



Rethinking
AFGHANISTAN

A path to put America first by ending our longest war

Fulfilling the U.S. National Defense Strategy's strategic goals requires rethinking the nation's open-ended presence in Afghanistan, both from a fiscal and a strategic perspective. Doing so has the potential to save or free up billions of dollars in critical resources and better defend the nation.



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Executive Summary

After 18 years at war, it is clear that American efforts in Afghanistan have been a strategic and fiscal failure. The original reasons for invading the country and then staying have shifted continually since 2001, while American lives and resources continue being committed. Recent efforts by the Trump Administration to wind down the nation's longest war should receive support from anyone who is concerned about national or fiscal security.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush framed the conflict in Afghanistan as a direct strike against those who attacked the United States. Since that time, it has devolved into an expensive, open-ended, and ultimately fruitless exercise in nation-building.

Those who defend staying in Afghanistan inevitably say it is too soon to withdraw. They claim doing so will encourage instability in the country or even require a reengagement of military forces. However, these arguments tend to ignore the role continued involvement has played in fostering instability of its own, to the tune of at least \$2 trillion – and counting.

Furthermore, debates that focus on timelines rather than conditions ignore alternative paths which would provide greater security to the U.S. and are significantly more affordable. Pursuing these paths offers several distinct benefits to policymakers now and in the future.

First, a new path would allow the United States to better fulfill the goals of the National Defense Strategy, resulting in a foreign policy that is more agile and prepared for 21st Century great power threats, not bogged down in an open-ended nation-building mission. Our involvement in Afghanistan has made it more difficult to follow through on U.S. strategic goals and discouraged regional players from stepping up to the task of maintaining stability – even when they have a vested interest in doing so.

Second, rethinking Afghanistan would be what the American people want, as clearly demonstrated in various public opinion polls. Now 18 years after the start of the conflict, American civilians and military veterans alike continue to favor withdrawal by significant margins.

Third, a reduced presence in Afghanistan offers the potential to save hundreds of billions of dollars. New estimates show that direct and indirect war spending to date totals more than \$2 trillion, and including future veterans' obligations results in a price tag of more than **\$2.5 trillion**.

Were the U.S. to draw down involvement, this paper estimates possible savings ranging from \$150 billion to \$280 billion over the next four years, and by between \$210 billion and \$386 billion when accounting for the accrual of additional future obligations. For context, based on the Congressional Budget Office's (CBO) latest projections, these savings would account for as much as 9.4% of the U.S. budget deficit during the next four years.

After 18 years at war, mistakes are myriad and documented, but ruminating on mistakes will neither bring back lives lost nor refund money spent. Lawmakers must instead learn from the past and create a better path forward by *rethinking Afghanistan*.

Rethinking Afghanistan

A path to put America first by ending our longest war

“This is not going to be won militarily.”

– *General Austin Scott Miller, Commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, October 2018*

“There is no military solution in Afghanistan.”

– *President Donald Trump, July 2019*

“What you have got to do is figure out what it is you intend to do at the outset [of a war] and then hold firm to that and don't half-step it.”

– *General James Mattis, September 2019*

Part I: Strategic Assessment

Background

In December 2018, President Donald Trump announced that U.S. forces in Syria would be withdrawn, and news soon broke that roughly half of the 14,000 U.S. forces remaining in Afghanistan would be coming home as well.

Just a few days later, the White House denied the latter, saying a decision had not been made on removing troops from America's longest war. Nevertheless, opposition came quickly, and would continue throughout 2019, as news of peace negotiations came in fits and starts and then died out.

This reaction was in sharp contrast to when the President ordered limited airstrikes in Syria in 2017. Then, Democratic leaders such as Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi gave Trump high marks for intervening militarily, and even his former opponent Hillary Clinton encouraged airstrikes on Syria mere hours before the president gave his order.

“I think Donald Trump became President of the United States” last night, declared CNN's Fareed Zakaria on the morning after the bombs dropped.¹

The sheer length of the war in Afghanistan, not to mention the eagerness for intervention from many public commentators, might lead one to assume that continuing the status quo is the best option. That idea would be a mistake. Current policy in Afghanistan has failed from a fiscally conservative and small-government perspective, and identifying an alternate path forward would offer several distinct benefits for policymakers both now and in the years to come.

First, a new strategy would achieve what the American people want. Most Americans, including active-duty military members and veterans, agree with the president's 2018 decision that it is time to wind down the war in Afghanistan.² A June 2019 Pew Research Center survey found that “majorities of both veterans (58%) and the public (59%) say the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting.”³

Second, a new strategy would formalize what has begun to happen already. The war is now older than the youngest soldiers who are fighting in it, and has wound down since its peak. At that point, it had drawn 100,000 Americans and tens of thousands of allied troops to the region. But as the *New York Times* noted in August 2019, “[w]ith a consensus emerging that neither side can win the war militarily, those numbers have now dropped to about 14,000 American troops and several thousand from NATO allies.”⁴

Similarly, Michelle Skorka observed in a piece for the *Council on Foreign Relations* that “[a] reduction of U.S. forces seems imminent, irrespective of the peace negotiation,”⁵ and in fact, in October 2019, the *New York Times* reported that the U.S. had quietly withdrawn roughly 2,000 troops from the country already.⁶ A clear strategy for Afghanistan would continue this drawdown, while minimizing the possibility of festering U.S. involvement, or worse, indefinite engagement without an end point.

What’s more, a successful strategy offers the potential to save an immense amount of taxpayer money, free up critical resources to be allocated elsewhere, and return Americans home from harm’s way.

Growing Involvement over Time

Since the start of the war in 2001, over 2,400 Americans have been killed, while roughly 20,000 have been injured.⁷ While the highest losses came early in the conflict, 2019 saw the most U.S. troop casualties in five years.

