DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF THE UNITED STATES WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN IN 2020-2021

Bintang Corvi Diphda[1], Putri Alyaa Safira[2], Yoga Ramadhani[3], Gertha Maria Gultom[4], Angelique Kishiola Prima Foraihmbarasi[5]
Universitas Brawijaya, Malang
e-mail: [1]bintangcorvi058@student.ub.ac.id, [2]safiraalyaa@student.ub.ac.id,
[3]yogacuteboy@student.ub.ac.id, [4]gerthagultom04@student.ub.ac.id,
[5]angeliquekishi@student.ub.ac.id

Abstract: *This article explains why the United States chose to withdraw troops from Afghanistan in 2020-2021 by applying Graham Allison's decision-making models. Using a qualitative desk review, this article systematically identified, selected, and analysed secondary sources, then conducted a thematic analysis aligned with the Rational Actor, Organisational Process, and Bureaucratic Politics frameworks. The findings show that, as a rational actor, the U.S. pursued strategic aims of cost reduction, force protection, and fulfilment of political commitments, enabled in part by the Doha framework. Organisational procedures within the Department of Defence, the State Department, and CENTCOM shaped the pace, sequencing, and modalities of withdrawal. Bureaucratic bargaining among the President, senior defence leaders, and the special envoy structured key choices and trade-offs. This article concludes that the exit was driven by rational goals filtered through institutional routines and interagency politics. Policy implications include earlier whole-of-government planning, tighter diplomatic coordination with partners, and robust contingency arrangements.*

Keywords: *Afghanistan, foreign policy, middle east*

Abstrak: Artikel ini menjelaskan alasan Amerika Serikat menarik pasukan dari Afghanistan pada 2020-2021 dengan menggunakan model pengambilan keputusan Graham Allison. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui *desk review* untuk mengidentifikasi, memilih, dan menganalisis sumber sekunder, kemudian melakukan analisis tematik berdasarkan model Rational Actor, Organizational Process, dan Bureaucratic Politics. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa sebagai aktor rasional, Amerika Serikat mengejar tujuan strategis berupa pengurangan biaya, perlindungan personel, dan pemenuhan komitmen politik yang didukung perjanjian Doha. Prosedur organisasi di Departemen Pertahanan, Departemen Luar Negeri, dan CENTCOM membentuk ritme, urutan, dan proses berulang yang mendorong upaya penarikan pasukan dari Afghanistan. Tawar-menawar birokratis antara Presiden, pimpinan pertahanan, dan utusan khusus menjadi penentu kebijakan dan keputusan kunci. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa keputusan ditariknya pasukan Amerika Serikat dari Afghanistan didorong oleh tujuan rasional yang secara bersamaan juga melalui rutinitas institusional dan persinggungan kepentingan antar para aktor birokrasi.

Kata kunci: Afganistan, kebijakan luar negeri, timur tengah

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a phenomenon that has been inseparable from the history of human existence. One of the most influential conflicts in recent history is the United States and Afghanistan conflict, which escalated after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and resulted in the deaths of around 3,000 people (Rajmil et al., 2022). In response, President George W. Bush declared a war on terror,

identified Osama bin Laden as the main suspect, and demanded that the Taliban government in Afghanistan hand him over. The Taliban rejected this request, arguing that the United States lacked evidence and was violating Afghanistan's sovereignty, which then became the basis for the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom and the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan to dismantle Al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power (CNN, 2013; Myers, 2002).

The conflict evolved from an initial counterterrorism operation into a prolonged military engagement that lasted almost two decades. By 2020, President Donald Trump announced that it was time to end this long war and linked the withdrawal of U.S. troops to progress in intra-Afghan peace talks with the Taliban (Ullah et al., 2022). These negotiations produced the 2020 Doha Agreement, which set out the U.S. commitment to withdraw its forces in exchange for Taliban assurances not to attack U.S. troops and to prevent other militant groups from using Afghan territory (Anuj & Kumar, 2024; Verma, 2022; Theros, 2023).

