs (2021), the Afghanistan conflict from 2001 to 2021 resulted in 176,206 fatalities, including military personnel, law enforcement officers, veterans, civilians, and humanitarian workers. This figure does not account for deaths caused by disease, food scarcity, lack of clean water, or other indirect consequences of the war. These data highlight the substantial

burden borne by the United States in terms of military personnel losses. The figure also underscores considerations of the human cost, which extends beyond economic loss to encompass the lives and safety of deployed personnel (Statista, 2022). Two decades of military engagement have exerted significant pressure on human resource capacity, leading to combat fatigue and profound psychological trauma. Incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among personnel returning from Afghanistan reportedly increased substantially, accompanied by a rise in suicide rates within the military (Watson Institute for International Public Affairs, 2025). In this context, the sustainability of military intervention is considered no longer to provide optimal strategic effectiveness. This situation has become a crucial factor in policy considerations, prompting the need to reorient strategy, including the cessation of prolonged direct military involvement in Afghanistan.

The second determinant influencing the United States' strategic calculation in the decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan is the effectiveness of military training programs. Over two decades of intervention, the United States, together with NATO, invested billions of dollars to strengthen Afghanistan's security sector, including the training of the Afghan National Army (ANA). The SIGAR report (2022) notes that more than USD 88 billion was allocated to this sector. However, the scale of investment did not correspond proportionally to outcomes on the ground. Afghan forces continued to exhibit a high dependence on U.S. logistical and intelligence support, so that when such assistance was reduced prior to the 2021 withdrawal, the domestic defense system quickly collapsed. The Taliban captured over 300 districts within a few months before taking Kabul in August 2021, underscoring the limitations of conventional military approaches in confronting non-linear battlefields and non-state actors (Al Jazeera, 2021). These limitations were also reflected in U.S. and civilian losses. Data from the Costs of War Project (2021) indicate that 2,461 U.S. military personnel were killed and approximately 20,000 others were wounded, while over 47,000 Afghan civilians lost their lives due to the conflict. These facts suggest that, despite extensive military training and development programs, their effectiveness remained limited. The sustainability of conventional military strategies not only failed to create stability but also exposed operational vulnerabilities, which ultimately became a key factor in the decision to withdraw troops.

The third determinant influencing the United States' strategic calculation in the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is the factor of military armament completeness. Since the onset of the intervention in 2001, the U.S. military has been recognized for its superior combat technology. Advanced weaponry included armed tactical vehicles, fighter aircraft, armed and reconnaissance drones such as the MQ-9 Reaper, and modern intelligence systems. U.S. air dominance was further reinforced through the deployment of F-16 and F-15E fighter jets, as well as B-52 strategic bombers, which were regularly utilized in operations against Taliban positions (Department of Defense, 2020). Additionally, the Afghan National Army (ANA) received significant support, including 43 MD-530 aircraft, 23 A-29 aircraft, and various other military equipment such as 70 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, MI-17 helicopters, Black Hawks, and UH-60 helicopters (BBC News, 2021). This equipment was intended to enhance the ANA's capacity to counter the intensified Taliban attacks.



However, despite being equipped with the world's most advanced military technology, the effectiveness of these weapons was limited in addressing asymmetric conflict. The Taliban did not operate as a conventional adversary but relied on guerrilla tactics, sudden attacks, and strategies of concealment within civilian communities. Their mastery of local terrain also enabled them to avoid direct confrontation (Sahel, 2020). Consequently, U.S. technological superiority could not be fully leveraged strategically, rendering the enormous military expenditures disproportionate to the outcomes on the ground. Furthermore, the burden of military spending became a critical factor in U.S. foreign policy discourse. According to the Costs of War Project, the total cost of the Afghanistan war from 2001 to 2020 is estimated to have exceeded USD 2.3 trillion, encompassing direct military operations, training and support for Afghan forces, security assistance, and the procurement and maintenance of combat equipment (Crawford & Lutz, 2021).

The final determinant influencing the United States' strategic consideration in withdrawing troops from Afghanistan is the issue of domestic security stability. This concern became increasingly prominent as the United States faced waves of social protests, political polarization, and a rising domestic terrorism threat, necessitating a shift of military attention inward. In recent years, domestic terrorism threats have shown a significant upward trend. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2023), the number of domestic terrorism cases handled by the FBI sharply increased from 1,981 cases in 2013 to 9,049 active cases in 2021. Data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) also recorded 73 domestic terror incidents or planned attacks in 2021, with fatalities rising dramatically from 5 in 2020 to 30 in 2021 (Doxsee et al., 2022). These incidents occurred across various regions, including New York City and Portland, which emerged as epicenters of escalating violence.