Of course, official troop counts tell only part of the story. There is also the role that the Central Intelligence Agency has played, and the potential inverse relationship it has with a troop drawdown. As noted in an August 2019 *Costs of War* report, “There is no public disclosure of the size of the CIA-supported units, but they probably have more than doubled since the 3,000 estimate used by Woodward in 2010.”⁸

Some have suggested growing covert involvement could lead to larger ramifications. “Militias that operate outside the control of the central state and the chain of command of its armed forces,” says the report, “will undermine the process of state formation and the prospects for a sustainable peace.”⁹

Regardless of whether one agrees with the idea that covert involvement will damage the peace process, there is no question that costs and risks on this front have been rising. President Trump has further expanded the CIA’s role in Afghanistan, relying on CIA-trained militias to carry out “hunt-and-kill operations,” a strategy that could continue or even ramp up after an official withdrawal.¹⁰

There is also no ignoring the civilian death toll – after attacks throughout the region, more than 45,000 Afghan troops and police officers have been killed over the last five years alone.¹¹

A Shifting Rationale

At the outset of the war in Afghanistan, U.S. goals seemed relatively straightforward. In an address to a joint session of Congress just weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush

framed the mission in clear terms, demanding that the nation turn over terrorist leaders, close training camps, and give the U.S. access to the camps.¹²

The 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy articulates the new vision that has developed in the years since then. “Today,” it says, “we are emerging from a period of strategic atrophy, aware that our competitive military advantage has been eroding ... Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”¹³

While “[denying] safe haven for terrorists” remains a goal, the larger focus has turned to building lasting coalitions and creating a region that not only denies safe haven to terrorism, but “is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States.”

Instead of a targeted effort to eliminate terrorist training centers, or even the broader-reaching goals of the global war on terror, larger proxy battles are now at play. As *RAND Corporation* scholar Ali Wayne recently told *The Atlantic*, “[O]ver the past year and a half or so, great-power competition has become the animating construct guiding U.S. foreign policy.”¹⁴

Elbridge Colby, who helped popularize the term, suggests that winning such a great-power competition, “would mean achieving ‘favorable regional balances of powers,’ especially in Asia and Europe, to prevent China in particular from dominating these regions.”¹⁵

Typically, those who object to a drawdown in Afghanistan do so because they suggest stepping back will allow terrorism to flourish – essentially arguing as if the last decades and shifting strategy never happened. Elongated nation-building, ostensibly to root out terrorism, may be making that goal harder while simultaneously harming the United States’ strategic interests.

The reasons that the U.S. remains in Afghanistan have shifted immeasurably over time, but as Quincy Institute scholar Adam Wunische argues, “Strategy isn’t valuable because it gives you the plan that will undoubtedly be executed – it’s valuable because it forces planners to prioritize interests, anticipate counter-strategies, and make tough choices. It can, and should, be updated as conditions change.”¹⁶

In other words, the changing landscape is not, as some have argued, reason to forgo an exit strategy entirely – but rather all the more reason to have one. Those looking to fulfill the goals of the National Defense Strategy should seek to identify an end point for the war in Afghanistan.

In looking ahead, there will need to be “difficult choices... to field a lethal, resilient, and rapidly adapting Joint Force” while ensuring “effective stewardship of taxpayer resources.”¹⁷ The United States, as the Strategy notes, has the “responsibility to gain full value from every taxpayer dollar spent on defense, thereby earning the trust of Congress and the American people.”¹⁸

U.S. objectives can only be reached, as the Strategy suggests, with creative approaches and “[m]utually beneficial alliances and partnerships” that will provide “a durable, asymmetric strategic advantage that no competitor or rival can match.”¹⁹ It is clear that fulfilling the goals of the National Defense Strategy requires both working effectively with regional powers and identifying an end point to U.S. involvement.

Regional Players

The U.S. is hardly the first nation to become entangled, or at least take an interest, in Afghanistan. Most are familiar with the Soviet misadventure in the 1980s, but “richer, more powerful neighbors ... [also] have a long history of taking sides in Afghan civil wars.”²⁰

More recently, U.S. involvement has not improved relations with nearby countries. Whereas most countries in the region supported the United States at the beginning of the war, at least privately, tensions have risen in the years since. Dobbins et al., writing for a recent *RAND* study, note that “U.S. relations with Afghanistan’s most-important neighbors are also at their lowest point since 2001.”²¹

Regional powers’ “clashes with one another, and their tensions with the United States, are complicating an endgame already filled with suspicion and uncertainty.”²² India and Pakistan, for instance, both exercise influence over the country. India has supported the Afghan government and remained anti-Taliban, while Taliban leadership is known to take refuge in sanctuaries within Pakistan.

The rise of the Haqqani terror network and its close ties to the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has further complicated the path ahead. Before peace talks initially fell apart, tensions were rising over disputed territory in Kashmir and the U.S. envoy’s decision to leave for New Delhi during those talks. The Trump administration had made progress in its efforts to get Pakistan’s involvement with a peace process, but these tensions “cast a shadow” over peace prospects.²³

Whereas competing interests among Pakistan and India present unique challenges for the United States, its position toward Iran is even more complex. While there are some naturally “overlapping interests” between Iran and the United States, “escalating tensions” between it and the Trump administration has meant that Iran is not a part of withdrawal discussions and might even be willing to support natural enemies as tensions rise with the U.S.²⁴

As Dobbins et al. note, “Since 2001, Russia and Iran have generally supported the Kabul government but, in recent years, have provided limited aid to the Taliban as a hedge.”²⁵ What’s more, “Russia and Iran, along with India and Uzbekistan, also have a history of support for Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara warlords.”²⁶

Addressing Objections

There is, of course, no foolproof or perfect process for peace, but it is worth considering commonly stated risks and objections.

Is it Too Soon for Withdrawal?

Perhaps the most common objection is that while leaving may be a good idea at some point, it is certainly not now and certainly not this way. As Dobbins et al. asserted shortly after the President’s 2018 announcement, “A precipitous departure, no matter how rationalized, will mean choosing to lose.”²⁷

The risk, this argument goes, is that America will lose credibility among allies elsewhere and face increased terrorist threats from the region. Maseh Zarif and James Zumwalt expressed this concern in *The Hill*: “There are jihadists in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria who intend to attack the U.S. How would a retreat affect their likelihood of success?”²⁸

Some have even suggested that a withdrawal will equal a “full-blown civil war and the re-establishment of a terrorist sanctuary” which Afghan police and the military are ill-equipped to deal with.²⁹ Certainly, a poorly managed withdrawal could create such disastrous consequences.

The operative question, however, should not be one of timing but rather conditions – specifically, whether conditions for a lasting peace can be met, and whether the U.S. can achieve its strategic objectives. Unless opponents of withdrawal are prepared to argue for a permanent presence in Afghanistan, they must concede that an end point can be identified, and that the key task is to find the conditions for doing so.