However, despite the United States' significant decision to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan following the Doha Agreement, few studies have examined in detail the rationale for this choice and the internal dynamics behind it. Existing research tends to focus either on strategic calculations, on institutional implementation, or on elite politics, but rarely integrates these dimensions within a single analytical framework. There is still a lack of studies that apply all three of Graham T. Allison's models simultaneously to the Afghanistan case and that systematically compare rational calculations, organisational routines, and bureaucratic bargaining in explaining the withdrawal decision. To address this gap, this article applies Graham T. Allison's decision-making theory as the analytical framework, using the Rational Actor, Organisational Process, and Bureaucratic Politics Models together to explain why the U.S. government ultimately decided to withdraw its forces.

The relevance of discussing the United States and Afghanistan conflict using Graham T. Allison's theory lies in the long duration and layered nature of the conflict, which involves strategic calculation, bureaucratic bargaining, and complex organisational routines. Applying this theory makes it possible to identify and connect the different factors that influenced the U.S. decision to withdraw its troops, rather than treating the withdrawal as a single, unitary choice. Allison's framework, first developed in his analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, offers three complementary models for analysing foreign policy decision-making: the Rational Actor Model, the Organisational Process Model, and the Bureaucratic Politics Model (Allison, 1971).

In the context of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Rational Actor Model helps to examine how the United States, as a state, weighed the costs and benefits of continuing or ending the military presence and how it defined its strategic interests at the time. The Organisational Process Model is relevant because the withdrawal depended on standard operating procedures and routines within institutions such as the Department of Defense, the State Department, and U.S. Central Command, which shaped what was practically possible and how decisions were implemented.

Furthermore, The Bureaucratic Politics Model is suitable for capturing the negotiations and power struggles among key actors in the Trump administration, whose differing preferences and influence affected the content and timing of the withdrawal decision. Taken together, these three models provide a structured way to link rational calculation, organisational constraints, and bureaucratic bargaining in order to understand the complexity of U.S. foreign policy decision-making in Afghanistan.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a desk review method. According to Barbieri et al. (2025), a desk review consists of systematically identifying, selecting, and analysing secondary sources such as official reports, news articles, government statements, and other relevant documents that are not indexed in traditional academic databases. The first step in the desk review process was to define the research objectives and inclusion/exclusion criteria, ensuring that only documents relevant to the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan were considered. The materials reviewed include a diverse range of institutional reports, public statements, and grey literature sourced from government publications, international organisations, and reputable media outlets.

The desk review process follows a three-step procedure. The first step involves an initial broad search to identify a wide range of relevant documents using both general and specialised sources, including government websites, think tanks, and international news outlets. This stage generated a preliminary corpus of several dozen documents published from the early 2000s to 2024 that discussed the U.S. presence and withdrawal in Afghanistan. The second step consists of a more targeted search to locate key regulatory documents, treaties, and policy papers using relevant keywords such as "U.S. troop withdrawal," "Doha Agreement," and "Afghanistan peace talks."

At this stage, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied: documents were included if they addressed U.S. foreign policy or decision-making related to the 2020–2021 withdrawal, and were excluded if they were duplicates, purely opinion pieces without clear empirical or documentary bases, did not deal substantively with Afghanistan, or focused solely on battlefield operations without linking them to policy decisions. The third and final step involves a detailed screening process of the remaining documents to ensure that all identified materials meet the inclusion criteria, followed by a thorough analysis to synthesise the findings.

Furthermore, this article will employ thematic analysis according to the key themes of Graham Allison's decision-making theory. Thematic analysis allows for a systematic interpretation of recurring themes and patterns within the selected documents. These themes, derived from Allison's Rational Actor, Organisational Process, and Bureaucratic Politics Models, are used to explore the key factors and motivations behind the U.S. decision to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. The analysis focuses on identifying strategic goals, organisational influences, and the political dynamics that shaped the withdrawal decision.

