

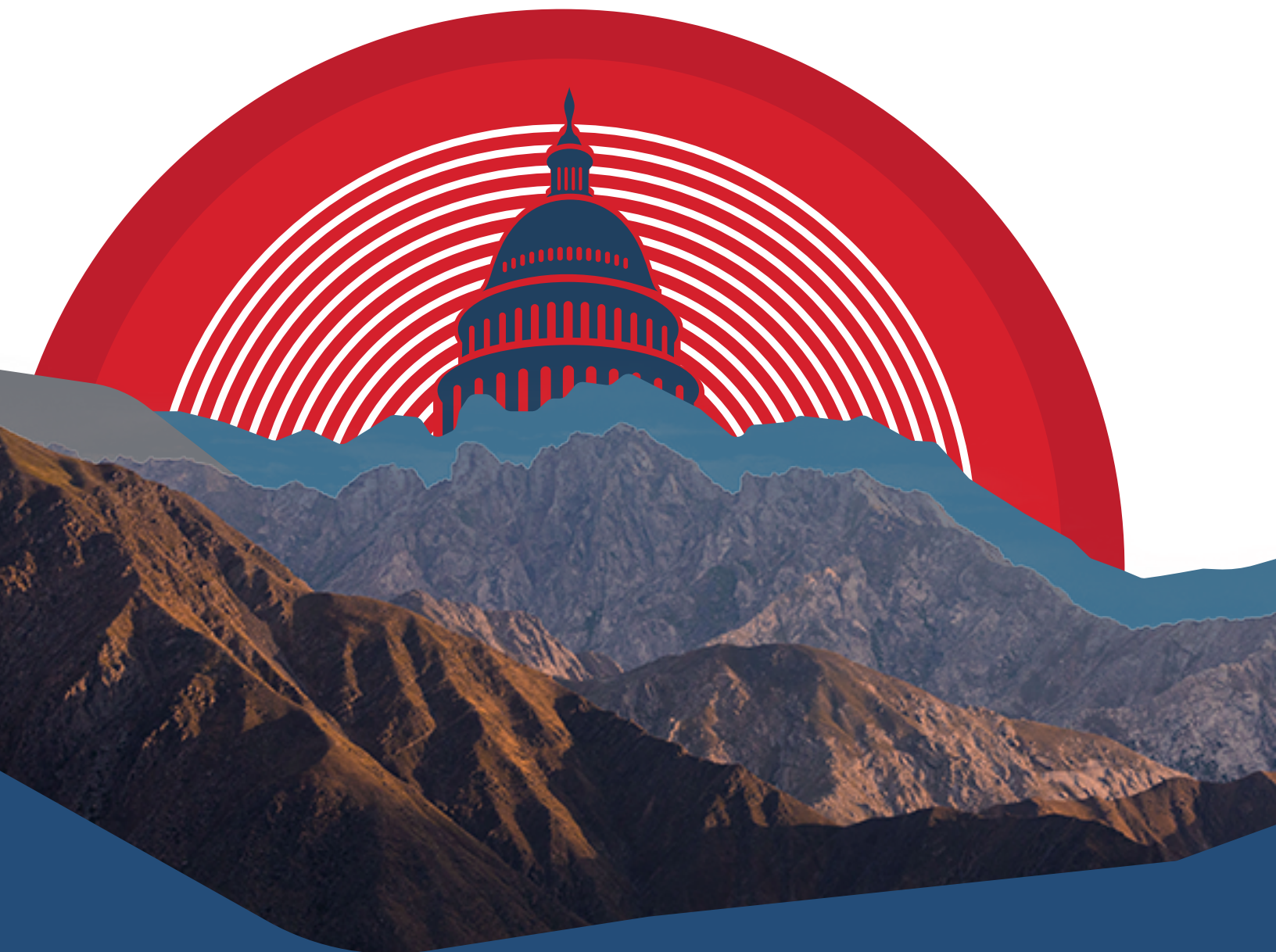


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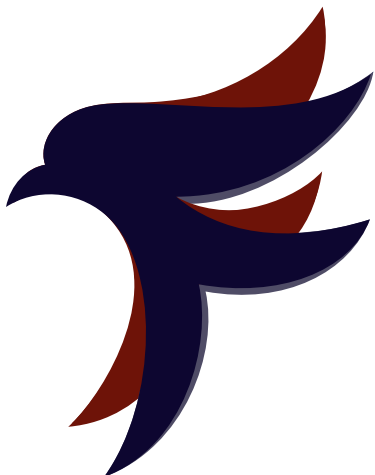
EURASIA PROGRAM