If one is to abide by the National Defense Strategy, these conditions include containing terrorist networks and avoiding a situation in which U.S. enemies dominate.

Will U.S. Rivals Win by Waiting?

Writing for *National Review*, Andrew McCarthy argues that the original enemy, the Taliban, is simply playing a waiting game – and winning. “They are,” he says, “in attack mode to ‘pave the way for the withdrawal of invaders and establish a true Islamic system.’”³⁰ Similarly, Dobbins et al. argue for *RAND* that “[i]f Taliban leaders receive or come to expect a cost-free U.S. withdrawal, they will have little incentive to bargain with the United States or with the U.S.-backed Afghan government.”³¹

In other words, these observers suggest, Taliban leaders may choose to simply opt out of any peace process, knowing that they will achieve their end goal of U.S. withdrawal one way or another.

However, this outcome is in no way guaranteed. Despite such claims that a full U.S. exit is inevitable, all reported agreements to date include at least some forces remaining – not to mention the potential role of covert operations. To suggest the Taliban and other U.S. rivals act in anticipation of inevitable full withdrawal is to presume that they are unfamiliar with negotiations in which they themselves have participated – not to mention all available history of U.S. overseas involvement.

In fact, “Trump has empowered his special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, to reach a deal that allows for a reduction of forces in the country and the ability to continue counterterrorism operations.”³² Reportedly, General Austin “Scott” Miller, Afghanistan’s U.S. commander, wants to keep open the air base in Bagram, as well as maintaining a “robust presence” at Kandahar Airfield. However, he has long said he could conduct the mission with fewer troops.³³

Would Withdrawal Encourage Terrorism?

Other commentators have suggested that intelligence forces would be withdrawn first and damage the U.S. intelligence community's broader ability to track Al Qaeda and the Islamic state.³⁴ This view, however, ignores both recent history and stated goals of the Trump Administration and military leadership.

Nevertheless, some would suggest that these terrorism risks necessitate what is essentially permanent and full involvement. David Petraeus and Vance Serchuk argued in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial that "Until the Taliban demonstrate they have both the determination and the capability to work with the Afghan government against international terrorists... the U.S. must retain its own means to pressure extremist networks plotting against the American homeland and U.S. allies. This can be accomplished only by having some number of capable American forces in Afghanistan, along with substantial "enablers" such as unmanned aerial vehicles and close air support."³⁵

They further argue that "[w]hile diplomatic progress with the Taliban may justify a reduction in U.S. force levels, under no circumstances should the Trump administration... agree to a total withdrawal of combat forces from Afghanistan."³⁶

Particularly in a time of limited national resources and waning public support for the war, it seems relatively unlikely that unlimited combat involvement will be tolerated, even if it were necessary.

McCarthy concedes in *National Review*, "I cannot say it is unreasonable of [Trump] to calculate that it is better to get out than to endanger an ever-more-skeletal contingent of American forces in a stalemate."³⁷ And as Zarif and Zumwalt write in *The Hill*, "No American, including the authors, wants to send their brothers and sisters into harm's way, much less keep them there indefinitely."³⁸

Ultimately, as Brad Polumbo writes in the *Washington Examiner*, "Indefinitely continuing war until all terrorism is defeated is itself a ridiculous standard, but even on its own terms, the hawkish narrative simply isn't true."³⁹ He quotes scholar John Glaser's observation that "Territorial safe havens are not the danger they're made out to be, and the Taliban have already pledged not to host al Qaeda, and to fight other terrorist groups."⁴⁰

While there has been well-documented disagreement on exact definitions of terrorism and risks remain that Taliban leadership would become close with terror networks, other countries in the region, such as China and India, have overlapping interests with the U.S. and a strong incentive to maintain peace and stability."⁴¹

If the goal, as laid out in the National Defense Strategy, is to achieve meaningful peace among regional powers and not allow forces hostile to the U.S. to dominate, is indefinite U.S. involvement in the region the only way to reach it?

Particularly given souring relationships in the region as our involvement drags on, it is worth considering whether regional powers with vested interests in containing regional terrorism will step up to the task – and whether, as in the case of Iran and its strategic alliance with U.S. enemies, our involvement is snarling that goal instead of helping it.

Risks of Returning

A more compelling concern is that a mismanaged exit leaves open enormous risk that the U.S. will be forced to reengage troops and resources down the road. As Dobbins et al. suggest, “If American and NATO forces were extricated from the region and then were returned, they would find themselves fighting in territory dominated by the al-Qaeda-affiliated Haqqani alliances.”⁴²

Similarly, Petraeus and Serchuk argue in the *Wall Street Journal* that “The cost of retaining a few thousand troops in Afghanistan pales in comparison with the price the nation will pay, strategically and economically, if al Qaeda or ISIS rebuilds a terrorist platform there.”⁴³ McCarthy also argues that “by pulling out of Afghanistan at this moment, we are enabling recreation of the conditions that obtained circa 1998 through 2001.”⁴⁴

Petraeus and others point to the U.S. exit from Iraq and the rise of ISIS as a cautionary tale for withdrawal from Afghanistan, saying that “renewed instability in Iraq and the civil war in Syria opened the door to ISIS, which promptly became the all-consuming problem for American national security and compelled the administration to rush thousands of soldiers back to Iraq and later Syria.”⁴⁵

This view, of course, ignores the unique geopolitical conditions that exist in Iraq and Syria. More importantly, these arguments generally assume that there is a clear and consistent view of what is a compelling U.S. interest that justifies involving troops.

It is increasingly clear that no such metric exists, and instead vital U.S. interests and precious lives have been dedicated to the open-ended task of rebuilding a nation into a stable Western democracy. Thus, the second main task for those seeking a better way is to identify the conditions that would require the U.S. to become involved – either again in Afghanistan, or in another nation in the future.

In fact, it is incorrect to view the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan as one of traditional warfighting as opposed to nation-building.

Skorka argues for CFR that efforts in Afghanistan have long since evolved, “expanding from ‘a limited focus on counterterrorism to a broad nationbuilding effort without discussion about the implications for the duration and intensity of the military campaign.’”⁴⁶

Similarly, McCarthy argues in *National Review*, “What have been 'endless' are not military operations against our enemies but our futile experiment in democracy promotion.” He suggests that attempting to create Western-style democracy by military operations was against U.S. interests and “changed the nature of the missions, which became hopelessly elongated and unwinnable.”