This article also conducts data triangulation by drawing on multiple secondary information sources to ensure the validity and robustness of the findings. The sources used for triangulation include government reports, news articles, policy papers, and expert analyses. By synthesising data from these diverse sources, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the decision-making process behind the U.S. military withdrawal and the underlying factors that influenced it.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Trajectory of Afghanistan Conflict

The conflict between the United States and Afghanistan began as a response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The terrorist group Al-Qaeda, responsible for the attacks, operated from Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban regime. In response, the United States, under President George W. Bush, launched a global military campaign known as the Global War on Terror. The first step in this campaign was an invasion of

Afghanistan, with the goal of destroying the Al-Qaeda network and overthrowing the Taliban. Initially, the invasion aimed to eliminate the terrorism threat from Afghanistan, but over time, the mission expanded into a larger effort, including building a stable government and supporting democracy in Afghanistan (CNN, 2013).

After the invasion in late 2001, U.S. and international coalition forces successfully took control of Kabul and overthrew the Taliban from power. A transitional government was established with international support, and the U.S. began collaborating with NATO allies to train the Afghan military, with the expectation that it would be able to maintain stability and security in the country. The training and military development programs aimed to assist the Afghan government in retaining control and expanding its authority across the country.

When President Barack Obama took office in 2009, he faced an increasingly challenging situation in Afghanistan. To address the rising activity of the Taliban, Obama announced a "surge" strategy, which involved sending additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan in large numbers. The goal of the surge was to significantly weaken the Taliban's power and provide time for the Afghan government to strengthen its military and local governance capacities. At its peak, over 100,000 U.S. troops were stationed in Afghanistan as part of this surge effort (Simbar et al., 2023).

During President Donald Trum"s administration, however, U.S. foreign policy towards Afghanistan underwent significant changes. After more than 16 years of prolonged military involvement, Trump took steps to prioritise reducing the U.S. military presence abroad, in line with his America First policy (Ullah et al., 2022). In this context, Trump's main objective was to end the forever war in Afghanistan, which he deemed ineffective and too burdensome on national resources.

In 2017, upon first assuming office, Trump decided to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan temporarily, arguing that it was necessary to ensure stability and give the Afghan government time to strengthen its military capacity. However, Trump expressed dissatisfaction with the prolonged war and emphasised the need for a diplomatic solution that could gradually end U.S. involvement in Afghanistan (McHugh, 2023).

Then, on February 29, 2020, after intensive negotiations, the U.S. and the Taliban signed a peace agreement in Doha, Qatar. This agreement, officially known as the *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, established a framework for the full withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan within 14 months, conditional on the Taliban fulfilling the agreed-upon commitments (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

Following the signing of the agreement, the U.S. began reducing its troops gradually according to the established timeline. On the other side, the Taliban also began adhering to some parts of the agreement, including pledging not to attack U.S. forces, although attacks on Afghan forces continued periodically. The implementation of the agreement faced several challenges due to tensions among the various parties involved, including dissatisfaction from the Afghan government, which felt sidelined in the peace process (Walldorf, 2022).

Obama's 2014 Drawdown and Trump's Withdrawal Decision

Although both Barack Obama and Donald Trump sought to reduce the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, their approaches to withdrawal differed in terms of objectives, timing, and implementation. Under Obama, the main focus was to wind down the large scale combat mission while still maintaining a long term commitment to supporting the Afghan government. After launching a troop surge to weaken the Taliban and stabilise key areas, Obama announced the

end of the U.S. combat mission in 2014 and the transition to the Resolute Support mission, which kept a residual force in Afghanistan to train, advise, and assist Afghan security forces and to conduct limited counterterrorism operations (Simbar et al., 2023; Ullah et al., 2022).

The drawdown was gradual and conditions based, framed as a responsible reduction that aimed to preserve the gains achieved and avoid a sudden security vacuum. The United States and its NATO allies continued to rely on cooperation with the Afghan government rather than direct negotiation with the Taliban, and the long term goal remained the strengthening of Afghan state institutions (Walldorf, 2022).