AFGHANISTAN AFTER ZAWAHIRI

AMERICA'S COUNTERTERRORISM OPTIONS IN THE NEW SOUTH ASIA



PHILIP WASIELEWSKI



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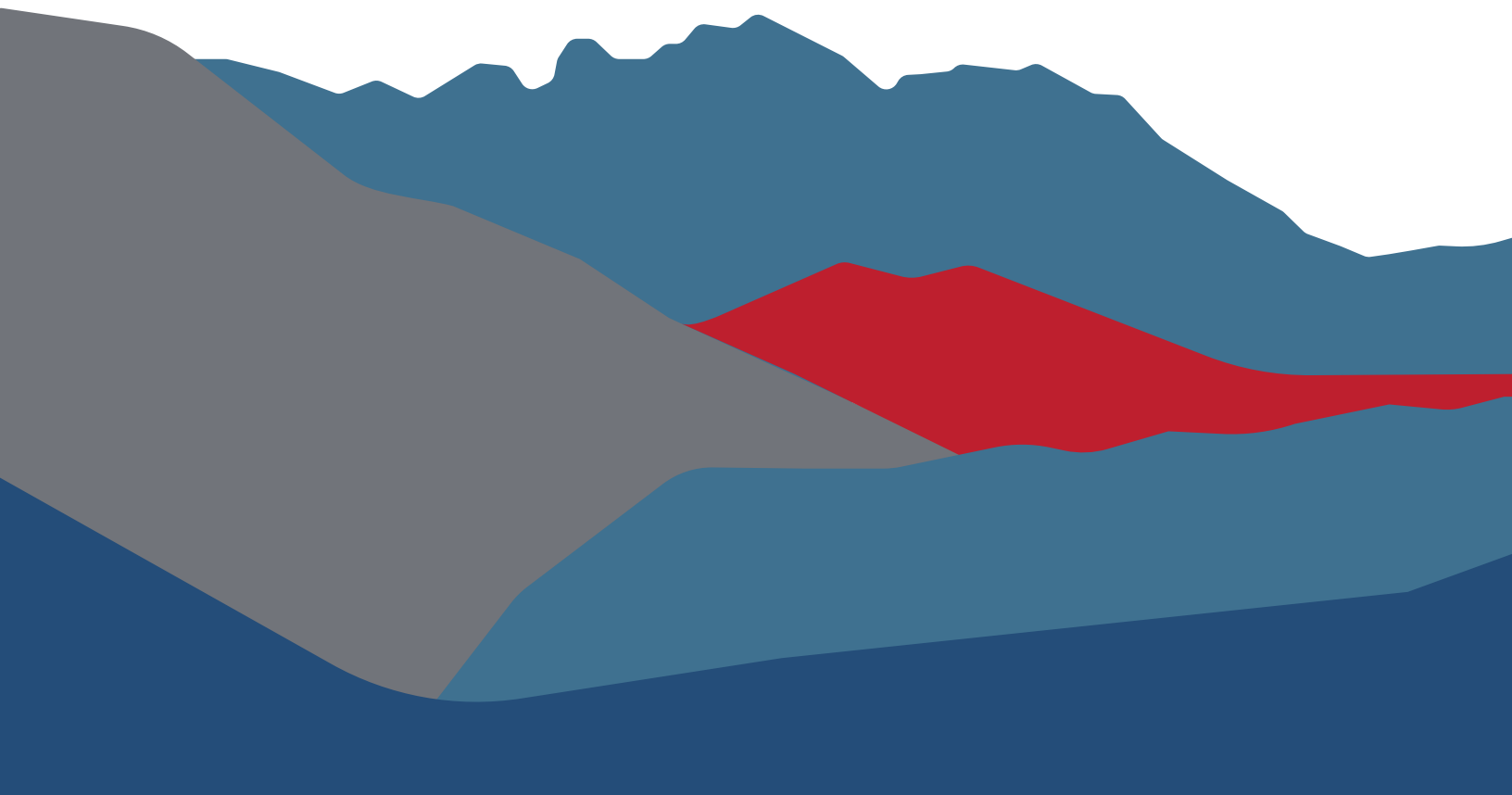