The National Defense Strategy supports this viewpoint, saying that while we must seek “a foundation of mutual respect, responsibility, priorities, and accountability” and one where we will unapologetically represent America’s values and belief in democracy,” the U.S. will not “seek to impose our way of life by force.”⁴⁷ Importantly, the fact that endless wars may be more accurately called endless nation-building does not justify the latter, in terms of U.S. resources or interests.

Conditions, Not Time

Most discussions in popular media and among elected officials alike are based on the perspective of time, yet, over the last few years, official discussions have focused elsewhere, shifting “from a time-based approach to one based on conditions.”⁴⁸ Various players including “China, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States have held related meetings on the peace process.”⁴⁹

While negotiations have struggled and the U.S. seems determined to act at least somewhat unilaterally, one can nevertheless identify several overarching possibilities for the future. In fact, U.S. special representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad met with Taliban leaders in Pakistan in early October 2019, and the U.S. and Afghan officials insist talks can be restarted. They would be wise to do so, as public opinion and shared interests of both countries support finding the conditions for peace.⁵⁰

Pompeo and the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani have previously agreed to a conditions-based withdrawal.⁵¹ In a series of tweets in early fall 2019, Khalilzad said that “Peace requires agreement on four issues: counter-terrorism assurances, troop withdrawal, intra-Afghan dialogue, and a comprehensive ceasefire.” All four, he said, had been “agreed to in principle,” with “agreement in draft” on the first two at that time.⁵²

Perhaps complicating matters, whereas peace negotiations have been based on relatively clear conditions, the President and his Administration seem committed to a timeline regardless.⁵³ The President “[has] been unambiguous: End the endless wars. Draw down. Reduce.”⁵⁴

Dating back to his 2016 campaign, the President has been adamant about his broader frustration with the monetary costs that continue to pile up every year, too, not to mention the continued violence in the nation.⁵⁵ Determined to focus on political questions at home, Trump has said, “I’m the president of the United States of America; I’m not the president of the world.”⁵⁶

It is unclear whether the Administration’s determination to proceed with a withdrawal motivated 2019’s quiet troop drawdown, or if these actions were taken as part of attempts to restart the peace process. But while those who are weary of war may rightfully celebrate any type of withdrawal, one that is based on successful peace talks is clearly preferable. Players on all sides have incentive to find lasting peace, and successful negotiations will reduce the risk that U.S. soldiers are forced to return in the future – or that covert operations continue uninterrupted in a secret war that still risks American lives and dollars.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Empowering Allies

In August, Karen DeYoung, Missy Ryan, Anne Gearan, and Philip Rucker reported for *Washington Post* that negotiators had “made significant advances in recent talks with the Taliban,” reporting on terms of a proposed deal including withdrawing about 5,000 of the remaining 14,000 U.S. troops in exchange for Taliban agreement to “renounce al-Qaeda and to bar it from activities such as fundraising, recruiting, training and operational planning in areas under Taliban control.” Additionally, the tentative plan reportedly included a move toward direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

According to former senior officials in the Administration, agreement on counterterrorism assurances and troop withdrawals was reached early, but “They’ve been trying to use them as leverage on the other issues.”⁵⁷

Success in the future will require robust involvement from the Afghan government. As Dobbins et al. write, there is a potential risk that the Afghan government will not abide by the terms of a deal, feeling sidelined in negotiations with the U.S. and the Taliban.⁵⁸ The recent instability over contested election results does not help matters.⁵⁹

A main sticking point when negotiations were ongoing is that while U.S. negotiators wanted a permanent cease-fire among U.S., Taliban, and Afghan government forces, the Taliban insisted on U.S. withdrawal first.

The Taliban has long insisted on complete withdrawal before agreeing to anything else, with its leaders wanting foreign troops to leave within months and American negotiators objecting that ending the 18-year military presence is logistically impossible in such a short time frame.⁶⁰

There is room for compromise on this front, such as a phased withdrawal in which non-combat support staff could “leave in earlier batches,” while Special Operations forces and technical teams responsible for coordinating air missions would leave later. Importantly, some have argued that a clear timetable – conditioned on progress – might be an important step toward securing agreement and opening up more difficult discussions among the Taliban and other Afghan leadership over divisions of power once the U.S. has left.⁶¹

Ultimately, the most important missing piece in Afghanistan is not so much any immediate actions the United States might take but whether it is able to successfully step aside and allow Taliban and Afghan officials to negotiate successfully on a lasting political solution⁶² – without which, the risk of becoming involved again will be ever-present.

Aiming for Full Withdrawal

Despite warnings from those who object to any withdrawal, it seems apparent that the U.S. will maintain covert operations in the region for the immediate future. However, the U.S. should avoid the temptation to allow intelligence forces or their supported militias to operate indefinitely.

Citing *POLITICO*, the *New York Times* reported in September 2019 on internal discussions among Trump Administration officials, some of whom had proposed secretly expanding CIA presence in Afghanistan if troop withdrawal were to occur. The President has said he wants to leave “a very strong” intelligence presence in the country after any withdrawal.⁶³

But leaving such a situation indefinitely poses risks. In fact, as Astri Suhrke and Antonio De Lauri state in “The CIA’s ‘Army’: A Threat to Human Rights and an Obstacle to Peace in Afghanistan,” “If an Afghan agreement were modeled on the peace accords promoted by the UN since the early 1990s, the CIA’s Army would have to be disbanded.”⁶⁴ For this to happen, they argue, there must be a political agreement and a lasting peace agreement for the official war. Otherwise, neither the U.S. nor Afghan government is likely to accept disbanding the unofficial one.

Ultimately, a lasting peace will require allowing ongoing negotiations to continue so that socio-economic and political questions can be decided in a meaningful way – along with the future role of U.S. and other foreign military forces. Restarting negotiations requires recognizing what is already happening: That U.S. combat forces will eventually leave the nation. Successfully completing the peace process requires finding the conditions in which withdrawal can leave allies empowered to contain terrorism.