### **International Context**

The United States' decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan was influenced by geographical, economic, and political factors. Geographically, Afghanistan is a landlocked country in South Asia with mountainous and desert terrain, which complicates long-term military operations. Logistical complexities, including reliance on supply routes through Central Asia and Pakistan that are vulnerable to diplomatic disruptions, rendered the U.S. military presence inefficient (Cordesman, 2021). The topographical conditions, particularly the Hindu Kush mountain region, provided a strategic advantage to the Taliban for covert movement and guerrilla attacks. Consequently, despite the deployment of over 775,000 personnel since 2001, sustainable stability remained unattained (Crawford & Lutz, 2021). Another geographical factor is the regional political dynamics, notably the Pakistan–India tensions, which affected the security of supply routes and increased the risk of U.S. involvement in bilateral conflicts beyond its military mandate (Kousar et al., 2023). The rivalry between these two nuclear powers further heightened geopolitical vulnerability, making the troop withdrawal a strategic measure to avoid uncontrollable regional escalation. Thus, the geographical determinants encompass not only Afghanistan's physical conditions but also regional rivalries with the potential to exacerbate international tensions (Das, 2020).

In the economic dimension, the United States' decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan was closely linked to strategic competition with China following the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exacerbated fiscal pressures that were already strained by the substantial costs of overseas military operations, including the war in Afghanistan. Since 2001, the United States has spent over USD 2.3 trillion on military operations, development assistance, and veterans' needs, an amount considered increasingly inefficient in the context of global economic uncertainty (Crawford & Lutz, 2021). Concurrently, China's economic rise further challenged U.S. hegemonic standing, with China recording an economic growth rate of 8.1% in 2021 compared to 5.7% in the United States (Ross, 2025). This disparity reinforced the urgency for Washington to reallocate resources from prolonged conflict toward global economic and technological competition with Beijing.

This gap indicates that China not only recovered more rapidly from the pandemic's impact but also expanded its economic capabilities more aggressively than the United States. The disparity in growth rates underscores the urgency of reallocating U.S. economic resources from less productive sectors, including prolonged military interventions such as in Afghanistan. The decision to withdraw all military forces from Afghanistan can thus be viewed as part of a national priority restructuring in response to the challenges of global economic competition, particularly with China as the principal competitor.

In the political dimension, the United States' decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan was influenced by a strategic shift in priorities from counterterrorism to great power competition. The 2018 National Defense Strategy emphasizes that strategic competition with major powers, particularly China and Russia, has become the central focus of national security, superseding terrorism-related issues (US Department of Defense, 2018). Within this framework, prolonged military involvement in Afghanistan was deemed no longer aligned with the United States' long-term strategic interests. Additionally, external political pressures accelerated the withdrawal process. The UN Security Council, through Resolution 2513, welcomed the U.S. –Taliban peace process and called for a gradual reduction of foreign troops as a gesture of respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty (United Nations Security Council, 2020). Furthermore, permanent members such as China and Russia emphasized that the troop withdrawal should be conducted responsibly, while highlighting that two decades of U.S. military intervention had resulted in instability, a humanitarian crisis, and structural weaknesses within the Afghan government. (United Nations, 2021). Thus, the decision to withdraw troops not only reflects a repositioning of Washington's global strategy but also constitutes a response to international community demands to prioritize sovereignty and the peaceful resolution of the Afghan conflict.

## **CONCLUSION**

The decision to withdraw United States troops from Afghanistan in 2021 represents a pivotal turning point in Washington's post-9/11 foreign policy. The findings suggest that a complex interplay of domestic factors, economic and military capabilities, and the international context shaped this decision. On the domestic front, several elements drove the troop withdrawal policy, including pressure from bureaucratic actors such as diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. Secretary of State Antony

Blinken, and President Joe Biden, who served as the central decision-maker. In addition, there was influence from the majority of US political party members, anti-war groups, Muslim communities, and human rights organizations, all of whom supported the withdrawal decision. Furthermore, the media and broad public support in the United States played a significant role in compelling the government to rationalize its overseas military engagement.

From the perspective of economic capabilities, a critical factor was the significant economic pressure faced by the United States following the pandemic, marked by a decline in GDP and an increase in national debt. Consequently, national policy was directed toward domestic economic recovery through more efficient and inward-focused budget allocation. Regarding military capabilities, issues included limitations in military training effectiveness, the enormous financial burden of the war, which amounts to trillions of dollars, and the geographical complexity of Afghanistan, which reduced the strategic viability of a long-term military presence. At the international level, normative pressure from the United Nations, coupled with the United States' strategic shift from counterterrorism operations to great power competition with China and Russia, acted as a catalyst for policy repositioning.

Thus, the troop withdrawal cannot be understood merely as a tactical measure but rather as a manifestation of the United States' grand strategy restructuring in response to the dynamics of the contemporary international order. The Afghanistan case illustrates the limitations of military-based state-building, while underscoring the importance of aligning objectives, means, and resources in foreign operations. Theoretically, these findings support Coplin's proposition that foreign policy decision-making is shaped by the interplay between domestic factors, state capabilities, and the international structure.

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