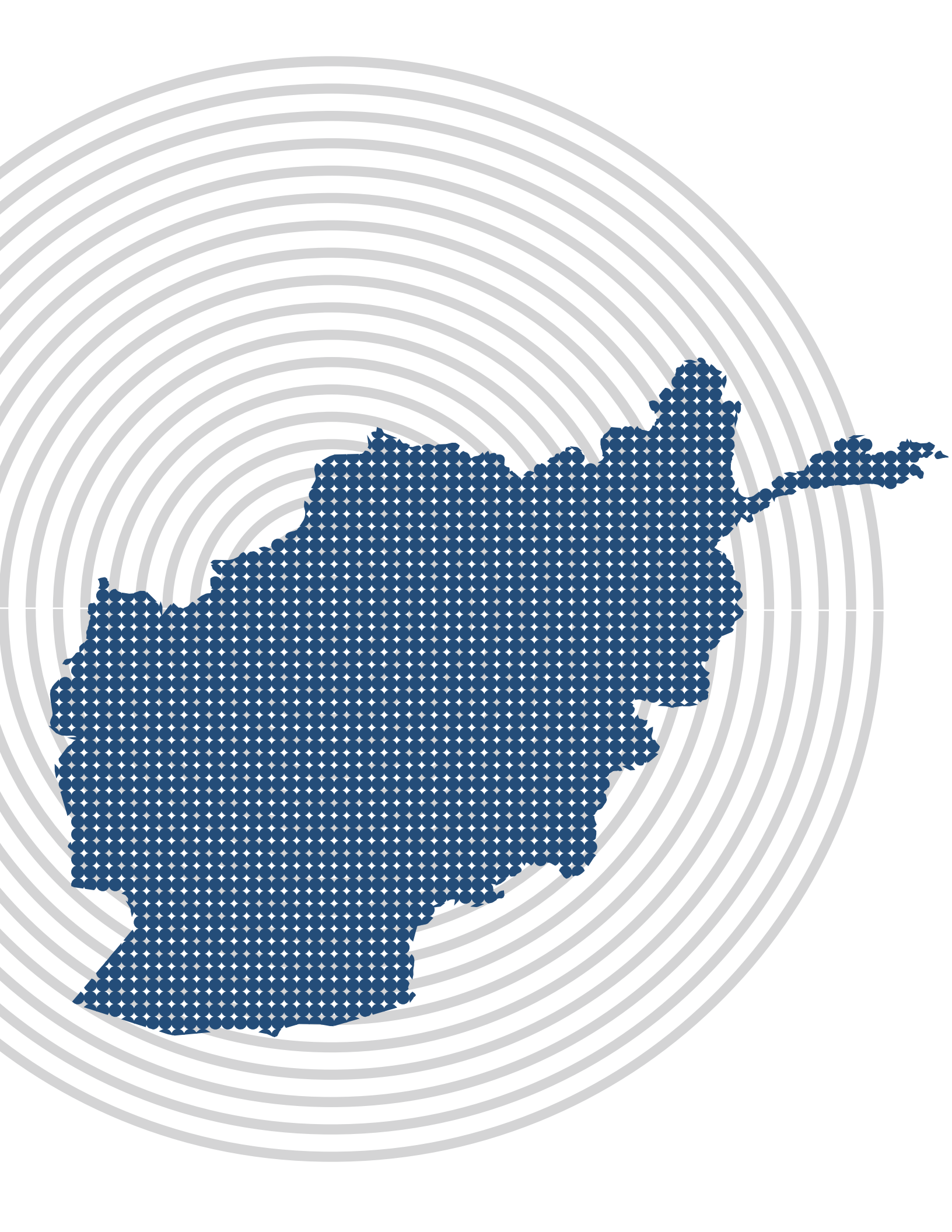
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Philip Wasielowski





Despite the attention in Washington currently paid to developments in Ukraine and the Taiwan Strait, terrorism remains a threat to US national security. The recent counterterrorism strike against Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul highlights that the fight against al-Qaeda, among other groups, is not over, and that Afghanistan remains a safe harbor for many of the world's terrorist organizations or their affiliates. Going forward, the United States will need to continue to dedicate resources to detect and disrupt terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan. To do so, **Washington needs to rebuild a coalition of allies opposed to violent Islamist extremism—both around Afghanistan and inside the country—who can provide intelligence and logistics support as needed, to help in that task.**

INTRODUCTION

The current national security horizon of the United States is dominated by the immense storm cloud of the Russian-Ukrainian War. Hovering behind it are other darkening shadows of possible Chinese aggression against Taiwan, Iranian and North Korean nuclear threats, and worldwide economic distress. Yet the threat from terrorism—or more precisely, the threat of violent Islamist extremist attacks against the US homeland and American interests—remains. While terrorist groups are diminished after two decades of US and partner counterterrorism efforts, many of the most dangerous organizations still exist and have a presence in Afghanistan.

A year after America's precipitous and disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, the terrorism threat that brought the United States there in the first place still exists. While the United States and the Taliban regime have a common interest in defeating the Islamic State in Afghanistan, there is no other convergence of interests (or values) between Washington and Kabul. In fact, the Taliban is actively aiding America's enemies. Afghanistan is home to numerous other terrorist groups sheltered and/or supported by the Taliban. Some of these groups (like al-Qaeda) have global ambitions, while others are focused on regional targets in India, Pakistan, and Central Asia.

Preempting terrorist attacks by any of these groups in Afghanistan remains a formidable task. Unlike in the 1990s, there is only one Central Asian state, Tajikistan, in opposition to the Taliban. Others have taken a neutral or "wait-and-see" stance towards the regime and are hesitant to support counterterrorism operations. Any strategy should take this evolving support (or lack thereof) from Central Asian states into account.

The recent successful drone attack in Kabul against Zawahiri seems to indicate that the counterterrorism infrastructure necessary to attrit al-Qaeda and its allies remains intact and capable. However, one shouldn't draw too many conclusions from a single, successful operation. The United States does not currently have all of the resources, intelligence, access, and partners necessary to conduct a sustained counterterrorism campaign against the numerous other threats in Afghanistan.