After eighteen years, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan has changed, evolved, and elongated in ways few could have anticipated when it began just weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the years since, its cost in lives and resources has been immense. Meanwhile, the U.S. focus has changed to one of great power competition, the objections to winding down the war have remained focused on stopping terrorist networks, and the focus of troops on the ground has been endless nation-building.

Open-ended involvement has made achieving both goals difficult, and it is encouraging to see signs that the administration is dedicated to drawing it down. Formalizing this process and allowing a final end to the nation's longest war will serve U.S. strategic interests. What's more, it will allow precious national resources to be saved at a time when doing so could hardly be more important. With historically high deficits and debt, the United States can no longer afford to ignore the costs of war – nor what we can save with a new policy.

Part II: Estimating the Cost of Afghanistan

Background

In 2018, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko told *The Hill* that the costs of reconstruction in Afghanistan now exceeded those of the Marshall Plan that rebuilt Europe after WWII.⁶⁵ This price tag represents Afghanistan's heavy reliance on international support. In fact, in January 2019, Dobbins et al. reported for *RAND* that “[i]n recent years, about 50 percent of the Afghan state budget and 90 percent of its military and police costs have been borne by international donors.”⁶⁶

After nearly two decades, the nation is hardly rebuilt. As Mark Cancian notes in the preface to his recent study, “after expending nearly \$800 billion and suffering over 2,400 killed, the United States is still there, having achieved at best a stalemate.”⁶⁷

Costs to Date

Direct Costs

Estimating the costs of Afghanistan specifically is difficult for many reasons, not the least of which is inconsistency in data the Defense Department (DoD) provides, as well as the difficulty of linking individual military expenditures with specific theaters of war in cost reporting.

These difficulties have been outlined most comprehensively in Neta C. Crawford's ongoing *Costs of War* research series, which since 2011 has sought to sum the total costs of the Global War on

Terror.⁶⁸ These historical costs are sourced either directly from Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budget requests, or otherwise estimated in keeping with convention within the literature.

Her most recent November 2019 report totals DoD and State Department OCO requests from FY2001-2020, finding that all wars during that time had direct costs of \$2.09 trillion and that \$978 billion (or roughly 47%) of the total was due to Afghanistan.⁶⁹ Below, we summarize Crawford's breakdown of direct war costs by theater in Table 1, along with average and percentage calculations.⁷⁰

Table 1: Direct War Costs by Theater

War Zone/Operation	Cumulative \$ Billions	Avg/Yr	%
Iraq & Syria (FY2003-FY2020)	\$880	\$44.0	42.1%
Afghanistan & Pakistan (FY2001-FY2020)	\$978	\$48.9	46.8%
Other OCO (e.g. Africa and Europe) (FY2001-FY2020)	\$232	\$11.6	11.1%
Total	\$2,090	\$104.5	

Indirect Costs

In addition to these direct costs, Crawford also estimates related *indirect* costs of war, including (1) increases to the base budget due to war, (2) medical and disability for returning and injured veterans, (3) Homeland Security spending, (4) interest on these expenses, and (5) accrued future obligations for veterans' care.

These indirect costs bring the total cost of *all* U.S. wars and interventions, by Crawford's estimation, to \$6.4 trillion since FY2001. We summarize her 2019 figures in the table below.⁷¹

Table 2: Total War Costs

Expense	\$ Billion
Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Appropriations: DoD (\$1,959b) and State Department (\$131b)	\$2,090
War-related Spending in the DOD Base Budget: Increases to Base (\$803b) and "OCO for Base" (\$100b)	\$903
Medical and Disability Care for Post-9/11 Veterans	\$437
Homeland Security Spending for Prevention and Response to Terrorism	\$1,054
Est. Interest on Borrowing for OCO Spending	\$925
Total War Appropriations and War-Related Spending through FY 2020	\$5,409
Est. Future Obligations for Veterans' Medical and Disability FY 2020-59	> \$1,000
Total War-Related Spending and Obligations through FY2020	\$6,409

Total Costs

Calculating an exact breakdown of indirect costs by war zone is difficult for reasons already discussed. However, it is possible to estimate totals for the conflict in Afghanistan by assuming that indirect costs accrue proportionately to the direct OCO requests.

We do so below by attributing 46.8% of total indirect costs to the war in Afghanistan – with one exception. In this paper, we assume that Homeland Security spending would occur independently of any particular conflict. While such spending is properly understood as a general expense of war, it is reasonable to assume that it would have occurred regardless of whether or not the United States became involved in Afghanistan specifically.

Table 3 provides our original estimate of total war costs in Afghanistan, which builds from Crawford’s totals and then applies the 46.8% ratio to all indirect costs.

Table 3: Estimated Total Afghanistan War Costs⁷²

Expense	\$ Billion	Afghanistan Share (46.8%)
Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Appropriations	\$2,090	\$978
War-related Spending in the DoD Base Budget	\$903	\$423
Medical and Disability Care for Post-9/11 Veterans	\$437	\$204
Homeland Security Spending for Prevention and Response to Terrorism	\$1,054	\$0
Est. Interest on Borrowing for OCO Spending	\$925	\$433
Total War Approps and War-Related Spend. through FY 2020	\$5,409	\$2,038
Est. Future Obligations for Veterans’ Medical and Disability FY2020-59	> \$1,000	> \$468
Total War-Related Spending and Obligations through FY2020	\$6,409	\$2,506

By this methodology, we can estimate that the total cost of the war in Afghanistan to date exceeds \$2.5 trillion, including roughly \$1 trillion of direct war costs and an additional \$1.5 trillion in related costs and accrued obligations. Of these totals, \$2 trillion is already expended, while nearly \$500 billion in accrued future costs for veterans’ care remain over the next four decades.

Looking Ahead: Future Afghanistan Costs

Of course, costs to date tell only half the story. The longer that the United States maintains a presence in Afghanistan, the higher costs – both direct and indirect – can be expected to rise.

In order to ultimately assess potential savings from a troop withdrawal, we first must estimate expected future expenditures in Afghanistan. Crawford’s November 2018 report provides the best available summary of potential future costs from FY2020 to FY2023.⁷³

We append an additional estimate for veterans’ obligations that will be accrued during the four-year period in question. Crawford estimates that veterans’ care *for all wars* over the last 20 years totaled at least \$1 trillion, or \$50 billion per year. Thus, we assume additional veterans’ obligations of \$200 billion between FY2020-23.