On the other hand, Trump's approach differed both in tone and in substance. While he initially authorised a moderate increase in troop levels in 2017, he repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the length and cost of the war and framed Afghanistan as a forever war that needed to be brought to an end (Ullah et al., 2022). The central objective of his policy became a complete withdrawal of foreign forces within a clear time frame.

To achieve this, the Trump administration shifted from relying primarily on Kabul to engaging in direct talks with the Taliban, which culminated in the 2020 Doha Agreement. This agreement set a 14 month schedule for the full withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops in exchange for Taliban commitments related to counterterrorism and intra Afghan dialogue (U.S. Department of State, 2020; Simbar et al., 2023). In practice, the Trump withdrawal plan envisioned a much smaller and shorter residual presence than Obama's, placed stronger emphasis on ending U.S. military involvement even at the risk of a rapid shift in the internal balance of power, and gave the Taliban a central role in the political framework for Afghanistan's future.

Rational Actor Approach

The Rational Actor Approach framework views foreign policy decision-making as an action taken by a single entity, which is a state that acts rationally to achieve clear objectives (Allison, 1971). In the context of the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2020 under President Donald Trump's administration, this approach assumes that the decision was made through careful calculations to achieve the desired outcome (*cost and benefit analysis*), based on strategic goals and rationally evaluated options. This model considers the U.S. government as a rational actor, striving to maximise benefits and minimise the risks or costs arising from its military involvement in Afghanistan.

In the decision to withdraw troops, the Trump administration had several key objectives that formed the basis of this decision, focusing on the *America First* concept, which prioritised domestic interests and reduced involvement in foreign affairs deemed unprofitable for the U.S. These objectives included (Snyder, 2022).

First, one of the Trump administration's main goals was to end U.S. involvement in the forever war that had lasted nearly two decades in Afghanistan. Since 2001, the U.S. has invested significant resources in this war, but the expected outcome, which is full stability in Afghanistan, has remained difficult to achieve. The decision to withdraw troops was part of an effort to reduce the burden of a prolonged war that was draining U.S. energy and finances.

Table 1 The U.S. Estimated Spending

Category	Amount	Detail
U.S. Military Operations	Over $720 billion	Spent to support U.S. military operations in Afghanistan since FY2001.
Overall War Costs (2001-2020)	More than $2.3 trillion	Military expenses for fighting terrorism in Afghanistan

		from 2001 to 2020, according to the Watson Institute of Brown University.
War Costs (Direct Spending)	$1 trillion	The estimated direct spending costs of the war for the United States.
Reconstruction & Related Activities	Over $141 billion	Spent for reconstruction efforts and related activities (including military assistance) since FY2001.

Source: Compiled by Authors

Furthermore, the long-term U.S. involvement in Afghanistan brought enormous costs to the country. According to reports analysed in several studies (Rasooli et al., 2024), the expenses incurred over the years for the Afghanistan war reached 2,3 trillion dollars. The Trump administration thus sought to reduce these massive expenditures by fully withdrawing troops and reallocating funds that were previously assigned to the war toward more urgent domestic needs (Zulfiqar et al., 2025).

The withdrawal was also intended to reduce the risks faced by U.S. military personnel, who continued to face threats on the battlefield. This decision was seen as a rational step to protect U.S. soldiers and prevent further casualties, especially given the lack of clear results from the ongoing stabilisation mission.

Additionally, the Trump administration's decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan can be seen as the result of a rational calculation to meet political and financial interests. With this withdrawal, the U.S. achieved several important strategic goals: reducing costs, protecting military personnel, and fulfilling political promises. The decision was also supported by the agreement with the Taliban, which was seen as an effort to maintain post-withdrawal security (Murtazashvili, 2022).

