

Biden likely to keep troops in Afghanistan, missing May 1 deadline

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Former President Donald Trump's push to end America's "forever wars" in the Middle East may have exited the stage with him, as the Biden administration appears poised to keep troops in Afghanistan past a key May 1 deadline and powerful Republicans say their party must reject the former commander in chief's view of the need to fully remove the U.S. from intractable foreign fights.

President Biden, during his 2020 campaign, also embraced the idea of winding down endless wars abroad, as the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan approached its 20th year and American forces remained on the ground in Iraq and Syria.

But the new administration's early signals suggest a much more measured approach that could frustrate anti-war liberals as much as Mr. Trump's mixed record on troop withdrawals vexed the more dovish, libertarian-leaning side of his party.

Top lawmakers on Capitol Hill now say they expect at least some of the 2,500 American forces stationed in Afghanistan to remain past the May 1 date set out in an agreement the U.S. struck with the Taliban last year. The White House also has given no hints that it intends to quickly pull the 2,500 troops out of Iraq or the few hundred from Syria. The long-term fate of roughly 700 U.S. forces in East Africa battling the al-Shabab terrorist network is also uncertain.

Mr. Biden and Mr. Trump used much of the same rhetoric in their campaign pitches, but analysts say their approaches are dramatically different. Mr. Trump often pushed for withdrawals over the advice of military officials and sometimes surprised the Pentagon by declaring on Twitter that American troops would be coming home. Those promises did not always materialize.

Mr. Biden, a career politician, is creating an off-ramp that could keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan for years to come. The withdrawal decision is also being closely coordinated with NATO and allied forces also in Afghanistan, something Mr. Trump rejected.

"The Biden administration, very much unlike the Trump administration, is keeping its cards close to its chest. It's very guarded," said John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. "They've signaled some moves in that direction [of withdrawal]. It's just that each signal has caveats and we're not sure how it will play out."

The contrast between the Trump and Biden administrations is just one aspect of a complex political dynamic that is likely to take on huge importance in the 2024 Republican presidential primary race. With Mr. Trump out of office and at least temporarily out of the political spotlight,

his critics in the Republican Party are seizing the opportunity to push more hawkish, activist foreign policy views that dominated the party in the post-9/11 era.

Rep. Liz Cheney, a Wyoming Republican who has become one of Mr. Trump's harshest critics, stressed this week that the party must not embrace the former president's rhetoric.

"I think it is irresponsible to use phrases like 'endless war.' That is not a description that is accurate about what's happening in a place like Afghanistan or Iraq or Syria," she said during a recent speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute. "And I think we have to take responsibility for being honest with the American people about what is happening. And that is that in order for us to defend ourselves, in order for us to ensure that terrorists can't establish safe havens from which they could attack us again, we've got to have sufficient resources ... to work with local entities and be able to deny safe havens to terrorists."

Looming battle

The idea of keeping "sufficient resources" in theater with an open-ended time frame could create a situation similar to that in Europe or on the Korean Peninsula, where thousands of U.S. troops are stationed in what have essentially become permanent deployments dating back to the early days of the Cold War.

But some observers say Ms. Cheney and others who share her views fail to realize that Mr. Trump's condemnation of forever wars hit a nerve with voters and reshaped traditional political boundaries. With memories of 9/11 fading and U.S. casualties at historic lows, many feel little connection to the distant Afghanistan struggle and question how U.S. forces can resolve the country's deep-seated domestic conflicts.

"President Trump's policy positions didn't fit neatly within the lines of what people expected for a Republican. Some were reliably conservative, others historically associated with the far left," said J.D. Gordon, a former Pentagon spokesman and now an analyst for the One America News Network. "Unfortunately, the Trump derangement syndrome was so intense and lucrative, many on both sides of the aisle gave him zero credit, even when successful."

The collision of the Trump and Cheney schools of thought on foreign policy, experts say, could create a wide-open political dynamic that allows Republicans to take advantage of whatever circumstances arise over the next few years.

"The strategy right now among Republicans is basically to play the field on the issue," Mr. Glaser said.

Indeed, Republicans surely are closely watching what Mr. Biden will do in Afghanistan. Should he honor his predecessor's withdrawal deal with the Taliban, that could open the door for extremists to once again take full control of the country — a "Who lost Afghanistan?" outcome that would be disastrous for U.S. foreign policy but would create a massive political opportunity for Republicans.

Mr. Biden seems well aware of that possibility. He, along with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and other top officials, have repeatedly spoken in recent weeks of the need for a "responsible" exit from Afghanistan — a sign that the White House doesn't necessarily feel bound by the May 1 deadline.

The U.S.-Taliban deal calls for all troops to leave the country by May 1 in exchange for guarantees from the Taliban, including that Afghanistan never again becomes a home base for terrorist groups such as al Qaeda. The agreement also calls for a reduction in violence and a lasting peace agreement between the Taliban and the U.S.-backed government in Kabul.

Virtually all observers agree that the Taliban have not entirely lived up to their end of the bargain, and top lawmakers on Capitol Hill are laying the groundwork for a longer American presence.

“In the short run ... I would expect some extension,” Sen. Jack Reed, Rhode Island Democrat and chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, told reporters Wednesday.

“Even operationally, I think the military would make the case they need more time, even if they’re coming out,” he said, as quoted by The Hill.