A Note on Hidden Costs

While the OCO budget usually provides funding for fixing damaged equipment, “OCO funding must continue for three years after the last piece of equipment comes home from Afghanistan,” according to Lt. Gen. Raymond V. Mason, Army G-4 deputy chief of staff.⁷⁴ In instances when this isn’t the case, the Army has to “find the money within the ... base budget.”

For this reason, it makes sense to consider increases in base budget spending due to war with particular attention, because costs like worn-out equipment are not always attributed directly to particular conflicts like Afghanistan. As then-Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Schoomaker noted in 2007 at the height of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, “The destruction of equipment, the wearing out of equipment has accelerated over what it was before ... we’re wearing our helicopters, trucks, Humvees, [and] tanks at rates that are six, eight, 10 times in some cases what we’re programmed for.”⁷⁵

While no authoritative, department-wide cost estimate exists for the wearing out of military equipment due to conflicts overseas like Afghanistan, many data points exist that illustrate the extent of this hidden cost. For example, a 2016 Marine Corps report first reported on by *The Virginian-Pilot* found that only 23% of the branch’s workhorse Super Stallion helicopters were ready to fly. As the investigation noted, “[a]fter more than a decade of relentless combat ... the CH-53E Super Stallion is worn out.”⁷⁶

These costs are not explicitly monetary either, as overuse and deterioration of one aircraft can often “put a strain” on others. The *Virginian-Pilot* authors cited examples of squadrons that “couldn’t deploy,” increase crash rates of deteriorated aircraft, and “degrade[d] pilot skills” as a result of diminished flight hours.⁷⁷ The full impact of worn out equipment on military readiness is difficult to adequately quantify, but considering these related costs provides an important look at how ongoing conflict in Afghanistan can impose costs beyond direct war expenditures.

As before when estimating historical totals, we assume that 46.8% of these total war costs can be attributed to Afghanistan going forward. Keeping with our convention of treating Homeland Security spending as *unattributable* to the war in Afghanistan, we find a low-end estimate of \$340.7 billion for the costs of Afghanistan going forward. This total consists of \$39.3 billion in direct war costs, or just under \$10 billion per year, as well as an additional \$207.8 billion in indirect costs and \$93.6 billion in new veterans’ obligations.

We also estimate a second scenario in which Afghanistan spending represents a higher proportion of OCO funding in the future. While the war in Afghanistan has represented 46.8% of the direct war costs since FY2001, as Table 1 illustrates, the majority of the remaining OCO requests were associated with the war in Iraq beginning in FY2003. Since the United States has drawn back its presence from that country⁷⁸, we estimate an alternative scenario in which Afghanistan makes up 75% of future OCO requests and associated indirect war costs. This figure can be considered a high-end estimate.

These two scenarios are summarized below:

Table 4: FY2020-23 Estimated Future Afghanistan Costs

Expense	\$ Billions	Afghanistan 46.8% share	Afghanistan 75% share
Estimated DOD and State OCO Appropriations, FY2020-FY2023	\$84	\$39.3	\$63
Estimated Increase to DOD Base Budget Due to War, FY2020-FY2023	\$24	\$11.2	\$18
Estimated Homeland Security Spending, FY2020-FY2023	\$280	\$0	\$0
Interest on \$1,509 OCO spending, FY2020-FY2023 (\$105 B annually)	\$420	\$196.5	\$315
<i>Projected Additional War-Related Spending, FY2020 through FY2023</i>	<i>\$808</i>	<i>\$247.1</i>	<i>\$396</i>
Estimated Additional Future Obligations for Veterans' Medical and Disability FY2020-59	> \$200	> \$93.6	> \$150
<i>Projected Additional War-Related Spending & Obligations, FY2020 through FY2023</i>	<i>\$1,008</i>	<i>\$340.7</i>	<i>\$546</i>

In the alternative 75% scenario presented in the third column of Table 4, the total cost of the war in Afghanistan during the next four years may be expected to be as high as \$546 billion (\$63 billion in direct costs, or \$15 billion per year, plus more than \$330 billion in indirect costs and \$150 billion in new veterans' obligations), assuming no changes in U.S. foreign policy during that time.

Potential Savings

Lawmakers should be aware not only of what we have spent, but of what is to be gained with a better strategy. The next part of our analysis examines what we could save in the event of a drawdown under various hypothetical scenarios.

We analyze prospects based on the plans thus far announced – 5,400 troops to be withdrawn from the country – along with several hypotheticals including an eventual full troop withdrawal, and a remaining residual force in the country.

Our preliminary analysis shows that the U.S. could save \$150-\$280 billion over the next four years, in addition to \$58-106 billion in future veterans' military and disability obligations. This puts **total potential savings between \$210 and \$386 billion**.

Additionally, it is difficult but necessary to consider factors like expected foreign aid and covert operations, which we do later in this paper. In order to model how much of estimated future costs could be saved by withdrawing from Afghanistan, we begin with a few assumptions.

First, reports on the proposed peace agreement suggested that 5,400 troops would be withdrawn 135 days after an agreement is signed⁷⁹, with the remainder to be pulled out within 16 months.⁸⁰ Most public estimates have stated that the U.S. currently has 14,000 troops in Afghanistan, although the President has stated on numerous occasions that the total is actually closer to 13,000.

At the end of October 2019, Pentagon officials confirmed that this number was now closer to 12,000, and suggested that the planned drawdown to about 8,600 would occur by attrition instead of peace deal, as the U.S. simply would not replace troops who have cycled out.⁸¹ While the matter in which troops are withdrawn is critical from a strategic perspective, it matters less for cost-savings estimates.

For simplicity in modeling, we assess potential savings from Afghanistan withdrawal as follows:

- (1) A withdrawal of 5,400 troops effective immediately, near the start of FY2020;
 - (2a) Full withdrawal completed by the end of FY2021, or 24 months from the beginning of a troop drawdown; and
 - (2b) Nearly full withdrawal, with a leftover residual force of 2,000 for potential counterterrorism operations or other purposes.

We apply assumption (1) to all scenarios, while assessing (2a) and (2b) separately.

