

EDITORS' PICK

# The U.S. Withdrawal From Afghanistan Will Let Army Shift Focus To Modernization

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Last week, President Biden announced that [all troops will be pulled out of Afghanistan](#) by mid-September, marking the end of the 20-year combat operation. Historically, after the end of every major combat operation, the Army has downsized and experienced a significant cut in funding. As such, technology development efforts cease, forcing the Army to rapidly modernize once the next war starts. This inherently creates an issue because as Donald Rumsfeld put it, “You go to war with the army you have.”

With the end of combat operations in Afghanistan, the Army could potentially fall into the same historic pitfall. However, unlike previous wars, the end of this war will likely not result in the stagnation of Army technology. Rather, it may actually benefit the Army’s current modernization effort.



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In 2018, the Army initiated a modernization strategy with a focus on multi-domain operations. Multi-domain operations involve synchronized attacks across different domains (i.e., ground, air, sea, space, cyberspace) to overwhelm an adversary and expose their vulnerabilities. This type of combat is required when fighting near-peer adversaries, the term used for nations with large, modern armies who similarly operate across these domains. Additionally, the

Army established the Army Futures Command to oversee the modernization effort with an increased push for innovation and leveraging advances in the commercial sector. Army Futures Command is focusing on modernizing the Army in six main areas — long range precision fires, next generation combat vehicles, future vertical lifts, updates to the command/control network, modernized air and missile defense capabilities, and enhanced soldier lethality. These future capabilities will allow for the Army to succeed in complex, large-scale wars against near-peer enemies.

With its modernization effort, the Army attempted to do something that generally is not done. It attempted to fight a war while also developing the technology for a completely different type of war.

The war in Afghanistan was a counterinsurgency. Although, soldiers in Afghanistan could benefit from the fruits of the



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modernization effort, a counterinsurgency is very different from a near-peer war. For example, the modernization effort is focusing on large unit operations, which is different from the small-unit operations currently employed in Afghanistan. As such, the Army was attempting to modernize while also developing and fielding the gear necessary for Afghanistan, such as counter-IED and counter-drone equipment.

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The end of the war in Afghanistan will allow for the Army to shift their focus to modernization. Although the modernization effort was already considered an important effort, it naturally was hampered by the need to train and equip soldiers to actively fight in an ongoing war. The war necessitated that a large portion of the Army research community focus on the “25 meter” target, the term used across the Army to refer to short-term, pressing goals. Rather than rushing out a technology to save lives of soldiers on the battlefield, the Army can now focus its research teams on developing long-term solutions.

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A soldier from the U.S. Army's 3rd Battalion, 509th Infantry Regiment (Airborne), based at Fort ...

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Additionally, the end of the war will allow for a change in thinking. With an active war going on in Afghanistan, there is the underlying consideration towards rural terrain, austere conditions, small cities, and IEDs. They can now shift their focus to the harder challenges associated with a near-peer competitor. For

example, the insurgents in Afghanistan did not have an air force or satellites. Thus, the Army never had to operate in an environment where they did not have air support or reliable communications, the harsh realities of near-peer wars. Moreover, the cities in Afghanistan were much simpler than a complex mega-city with skyscrapers, tunnels, and massive civilian populations.

It would be naïve to not expect a budget a cut for the Army. Historically, defense budgets have been slashed at the conclusion of a war, resulting in the Army sacrificing long-term modernization efforts to maintain readiness levels. Given other goals in the Biden administration, there is a high likelihood that the Army will face budget cuts; however, they will be less extreme than after previous conflicts. The budget cuts typically scale with the need to downsize the Army to its pre-war levels. There are only 2,500 soldiers in Afghanistan, which is small compared to the 25,000 soldiers deployed in the final year of the Vietnam War or the millions deployed in World War II. Given the expense of the Afghan war, especially accounting for the amount of contractor support, the budget cut will likely not drastically hinder the modernization effort.

When a soldier finishes a mission, they take a knee, sip some water, and prepares for the next engagement. The Army finds itself in the

same position, moving on from the longest war in American history. And just like the soldier, the Army can now properly prepare for the next war.

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