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The United States should also pause to consider that Zawahiri met his demise not in some remote area of Pakistan's tribal areas but in the middle of Kabul. This after the Taliban assured the world that they would never again harbor terrorists. One must wonder, despite this great success, what else the Taliban and their partners are hiding from the world. A realistic appraisal of the Taliban's intentions, capabilities, and reliability should underline the need for a robust US counterterrorism approach in the region commensurate with all of its various threats.



Army paratroopers assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division prepare to board an Air Force C-17 at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, August 30, 2021.
(Army Master Sgt. Alexander Burnett/U.S. Department of Defense)

CURRENT THREATS FROM AFGHANISTAN

Major terrorist groups continue operating in Afghanistan. In addition to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, there are the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (or the Pakistani Taliban), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harakat-ul-Mujahedin, Hizbul Mujahedin, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Katibat Imam Bukhari, and Jamaat Ansarullah, to name only the major groups.

The United Nations estimated in 2020 that al-Qaeda had between 400 to 600 fighters in Afghanistan.¹ However, as counterterrorism expert Bill Roggio noted that same year, it is easy to undercount al-Qaeda's fighting strength in Afghanistan. Many of its members are dual-hatted as members of both the terrorist group and the Taliban or Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. Furthermore, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Hizbul Mujahedin, Harakat-ul-Mujahedin, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Jamaat Ansarullah, and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan all have strong al-Qaeda links, which is why together they were once referred to as "al-Qaeda and the Allied Movements." These groups have fought together in the past, shared personnel when needed, and can quickly increase the strength of al-Qaeda as requirements demand.² To these several thousand terrorist foot soldiers in the al-Qaeda constellation, there are also approximately 4,000 Islamic State fighters in Afghanistan.³

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are global in their ambitions. The other groups in Afghanistan have regional jihadi goals. The Uighur-based East Turkestan Islamic Movement targets Chinese rule in Xinjiang; Hizbul Mujahedin, Harakat-ul-Mujahedin, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Lashkar-e-Taiba



Map of Afghanistan. (CIA World Factbook)

The regionally focused al-Qaeda affiliates threaten US interests via their efforts to destabilize the nuclear-armed nations of India and Pakistan, and the oil- and gas-rich nations of Central Asia.

serve as Pakistani government proxies in their guerrilla war against India, especially in Kashmir; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and its splinter group Katibat Imam Bukhari are Uzbek jihadi groups; and Jamaat Ansarullah is a Tajik off-shoot of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan that is dedicated to overthrowing the government in Dushanbe.⁴ The regionally focused al-Qaeda affiliates threaten US interests via their efforts to destabilize the nuclear-armed nations of India and Pakistan, and the oil- and gas-rich nations of Central Asia.

AL-QAEDA AND THE ISLAMIC STATE IN AFGHANISTAN ARE RIVALS—FOR NOW

The conflict between the Taliban and the Islamic State is not immutable. Ideological rivals can put hatreds aside and unite, if only temporarily, should circumstances require it for either survival or mutual benefit.

The dispute between the two parties in Afghanistan reflects part of the larger conflict between the Islamic State—formerly al-Qaeda in Iraq—and the main al-Qaeda franchise, but also internal Afghan jihadi dynamics. The schism has deep underpinnings, but circumstances could lead to a settlement or at least détente between the two groups.

This rivalry began in 2005 during the Iraq insurgency. Zawahiri publicly chastised the uber-violent activities of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. It intensified in 2013 when Zarqawi's successor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, renamed al-Qaeda in Iraq as the Islamic State. Under Baghdadi, the Islamic State intervened in the Syrian civil war, to the consternation of the already existing al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, the Nusra Front. This brought further rebuke from Zawahiri, who by this point was leading al-Qaeda after Osama bin Laden's death.⁵ After the Islamic State's swift successes in June 2014 in western Iraq and eastern Syria, Baghdadi proclaimed this conquered territory a "caliphate," thereby claiming spiritual and temporal authority over all Muslims worldwide. In 2015, Zawahiri, who had earlier cut al-Qaeda's ties with the Islamic State over the conflict with Nusra Front, refused to endorse or subordinate his organization to the self-proclaimed caliphate.⁶

The split between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State emerged in Afghanistan in February 2014. It started when nine al-Qaeda members defected to the Islamic State, and were soon joined by others from al-Qaeda, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, and the Taliban. In January 2015, this group under the leadership of former Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan commander Hafiz Saeed Khan swore *bay'a* or fealty to Baghdadi, and were formally named the Khorasan Province of the Islamic State—signifying their area of operations extended across Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan.⁷

The dispute between the two parties in Afghanistan reflects part of the larger conflict between the Islamic State—formerly al-Qaeda in Iraq—and the main al-Qaeda franchise, but also internal Afghan jihadi dynamics.

