



# THE ROLE OF THE “DISSENT CHANNEL” IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

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On August 31, 2021, U.S. President Joseph Biden announced the completion of the withdrawal of his troops from Afghanistan. The closure of the Bagram military air base, which was one of the largest and most strategically important facilities in the region, was the official end of the 20-year U.S. military campaign in that country. Inspired by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, it was the longest military campaign in U.S. history. More than 2,400 U.S. soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Afghans lost their lives during the fighting. In addition, the U.S., leading a coalition of NATO allies, spent nearly \$1 trillion on military action, and 80% of this amount was spent during the presidency of Barack Obama.

However, despite the length of the military operation and significant U.S. efforts, the goal of a complete victory in the conflict and the establishment of its hegemony in Afghanistan were not achieved. Many Western politicians have called the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan a geopolitical disaster for the forces of Atlanticism in the region. After the withdrawal of U.S. troops, fighting between pro-American insurgents and the Taliban, as well as other armed groups, periodically resumed in the region, giving rise to tensions for the region at the moment. For example, ongoing internal conflicts have been marked by the recent announcement by the National Resistance Front (NRF) of a renewed guerrilla struggle against the Taliban, who lead the government of the Emirate of Afghanistan.

Moreover, the situation inside the "young" state leaves much to be desired. Recently, there has been a significant increase in terrorist activity on the territory of Afghanistan, including from ISIS and al-Qaida. In addition, the country remains one of the largest producers and suppliers of opium in the world, which threatens the security of not only Asia but also other regions. Nevertheless, the Taliban government is trying in every way to show its readiness to solve regional problems. Thus, the Taliban (an organization banned in Russia) on April 3, 2022, announced a ban on drugs and the cultivation of plants used in the production of narcotic substances.

Thus, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan was not so much an end to the conflict as a reset of the situation in the region, which at the beginning was marked by a new wave of violence and instability. However, against the backdrop of a very complex geopolitical context and endless bloodshed in Afghanistan, a return to a peaceful resolution of the conflict with different interest groups is the only way out at present, though not a very promising one. The US, having unsuccessfully tried to establish its influence in Afghanistan, is trying to create tension in the southern "underbelly" of the Heartland, leaving the Taliban with \$7.2 billion worth of weapons, after its departure, which in turn end up on the black market.

## Biden's Failure in Afghanistan

It is worth noting that the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2021 has caused numerous discussions and debates among politicians, experts and the public. The hottest disputes arise between Democrats and Republicans. The negative assessment of the evacuation of U.S. troops is given by "hawks," supporters of a hardline American foreign policy. They and many others are convinced that the end of the Afghan campaign was an embarrassment for the United States and the Western world and that the decision was due to the failure of the Biden administration, which was criticized by a lot, especially by his Republican opponents. On the other hand, the Democrats supported the idea of withdrawal of troops, describing it as a long expected and promised measure to help bring the "endless war" in Afghanistan to a definitive end.

First of all, the criticism to Biden and his administration was due to the hasty withdrawal of the troops that entailed huge reputation costs for the U.S.

The U.S. and Taliban originally agreed to a gradual withdrawal over 14 months, and the withdrawal agreement covered "all United States military forces, their allies and coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisers and support personnel." On the eve of the withdrawal, the House of Representatives of the U.S. Congress approved the draft "Allies Act." This document provided an expedited procedure for visa support for Afghan interpreters working at U.S. military installations. However, the necessity of hasty evacuation, first of all, of American citizens led to a failure of the declared guarantees: there were cases when the American embassy in Kabul destroyed the documents of citizens of Afghanistan, who had to be evacuated with the Americans. This showed the selfishness and indifference of the United States to those whom it called its "allies" throughout the Afghan campaign, and within the U.S. it became an occasion for political differences between competing parties.

In turn, the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee ordered the U.S. administration to submit closed service documents by March 28, expressing disagreement with some specific decisions to withdraw from Afghanistan. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was notified of this requirement by Michael McCaul, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee from the Republican Party. He asked for a list of all interagency meetings related to the withdrawal, as well as information on all negotiations with representatives of the Taliban (organization banned in Russia) since January 2021, in order to study in detail the circumstances of the withdrawal of US troops. It should be noted that

Republicans have made similar requests before, but this time their legitimate demand for data from the State Department is consistent with their majority in the House. The potential risk of litigation with State Department head Anthony Blinken has significantly escalated the months-long battle between the Biden administration and Congress over the Republican-led investigation into the last days and months of the war in Afghanistan.

The "Dissent Channel" Factor

According to Foreign Policy, "The looming political battle between the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and the Biden administration highlights the unique role that the State Department's 'Dissent Channel' plays in U.S. foreign policy." The Dissent Channel is a messaging system open to members of the Foreign Service and other U.S. citizens working at the U.S. Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), through which they are invited to offer constructive criticism of government policies.

The original format under Secretary of State Dean Rusk (who held the post under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson) was the Open Forum panel, which served as a "common channel" for previously unrepresented opinions of junior civil servants on issues including foreign policy. At the same time, the American Foreign Service Association began awarding annual dissent awards to U.S. Foreign Service employees. This led to the publication of a State Department report entitled "Diplomacy for the '70s," which included more than 500 recommendations to improve the quality of U.S. foreign service operations. One of the points included the possibility for diplomats to express their disagreement with the course of foreign policy in the form of a telegram to high-ranking State Department officials.

Topics touched upon in official telegrams through the "Dissent Channel" ranged widely, from moral concerns about embassies harassing women's groups by American congressmen, to calls for U.S. action to stop "genocide," to warnings about errors in intelligence reports on the Vietnam War, to recommended changes in overall strategy toward the Soviet Union and China. "The Dissent Channel" was used 123 times in the first four decades, and nowadays about four or five dissent telegrams are sent every year.

One such telegram, signed by 23 government officials expressing concerns about the then current critical situation of the Afghan administration and the lack of readiness to withdraw U.S. and allied troops from Afghanistan, was sent on July 13, 2021, about a month before the Afghan government collapsed and the Taliban took control of the country. At the time the telegram was sent, Biden and

other top officials from his administration insisted that the Afghan government would not collapse and would continue the orderly withdrawal of U.S. troops.

In his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Blinken refused to send the said telegram to McCaul, saying its transmission undermined the sanctity of the Dissent Channel and might have a "deterrent effect" on future dissenters. The case of the "Bloody Telegram," written in 1971 by Archer Blood and 20 of his colleagues, cost an American diplomat his career, is noteworthy.

Some of the telegrams sent through the Dissent Channel did predict many of the mistakes and strategic miscalculations that the United States subsequently made. However, many of the cables did call for a more moderate foreign policy (protesting the invasions of Iraq and Syria). Nevertheless, the U.S. political establishment, intent on achieving its geopolitical goals by any means necessary, almost always ignores these messages completely, and many of the officials involved in signing the telegrams are weeded out, through removal from office. As the current scandal between McCaul and Blinken shows, the Dissent Channel is only used as a matter of political speculation for the partisan struggle between Republicans and Democrats.

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Nikita Averkin writes from Russia. This article appears through the kind courtesy of [\*Geopolitica\*](#).

