



AFGHANISTAN

Support for Talks, Ambivalence Toward Withdrawal

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America's war in Afghanistan entered its 19th year this month.¹ President Donald Trump's approach to the war has veered between escalation and a complete withdrawal of American troops subsequent to a negotiated deal with the Taliban. Some 12,000 American troops remain deployed in Afghanistan, and more than 50 have been killed since President Trump took office in 2017.²

Views of American voters

Views on Afghanistan are soft, with widespread ambivalence toward U.S. military involvement in the country

Share of respondents



Source: Center for American Progress and GBAO, "Foreign Policy Research – Phase III" (Washington: 2019), available at <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2019/07/29142002/FP-condensed.pdf>.

A majority of American voters—54 percent—support negotiations with the Taliban to end Afghanistan's decadeslong conflict. But at the same time, a plurality of voters—48 percent—believe that the United States should keep troops in Afghanistan to combat the Taliban and other terrorist groups as well as keep peace in the region. Other main takeaways include:

- **Widespread ambivalence toward America's military involvement in Afghanistan.** Ambivalence toward ending American military involvement in Afghanistan transcends partisan divides: Democrats find themselves almost evenly split for and against staying in Afghanistan, with 43 percent favoring either option. Meanwhile, a majority, or 58 percent, of Republicans favor remaining. Only a plurality of independents, at 49 percent, favor leaving. Likewise, ambivalence

about Afghanistan transcends generational divides: A plurality, or 45 percent, of Millennials and those in Generation Z support keeping U.S. troops there, as do a similar plurality (44 percent) of Generation X and a majority of Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation (52 percent).

- **Support for a smaller, more focused U.S. military presence.** Among voters who favor keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan, a plurality, or 48 percent, say that the United States should keep a small number of specialized troops in the country to train Afghan forces, while slightly more than one-third, or 35 percent, say that the United States should deploy as many troops to Afghanistan as military leaders feel are necessary to provide security. Majorities among Democrats (55 percent) and Millennials and Gen Zers (51 percent) who favor keeping troops in Afghanistan support a smaller presence.
- **Broad support for negotiations with the Taliban to end the conflict.** Majorities of Democrats and Republicans, at 60 percent and 51 percent, respectively, support talks with the Taliban, as do a plurality of independents (46 percent). Likewise, majorities of Millennials and Gen Zers, at 60 percent, and Baby Boomers and Silent Generation, at 57 percent, back negotiations, as do a plurality of those in Generation X (43 percent).
- **Low preference intensity on both American involvement in Afghanistan and negotiations with the Taliban.** By and large, American voters lack firm opinions on what their country should do in Afghanistan. A plurality—48 percent—favor keeping U.S. troops in the country to fight the Taliban, and almost 4 in 10, or 39 percent, say U.S. troops should not remain in Afghanistan. But few felt strongly about either staying or leaving, at 11 percent and 16 percent, respectively. Similarly, while a majority of voters say the United States should negotiate with the Taliban to end the conflict, only 2 in 10, or 19 percent, strongly back talks and even fewer—16 percent—strongly oppose talks.

Key points

- American voters lack firm opinions on Afghanistan policy and remain open to persuasion as to whether the United States should remain involved in the country militarily.
- Policymakers must balance concerns about prolonged military conflict against enduring public anxieties about international terrorism in Afghanistan and the Middle East, as well as broader strategic priorities and threats such as China and Russia.
- Although Americans are open to talks with the Taliban, President Donald Trump is not pursuing the sort of negotiated settlement to the conflict that would both safeguard American interests in Afghanistan or the rights of the Afghan people.

The progressive policy alternative

- **Reaffirm America’s long-term civilian relationship with the Afghan people.** No matter what happens with its military presence in Afghanistan, the United States should continue to support both the Afghan government and the Afghan people through financial assistance and aid programs.
- **Pursue aggressive multilateral diplomacy.** The war in Afghanistan has long involved more than just the United States and the Taliban, and diplomatic talks to end the war should reflect that fact.
- **Recognize the trade-offs involved in any Afghanistan policy.** The United States cannot achieve all its goals in Afghanistan at an acceptable cost and thus will be forced to make hard trade-offs to end its military involvement there. Moreover, staying in Afghanistan carries its own set of wider geopolitical opportunity costs for the United States vis-a-vis strategic competitors such as China and Russia.

American voters remain ambivalent about whether the U.S. military should stay engaged in Afghanistan or withdraw from the country. While they worry about the continuing threat of terrorism and instability, they also favor negotiations with the Taliban that could end the conflict.

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This information is based on a national poll of 1,200 registered voters conducted July 10 to 14, 2019, by the Center for American Progress and GBAO. It is also informed by a series of focus groups, qualitative interviews, and a national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted February 25 to March 3, 2019. Polling results are on file with the authors.

Endnotes

1 For further reading on this topic, see Kelly Magsamen and Michael Fuchs, “The Case for a New U.S. Relationship with Afghanistan” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2019), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/07/29/472611/case-new-u-s-relationship-afghanistan/>.

2 Ibid.; Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, “U.S. Is Quietly Reducing Its Troop Force in Afghanistan,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/world/asia/afghanistan-troop-reduction.html>.