Part of the attraction of the Islamic State for Afghan and Pakistani jihadis was to be part of a new universal caliphate. The creation of the Islamic State in Afghanistan also exposed a simmering dispute between Salafi and Deobandi schools of Islamic thought in the Taliban movement. Since the founding of the Taliban, its leaders and scholars have adhered to Deobandism, a revivalist movement of the Hanafi school



Women in burqa with their children in Herat, Afghanistan. (Arnensen/Wikimedia Commons)

of Islam, traditional to Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. They suppressed Salafism, which comes from the Wahhabi revivalist movement of the Hanbali school of Islamist thought, which stresses a purer and stricter following of Islamic codes and traditions.⁸ This conflict is ironic when one considers that Deobandis are just as extreme as Wahhabis, and the past influence of Wahhabism on Deobandism. In fact, two Deobandi forefathers, Shah Waliullah Dehlawi (1703–1762) and Syed Ahmad Barelvi (1786–1831), were influenced by Wahhabi theology during visits to Arabia. Shah Waliullah studied in seminaries in Mecca and Medina with the same teachers as Wahhabism's founder Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab who was his contemporary. Syed Ahmed was exposed to Wahhabism during a hajj in the early 19th century. Upon his return to British India, his Wahhabist-influenced teachings would become a catalyst for the Deobandi movement.⁹

Despite this historical commonality, with the creation of the Islamic State in Afghanistan, those Taliban members who were attracted to Salafi vice Deobandi teachings finally had a home.

Theology, in part, helps fuel the divide today between the ruling Taliban and the insurgent Islamic State movement in eastern and northern Afghanistan. However, considerations of power are even more important. The Islamic State in Afghanistan, as part of the caliphate, believes it has the right to rule the country. The Taliban, for its part, spent twenty years struggling to gain power in Afghanistan, and is not about to give it up without a fight. Nevertheless, a mutual need to survive could motivate both to come to a modus vivendi.

Despite some theological differences, the Taliban and Islamic State in Afghanistan have similar jihadist views of Islam (as does al-Qaeda). Furthermore, the Islamic State in Afghanistan faces the reality that since the Islamic State no longer holds any

major amounts of territory or population, the caliphate now exists in name only. The Taliban, on the other hand, are the only Sunni Islamist group to control a sovereign state. Conversely, the Taliban face the reality that their hold on power is challenged by various resistance groups and a moribund economy. Survival will depend on coopting or conquering the resistance and delivering public goods to the Afghan people.

Taliban face the reality that their hold on power is challenged by various resistance groups and a moribund economy.

Some kind of compromise between the Taliban and the Islamic State in Afghanistan could help both Islamist parties to survive. With the demise of the divisive Zawahiri, a new al-Qaeda leader with better leadership skills might bridge past differences with the Islamic State to facilitate a reconciliation between the al-Qaeda and Taliban on one side and the Islamic State on the other. Such a move would increase the odds of survival for their terrorist safe haven and reunify the jihadist movement. After all, the Taliban is on its back foot in terms of international public opinion after Zawahiri was found to be living in Kabul, and it will need to be as strong internally as possible to face upcoming external pressure over this affair. If the Taliban and al-Qaeda ever reconcile with the Islamic State, the United States would face a united terrorist front in Afghanistan, the home of the greatest collection of Islamist terrorist groups in the world. Detecting and disrupting future possible terrorist attacks emanating from Afghanistan will require as many allies as possible. Fortunately, allies do exist.



View of Panjshir Valley from Ahmad Shah Massoud's Tomb. (Jim Kelly/Wikimedia Commons)

Resistance to Taliban rule in Afghanistan is not limited to the Islamic State. Other resistance movements exist consisting primarily of ethnic Tajiks who wish to liberate their native regions from Taliban control as well as some Hazara and Uzbek elements wishing for the same.¹⁰ The Tajik-based resistance consists of several groups and is centered in the predominately Tajik areas of the Panjshir Valley, Badakhshan, Badghis, Baghlan, Kapisa, Kunduz, Parwan, and Takhar provinces. Elements of the Hazara population with some support from neighboring Uzbek communities are strongly resisting the Taliban in the northern Balkhab district of Sar-e-Pul province.

There is also a nascent Uzbek resistance in Faryab province. These movements are currently small, outnumbered, and poorly supplied. However, they have survived last winter's harsh conditions, continue to fight, and offer the best option for an ally with whom the United States could conduct counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.

THE TAJIK RESISTANCE TO THE TALIBAN

The ethnic Tajiks of Afghanistan have traditionally been the natural foes of the Taliban and its terrorist allies. When the Taliban swept through Afghanistan in 1995 and 1996—conquering Kabul and 90 percent of the country—they were the main resistance group to survive in their enclaves in the Panjshir Valley and other areas of northern Afghanistan along with small pockets of Uzbek and Hazara forces. Led by the legendary guerrilla leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, who had fought the Soviet army to a standstill in the Panjshir Valley in the 1980s, these forces formed the United Islamic National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, better known as the Northern Alliance.



Ahmad Massoud (Wikimedia Commons)

Ahmad Massoud's lineage, the National Resistance Front legacy of resistance, and the size of its forces active in Afghanistan make the National Resistance Front first-amongst-equals in the anti-Taliban resistance.