Organisational Process Approach

Graham Allison's Organisational Process Model emphasises that foreign policy decisions are often the result of established procedures and routines within the government organisations involved in the decision-making process (Allison, 1971). In the context of the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2020, the decision was influenced not only by the ultimate goal of the government (i.e., ending U.S. involvement in Afghanistan) but also by various operational procedures applied by each of the organizations involved, such as the Department of Defense, the State Department, and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) (U.S. Department of State, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2024). Each institution carried out its tasks according to established protocols and procedures, meaning the final decision was the outcome of collective procedures and routines.

In the withdrawal policy, several key organisations had clear roles and responsibilities. Each organisation had specific mandates and operational procedures for managing the withdrawal, such as the Department of Defence, which acts as the primary agency responsible for U.S. military forces (U.S. Department of State, 2020). The Department of Defence was tasked with planning and executing the safe and effective withdrawal of troops. The department followed established logistical procedures, including reducing troop numbers, transferring personnel, and managing and moving military equipment in Afghanistan (U.S. Department of State, 2024). In many cases, equipment that could not be moved had to be destroyed to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Taliban or other third parties. All of these actions were carried out according to strict standard operating procedures to

ensure the safety and security of U.S. forces.

Furthermore, there is the State Department as the body responsible for U.S. foreign relations, the State Department played a crucial role in maintaining communication with the Afghan government, international allies, and the Taliban (U.S. Department of State, 2020). The department was involved in the implementation of the Doha Agreement, which served as the basis for the withdrawal, and worked alongside Afghan government officials to facilitate a coordinated withdrawal. The communication and diplomatic processes followed official protocols designed to maintain the stability of bilateral and multilateral relations throughout the withdrawal process.

Lastly, there is the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM, which holds operational jurisdiction over Afghanistan in the Middle East, was responsible for planning and coordinating daily military activities on the ground during the withdrawal process. CENTCOM played a key role in managing security operations involving the protection of U.S. forces and overseeing Taliban activities during the withdrawal period (U.S. Department of State, 2024). By adhering to strict standard protocols, CENTCOM ensured that the withdrawal process was carried out without posing direct threats to personnel on the ground.

Henceforth, the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2020 can be seen as the result of procedures and routines carried out collectively by various government agencies. Each organisation played its role in following operational standards to enforce security procedures, manage evacuations, and maintain diplomatic communication with international partners and the Taliban. This decision not only reflects the rational objectives of the Trump administration but also represents the outcome of a complex organisational process involving inter-bureaucratic coordination, operational protocols, and established security procedures.

Bureaucratic Politics Approach

The Bureaucratic Politics Approach (BPA) views foreign policy decision-making as the result of negotiation, compromise, and competition among various bureaucratic actors, each with its own interests and agendas (Allison, 1971). In the context of the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2020, this decision was not the outcome of a single thought or vision but rather the result of interactions between several officials and institutions within the Trump administration, each holding different views on the best way to end U.S. involvement in Afghanistan (McHugh, 2023).

In this model, each actor holds a unique position, role, and power within the government, influencing policy and the final decision. Further, explained the roles of key actors, their interests, the process of compromise, and the power dynamics involved in the decision-making process regarding the U.S. troop withdrawal in Afghanistan (Shively, 2024). The decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2020 involved several key actors with significant roles and interests. These actors played a major role in the decision-making process (McHugh, 2023).

First, President Donald Trump. As president, Trump held the highest executive power to determine the direction of U.S. foreign policy, including the decision to end U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan. Trump focused on the America First principle and remained committed to his campaign promise of bringing troops home from the prolonged war (Simbar et al., 2023). For him, the troop withdrawal was a way to save costs and reduce U.S. involvement abroad, while also fulfilling an important political promise ahead of the 2020 re-election.

Second, Mark Esper (Secretary of Defence). Esper held a more cautious

view regarding a full withdrawal. While he supported the reduction of U.S. military presence in line with the Trump administration's vision, he advocated for a more gradual approach to ensure the safety of U.S. troops on the ground and to prevent a power vacuum that could be exploited by the Taliban. As Secretary of Defence, Esper played a key role in coordinating the logistical preparations and ensuring that the withdrawal followed established operational standards within the Department of Defence (Klehm, 2020).