Initial 2-Year Savings

Reducing troop totals by 5,400 means that an estimated 7,600-8,600 troops would remain in Afghanistan after this initial withdrawal, a total that has been estimated by Pentagon officials. This represents a withdrawal of combat troops equal to about 38.6% to 41.5% of current forces. Since this drawdown applies only to the first two years of our FY2020-FY2023 period of study, we multiply these percentages by the expected costs for FY2020 and FY2021 to estimate the likely savings for these years. Our estimate is produced below in Table 5.

Table 5: FY2020-21 Afghanistan Withdrawal Savings

Expense	Costs		Savings	
	Afghanistan 46.8% share	Afghanistan 75% share	Low-End 38.6%	High-End 41.5%
Estimated OCO appropriations	\$19.7	\$31.5	\$7.6	\$13.1
Increase to DOD base budget	\$5.6	\$9	\$2.2	\$3.7
Homeland Security spending	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Interest on OCO spending	\$98.3	\$157.5	\$37.9	\$65.4
<i>Projected Additional War-Related Spending/Savings</i>	<i>\$123.5</i>	<i>\$198</i>	<i>\$47.6</i>	<i>\$82.2</i>
Additional Veterans' Obligations	> \$46.8	> \$75	> \$18.1	> \$31.1
<i>Projected Additional War-Related Spending/Savings w/ Obligations</i>	<i>\$170.3</i>	<i>\$273</i>	<i>\$65.7</i>	<i>\$113.3</i>

Subsequent 2-Year Savings: Full Withdrawal & Residual Ground Presence

As for FY2020-21, we assume half of the total war cost will occur in FY2022-23, and then calculate the range of expected spending in Afghanistan during that time. A full withdrawal would naturally save all of the expected costs during the two years, and leaving behind a residual force would continue to cost billions. These costs are summarized in tables 6 and 7 below.

Table 6: FY2022-23 Afghanistan Withdrawal Savings, Full Withdrawal

Expense	Costs		Savings	
	Afghanistan 46.8% share	Afghanistan 75% share	Low-End 100%	High-End 100%
Estimated OCO appropriations	\$19.7	\$31.5	\$19.7	\$31.5
Increase to DOD base budget	\$5.6	\$9	\$5.6	\$9
Homeland Security spending	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Interest on OCO spending	\$98.3	\$157.5	\$98.3	\$157.5
<i>Projected Additional War-Related Spending/Savings</i>	<i>\$123.5</i>	<i>\$198</i>	<i>\$123.5</i>	<i>\$198</i>
Additional Veterans' Obligations	> \$46.8	> \$75	> \$46.8	> \$75
<i>Projected Additional War-Related Spending/Savings w/ Obligations</i>	<i>\$170.3</i>	<i>\$273</i>	<i>\$170.3</i>	<i>\$273</i>

Table 7: FY2022-23 Afghanistan Withdrawal Savings, Residual Ground Presence

Expense	Costs		Savings	
	Afghanistan 46.8% share	Afghanistan 75% share	Low-End 84.6%	High-End 85.7%
Estimated OCO appropriations	\$19.7	\$31.5	\$16.6	\$27.0
Increase to DOD base budget	\$5.6	\$9	\$4.8	\$7.7
Homeland Security spending	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Interest on OCO spending	\$98.3	\$157.5	\$83.1	\$135.0
<i>Projected Additional War-Related Spending/Savings</i>	<i>\$123.5</i>	<i>\$198</i>	<i>\$104.5</i>	<i>\$170</i>
Additional Veterans' Obligations	> \$46.8	> \$75	> \$39.6	> \$64.3
<i>Projected Additional War-Related Spending/Savings w/ Obligations</i>	<i>\$123.5</i>	<i>\$198</i>	<i>\$144.1</i>	<i>\$234.3</i>

Based on these estimates, we can assume that leaving a residual ground presence in place will cost between \$19 and \$28 billion during FY22-23, or roughly \$10-15 billion per year. These costs increase to between \$26.2-38.7 billion when accounting for additional veterans' obligations.

Total Savings

In order to assess potential total savings, we combine both low-end and high-end estimates from Tables 5-7. The following table shows the full potential savings, both from a smaller ultimate troop withdrawal and from a full drawdown.

Table 8: Total Potential Savings from Afghanistan Withdrawal

Expense	Low-End	High-End
Estimated OCO appropriations	\$24.2	\$44.6
Increase to DOD base budget	\$6.9	\$12.7
Homeland Security spending	\$0	\$0
Interest on OCO spending	\$121.1	\$222.9
<i>Projected Additional War-Related Spending/Savings</i>	<i>\$152.2</i>	<i>\$280.2</i>
Additional Veterans' Obligations	\$57.7	\$106.1
<i>Projected Additional War-Related Spending & Obligations/ Savings</i>	<i>\$209.9</i>	<i>\$386.3</i>

We estimate the savings of a phased withdrawal at between \$150 billion and \$280 billion over the next four years. Factoring in the accrual of additional veterans' disability and healthcare obligations increases the potential cost savings to nearly \$400 billion. For context, based on the Congressional Budget Office's (CBO) latest projections, these savings would account for as much as 9.4% of the U.S. budget deficit during the next four years.⁸²

Additional Future Obligations: Covert Operations & Foreign Aid

It may be argued that some of the potential savings from a troop withdrawal in Afghanistan could be offset by an increase in covert operations or foreign development aid. On the former, lawmakers should indeed take care to avoid a protracted covert war for its long-term strategic consequences. That said, estimates in this paper attempt to account for this possibility by exploring a scenario in which residual forces remain in Afghanistan. While a full accounting of the potential future costs of covert operations is beyond the scope of this study, one can assume that CIA operations are generally less costly than a combat troop presence.

On the question of foreign aid, the evidence clearly suggests that any change in aid to the country post-withdrawal is unlikely to be fiscally significant.

For one, the cost of aid to Afghanistan pales in comparison to the other costs of war. As one can see in data compiled at *ForeignAssistance.gov*, the most aid that has been appropriated in one fiscal year to Afghanistan was in 2015, when just shy of \$11 billion was awarded to the country.⁸³ Aid was split roughly evenly for economic development and peace and security purposes. As the table below shows, annual aid requests and appropriations averaged between \$2-4 billion, with totals in recent years being far lower.