Al-Qaeda assassinated Ahmad Shah Massoud on September 9, 2001, but his organization provided the initial support to Americans entering Afghanistan after 9/11. American and allied forces were also later assisted by Uzbek and Hazara forces and various Pashtun tribes until the Taliban were thrown out of power and a new government created in December 2001. The legacy of

this resistance forms the basis of the current main Tajik group opposed to the Taliban, the National Resistance Front (NRF) of Afghanistan.

In September 2019, Ahmad Massoud, the eldest son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, launched an anti-Taliban political movement, which he called the National United Front for Resistance, modeled on his father's organization. He opposed US peace talks with the Taliban that excluded the Afghan government.¹¹ Ahmad Massoud, noticing the collapse of the regular Afghan army that spring, then announced the formation of the second NRF or "NRF II" of Afghanistan in May 2021. This move transformed the anti-Taliban political movement into an armed resistance group. After the Afghan army collapsed under Taliban onslaughts in the summer of 2021 and President Ashraf Ghani fled Kabul on August 15, First Vice President Amrullah Saleh and Ahmad Massoud, with several thousand Tajik soldiers and

policemen, moved into the Panjshir Valley. Once there, Saleh, in the absence of Ghani, declared himself the “caretaker” president of Afghanistan.¹² However, the Panjshir Valley was surrounded by the Taliban on three sides and fell after three weeks of fighting. Massoud and Saleh escaped by helicopter to Dushanbe. Their forces melted away into the mountains and reconsolidated in remote valleys.

Ahmad Massoud’s lineage, the NRF legacy of resistance, and the size of its forces active in Afghanistan make the NRF first-amongst-equals in the anti-Taliban resistance. Nearly a year since the fall of Kabul, approximately two to three thousand NRF fighters are conducting a guerrilla war in the Panjshir Valley and neighboring Baghlan province under the overall command on the ground by former Afghan Special Forces officer Khalid Amiry. The Taliban reportedly still hold the central road through the valley, but not all of the side valleys and none of the mountainous regions. The main NRF commander in the Panjshir is Doctor Gulistan, a former National Directorate of Security chief in Badakhshan and Takhar provinces, whose fighters are waging a traditional guerrilla warfare of hit-and-run strikes while being totally dependent on the local population for food and intelligence and on captured Taliban weapons and ammunition to arm themselves. In response, the Taliban has conducted severe crackdowns against the local populace. Taliban atrocities against the civilian population have increased popular support for the NRF and have led to at least one defection. In the Panjshir’s Dara district a local Tajik Taliban leader named Malik defected with his forces to the NRF because of his disenchantment with Taliban treatment of local population to include torture and murder. On June 16, 2022, NRF forces downed a Taliban helicopter conducting resupply missions in the valley.¹³ In Baghlan province, the NRF’s strongest presence is in Andarab district, but recently

an NRF force under commander Baryali Sangen seized control of two towns in the Tajik-Hazara populated Khost wa Fereng district. Small NRF groups are also fighting in the Kishim district of Badakhshan and the Wersaf district of Takhar province. The NRF’s near term political goal is to liberate the Tajik areas in the north from Taliban rule as they did under Ahmad Shah Massoud.

Taliban atrocities against the civilian population have increased popular support for the National Resistance Front and have led to at least one defection.

A separate Tajik resistance movement, the Freedom Front of Afghanistan, is based in Parwan province just north of Kabul, and led by former Afghan army chief of staff and acting defense minister General Mohammed Yasin Zia. Its members come predominately from the Shomali Plains region of the province and its operations concentrate on the now Taliban controlled Bagram airbase to include an early July rocket attack. The Freedom Front reportedly also has a presence in Baghlan, Kapisa, Kunduz, and Takhar provinces and has conducted direct action missions against Taliban figures in nearby Kabul, against whom they have publicized bounties. There have also been reported assassinations of Taliban figures in Jalalabad but no group has taken responsibility for these actions. According to NRF sources, the NRF and Freedom Front are in communication on the battlefield and coordinate activities but each group is separate militarily and politically.



Taliban fighters in Kabul, August 17 2021. (Voice of America/Wikimedia Commons)

There are reportedly several other Tajik-based resistance movements in Afghanistan, such as the Freedom Corps led by Mohammed Jahish, which operates in Badakhshan and Baghlan provinces, and several groups in northern Afghanistan related to the Jamiat-e Islami party of Tajik leader Atta Mohammed Noor, the former governor of Balkh province, who sometimes refer to themselves as the High Council of Resistance. There is also a reported Liberation Front of Afghanistan, but little is known about it. None of these lesser

Tajik-based groups operating in northern Afghanistan seem to have the organization or the military capability of the NRF or Freedom Front. However their presence indicates that among the Afghan Tajiks there is a willingness to resist, but that this resistance is not yet united. One of the reasons for this disunity is resentment amongst those Tajik leaders who did not serve in the Afghan government of former President Ghani against those Tajik leaders who did, such as Amrullah Saleh and General Yasin Zia.