Third, Zalmay Khalilzad (U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation). Khalilzad played a pivotal role in negotiating the Doha Agreement with the Taliban in 2020, which served as the basis for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. As an experienced diplomat with Afghan roots, Khalilzad had an in-depth understanding of the political dynamics in the country. He sought to secure an agreement that would regulate the U.S. troop withdrawal while ensuring that the Taliban committed to maintaining stability and not supporting terrorism. For Khalilzad, this agreement represented an opportunity for achieving lasting peace through diplomacy.

Fourth, Senior Officials in the Department of Defence and Intelligence. Some military and intelligence officials in Washington were sceptical of a rapid withdrawal. They feared that the Taliban would regain control and that Afghanistan might once again become a base for international terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda (McHugh, 2023). These officials supported a more gradual approach, hoping that the U.S. would maintain a small military presence in Afghanistan to support the local government in maintaining stability and combating the Taliban. This concern reflected a risk assessment that was deemed critical for the long-term success of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Henceforth, through the Bureaucratic Politics Approach, it is clear that the decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2020 was the result of complex interactions and negotiations between actors with differing interests. This decision was shaped by political power, compromise, and competition among the key actors involved, leading to a decision that was not only rational but also reflective of each party's influence and interests.

CONCLUSION

In this analysis, the U.S. troop withdrawal is recognised as a decision that was not only rational but also reflective of the interests and influence of the various parties involved. The application of Graham Allison's theory is also evident in this analysis. The Rational Actor Model shows that the decision to withdraw troops was based on strategic objectives, such as reducing costs and protecting military personnel.

The withdrawal process also involved the Organisational Process approach, where various government organisations, such as the Department of Defence and the State Department, followed established operational procedures and routines. Each agency had a specific role in managing logistics and security during the withdrawal, ensuring that the process proceeded according to plan.

The final model, Bureaucratic Politics, highlights the importance of negotiation and compromise between key actors, including Trump, Secretary of Defence Mark Esper, and Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad. Khalilzad, as the Special Envoy for Afghanistan Reconciliation, played a pivotal role in negotiating the Doha Agreement. This agreement became the basis for the U.S. troop withdrawal, with both parties committing to maintaining stability. Khalilzad sought to achieve an agreement that would be acceptable to all parties, creating an opportunity for lasting peace through diplomacy.

The final decision to withdraw troops was the result of a compromise process that considered various interests and concerns about post-withdrawal stability in Afghanistan. The research provides valuable insight into the dynamics of U.S. foreign policy decision-making and the challenges faced in achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Hence, based on the analysis of the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan using Graham Allison's theory, several recommendations for future foreign policy are proposed. First, there is a need for improved collaboration between organisations, such as the Department of Defence and the State Department, to design comprehensive strategies that consider both operational and social impacts. Second, it is essential for the government to consider various policy alternatives thoroughly and maintain flexibility in implementation to adjust to changing circumstances on the ground. Additionally, preparedness for unforeseen challenges should be enhanced, including contingency planning and collaboration with allies to minimise the negative impact of withdrawals.

This study, however, has several limitations. It relies entirely on secondary sources, such as news reports, policy papers, and official statements, without incorporating primary data from interviews or archival records. Some of these sources, particularly media coverage, may contain editorial or political bias that affects how actors, motives, and events are portrayed. The absence of direct testimony from policymakers, military officials, or Afghan stakeholders also restricts the ability to verify and nuance the interpretations presented in this article. Future research could address these limitations by combining Allison's models with primary data collection, including elite interviews and archival research, or by conducting comparative studies of other U.S. military withdrawals and incorporating Afghan and regional perspectives to deepen and cross-validate the analysis of foreign policy decision-making.

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