Table 9: Foreign Aid Over Time in Afghanistan

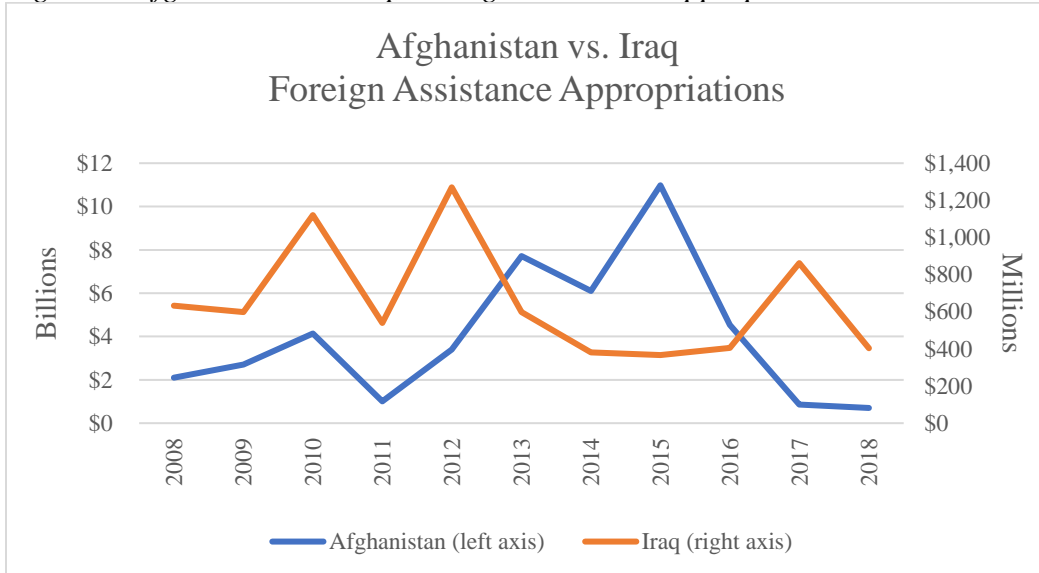
Fiscal Year	Requested (\$B)	Appropriated (\$B)
2008	\$1.07	\$2.10
2009	\$1.05	\$2.71
2010	\$2.78	\$4.14
2011	\$1.00	\$1.00
2012	\$3.21	\$3.40
2013	\$2.51	\$7.72
2014	\$2.19	\$6.10
2015	\$1.59	\$10.98
2016	\$1.51	\$4.54
2017	\$4.70	\$0.85
2018	\$0.78	\$0.70
Average (FY2008-18)	\$2.04	\$4.02

Source: ForeignAssistance.gov

A comparison with aid to Iraq in the years following the troop drawdown there provides little evidence that aid would increase in the years following an Afghanistan withdrawal. From FY2008-2012, annual requested and appropriated aid in Iraq averaged between \$800-900 billion, whereas in the years post-withdrawal that average was between \$500-700 billion.⁸⁴ While it is certainly possible that Afghanistan will be a special case, recent evidence from Iraq signifies that aid in Afghanistan is more likely to decline as troops are withdrawn.

Figure 1 illustrates the comparison between Afghanistan and Iraq.

Figure 1: Afghanistan vs. Iraq, Foreign Assistance Appropriations



Conclusion

The war in Afghanistan was the nation's first and most decisive response to the terror attacks of 9/11, but now nearly 20 years later, the objectives and U.S. interest have widened, evolved, and blurred. Few, it seems, want indefinite involvement in the nation – if not those in elected office, certainly among the public.

With a \$22 trillion debt and historically high deficits and spending, it is more important than ever to rethink U.S. obligations around the world, even if only for cost-related reasons. However, far greater potential savings come from a larger reevaluation of just what the U.S. presence in the world ought to be.

Importantly, this paper does not suggest that reevaluating the U.S. presence in Afghanistan will immediately return all savings to the Treasury or to taxpayers. It is likely that further action will be necessary to ensure wise stewardship of freed-up funds. However, having such funds available – either to be saved or allocated elsewhere – is immensely valuable both from a budgetary and strategic standpoint.

The United States is closing out another decade looking back on billions spent, lives lost, and open-ended involvement without a clear end in sight. Winding down Afghanistan wisely can and should be achieved. Avoiding such situations in the future requires adhering to the National Defense Strategy and establishing a framework for US involvement only when there is a compelling interest and clear need.

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- ⁷⁸ Estimates on the current number of troops in Iraq vary, and private estimates often conflict with official Pentagon numbers, but the best estimate is that 4-6,000 troops remain in the country, per this 2017 *Business Insider* report: Gould, Skye and Daniel Brown. "[The U.S. has 1.3 million troops stationed around the world — here are the major hotspots.](#)" *Business Insider*. 31 Aug 2017.
- ⁷⁹ "[Afghanistan war: US-Taliban deal would see 5,400 troops withdraw.](#)" *BBC*. 3 Sep 2019.

⁸⁰ Baker, Peter, Mujib Mashal and Michael Crowley. “[How Trump’s Plan to Secretly Meet With the Taliban Came Together, and Fell Apart.](#)” *The New York Times*. 8 Sep 2019.

⁸¹ Gibbons-Neff, Thomas and Mujib Mashal. “[U.S. Is Quietly Reducing Its Troop Force in Afghanistan.](#)” *New York Times*. 21 Oct 2019.

⁸² Calculation is based on CBO’s latest deficit projections: “[Updated Budget Projections: 2019 to 2029.](#)” *Congressional Budget Office*, May 2019. Budget deficits are estimated to total \$4.092 trillion between FY2020-23 (see Table 1, p. 2).

⁸³ U.S. Dept. of State. “[Foreign Assistance in Afghanistan.](#)”

⁸⁴ The analogous table for aid in Iraq is produced below:

Fiscal Year	Requested (\$M)	Appropriated (\$M)
2008	\$391.8	\$633.1
2009	\$397.0	\$599.0
2010	\$500.0	\$1,120.0
2011	\$729.3	\$539.2
2012	\$2,360.0	\$1,270.0
2013	\$2,050.0	\$598.8
2014	\$573.2	\$380.7
2015	\$308.8	\$366.7
2016	\$355.4	\$405.4
2017	\$510.4	\$861.3
2018	\$347.9	\$403.3
Average (FY2008-12)	\$875.6	\$832.3
Average (FY2013-18)	\$690.9	\$502.7