OTHER ANTI-TALIBAN RESISTANCE

The next largest anti-Taliban resistance movement outside of the Baghlan, Panjshir, and Parwan provinces is centered in Balkhab district, Sar-e Pul province, whose population is a combination of ethnic Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks. In 2001, Balkhab was the last stronghold of Uzbek resistance to the Taliban. Afghan Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum infiltrated into Balkhab in May 2001 to fight the Taliban, and a joint CIA-Special Forces team infiltrated into the same district in October 2001 to support his efforts.

The resistance in Balkhab district is led by Mawlawi Mehdi Mujahid, a Hazara who joined the Taliban in 2019. Mehdi was born in Balkhab but recently served as the Taliban governor in the predominately Hazara province of Bamiyan. He revolted against the Taliban when they replaced him and other local Hazara Taliban leaders in the province with Pashtun Taliban commanders. Another reported source of conflict between the local Hazaras and the Pashtun Taliban is a dispute over control of the coal and copper resources of the area.¹⁴

Serious fighting between Mehdi's supporters in Balkhab and Taliban soldiers has been reported since early June. Approximately 70 ethnic Uzbek fighters have also reportedly joined their Hazara neighbors in this fighting. So has former Bamiyan governor Mohammed Tahir Zaheer, a Hazara leader, with an unknown number of supporters. As in the Panjshir Valley, Taliban forces control the main road and populated areas in Balkhab, but not the more remote valleys and mountainous regions of the district. Mehdi is in contact with NRF leadership in Dushanbe but has not officially joined their organization. However, his revolt has benefited NRF operations since the Taliban

has had to transfer thousands of fighters from Panjshir to Balkhab.¹⁵

The most recent reporting from Balkhab district indicates that the Taliban have retaken the district and killed Mehdi as he was trying to flee to Iran. However, NRF sources report to the author that Mehdi was captured and is still alive in solitary confinement in a prison in Herat, Afghanistan. Mohammed Tahir Zaheer did manage to escape to Iran.¹⁶

In Faryab province, another group of Uzbek Taliban clashed with Pashtun Taliban forces in January 2022, because the Taliban were trying to take control of the province away from local ethnic leaders. The situation in the province remains insecure for the Pashtun Taliban. In Badakhshan province, Taliban leader Qari Weqaas has also turned sides and is fighting against the Taliban. Finally, Hazrat Ali, the leader of the Pashai ethnic group located primarily in Laghman and Nangarhar provinces, a mujahedeen veteran of the Afghan-Soviet war and a major figure in liberating Jalalabad from the Taliban in 2001, is currently in Dubai but is reported to be in discussions with Ahmad Massoud.¹⁷

There is very limited information about any anti-Taliban resistance in southern Afghanistan. This is unsurprising, since southern Afghanistan has long been a Taliban stronghold. There is a reported Pashtun-based resistance force—the Afghanistan Islamic National and Liberation Movement. It's led by former Afghan army Special Forces officer Abdul Mateen Sulaimakhail, but little is known about its size or operations, if any.¹⁸



From left to right: Haji Mohammed Mohaqi, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Atta Mohammed Noor. (Wikimedia Commons)

The limited resistance to Taliban rule in southern Afghanistan is not surprising because the Pashtun tribes are the heart of the Taliban movement. However, political differences have and still do exist amongst the numerous Pashtun tribes. In late 2001, with American support, several Pashtun tribal leaders such as Hamid Karzai (Popalzai tribe), Gul Agha Sherzai (Barakzai tribe), the brothers Abdul Haq and Haji Abdul Qadir (Ahmadzai tribe), and Atiqullah Ludin (Mashwani tribe) revolted against the Taliban; partly because of their dissatisfaction with Taliban rule and partly to ensure that any new Afghan government would include them. The same could happen again based on internal Pashtun politics and other motivations. For example, a key, if controversial, figure in Kandahar province was Afghan border police general Abdul Raziq (Achakzai tribe), who was assassinated by the Taliban in 2018. Since the Taliban takeover of Kandahar, many other of his family members have also perished. However, his brother, Tadeen Khan, has survived and is a sworn enemy of the Taliban. Blood feuds are powerful and persistent factors in Afghan politics and could help sway tribes and tribal leaders should the opportunity arise.

Separate from military efforts on the ground, an Afghan political organization uniting many former Afghan leaders is forming outside the country. On May 17 in Ankara, Turkey, at the residence of Afghan Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, approximately forty persons formed the Supreme Council of National Resistance to Save Afghanistan. The group included former jihadi leaders and political figures, including several Afghan women. Their goal is to resist the Taliban but also negotiate with them for political changes. This is a political grouping of various senior leaders such as Dostum, Haji Mohammed Mohaqiq (a Hazara), Atta Mohammed Noor (a Tajik), Abdulrab Rasoul Sayyaf (a Pashtun), Ismail Khan (a Tajik) and others, but it is not yet represented on the ground in Afghanistan by any armed forces.¹⁹ The NRF sent Hamid Wali Massoud, younger brother of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud and former Afghan ambassador to London, to observe the meeting and the two organizations are in contact but have not united. The most valuable service this council serves at the moment is as a grouping of the major Afghan political parties and uniting them to work together rather than at cross purposes.

WHAT SHOULD THE UNITED STATES DO?

History shows—from the experiences of the White Russians after the Bolshevik revolution to the Cuban exiles who fled Castro’s dictatorship—that the longer a government-in-exile stays out of its native land, the less relevant it becomes to the remaining citizens of that country and the less likely it can return. This is especially true when they have been ejected by despots, who with time will establish coercive population control measures to destroy any type of resistance. On the other hand, political groups that have lost a power struggle but have maintained an armed resistance and presence in their homeland—such as Mao’s Red Army in the 1930s, Franco’s Nationalist forces at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, or the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2000—can eventually prevail.

The resistance against the primarily Pashtun Taliban is based on minority groups indigenous to Afghanistan’s northern border region with several Central Asian countries, which could serve as a sanctuary or conduit for outside support. Although most of these countries are hesitant to provide such support—in part from fear of possible Taliban retribution—they also have a vested interest to create a *cordon sanitaire* between their secular states and a radical Islamist state and its terrorist confederates in Kabul. As Central Asian specialist Bruce Pannier highlighted in his recent Foreign Policy Research Institute report, *Northern Afghanistan and the New Threat to Central Asia*, “The deteriorating situation in the region demonstrates the limits of Central Asian states’ security strategies, and highlights that they have few options in dealing with a new threat on their border.”²⁰ Through sustained high level diplomatic engagement and security assistance that

assists Central Asian states protect their borders with Afghanistan, hopefully the United States can influence these states to discretely serve as a sanctuary and conduit for support for anti-Taliban resistance groups whose success would benefit Central Asian security writ large.

Inside Afghanistan, the United States needs a non-radical resistance movement to prevail where it can to give Washington the ability to conduct not just extraordinary missions against the most select high-value targets like Zawahiri, but also to establish the larger infrastructure necessary for intelligence collection and surveillance against the plethora of terrorist threats operating in the country.

Even a modicum of US political engagement and aid could be the difference between survival and submergence for these nascent anti-Taliban groups.

Unfortunately, due to the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, there is presently little political will in the United States for major material support to anti-Taliban resistance groups. However, even a modicum of American political engagement and aid could be the difference between survival and submergence for these nascent anti-Taliban groups. Furthermore, it should

A Marine hands water to evacuees at Hamid Karzai
International Airport, Kabul, Afghanistan, August 22, 2021.
(Marine Corps Sgt. Isaiah Campbell/ U.S. Department of Defense)



also be understood that suggested steps are meant to help various ethnic groups and tribes only secure their own home areas to be free of Taliban rule and not an attempt to overthrow the Taliban regime entirely. Therefore, the first steps should be small ones and applied to help the Afghan resistance help itself and not become decisively engaged ourselves.

For starters, the State Department could engage with the various Afghan resistance factions and build on recent contacts between the NRF and the Supreme Council of National Resistance to Save Afghanistan to help unify all Afghan resistance groups against their common goal. This would be similar to the efforts with the Afghan resistance in 1981 that produced a political agreement for dozens of disparate groups to come together into a seven-party alliance, end internecine fighting, and concentrate on expelling the Soviets from their country. At a minimum, the State Department could at least stop making statements that, “it would not support violent opposition towards the Taliban government,” especially when the United States has not recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.²¹

Further, US aid would help build anti-Taliban resistance groups into viable entities and would make these groups a more attractive option for former American-trained soldiers and police to join instead of the Islamic State. Many who have joined the Islamic State in Afghanistan, according to NRF sources I’ve spoken to, have done so only to protect themselves from Taliban retribution and because there are no other organized resistance groups in their area. In return for helping the resistance establish secure redoubts in Afghanistan, the United States would receive reciprocal support to reinforce and expand America’s existing counterterrorism infrastructure to prevent future terrorist attacks emanating from Afghanistan. Continued attrition of terrorist forces in Afghanistan and putting the Taliban on the defensive would also help protect Central Asian states and their important energy transportation corridors to the West from future Islamist extremist threats. The time to aid the anti-Taliban resistance for America’s own self-interests is now— while there is still a viable resistance to support.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Wasielewski is a 2022 Templeton Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and a former Paramilitary Case Officer who had a 31-year career in the Directorate of Operations of the Central Intelligence Agency. He was a member of the first CIA team into Afghanistan in 2001 and served a three-year assignment on the National Security Council staff as the Director for Intelligence and Covert Action programs. His CIA career was paralleled by a concurrent 30-year Marine Corps career (7 years active duty and 23 reserve) as an infantry officer including mobilizations for Afghanistan and Iraq. Philip Wasielewski graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1983 with a B.A. in International Relations and European History. He also has an M.A. from Harvard's Davis Center for Russian Studies and an M.A. in National Security Studies from the Army War College.



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ENDNOTES

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