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US-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

By Halle Clotey

INTRODUCTION



The 9/11 Memorial is a tribute honoring the 2,977 children, women, and men killed during the 9/11 attacks

9/11 Memorial

Al-Qaeda – a militant Islamic organization founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden

Taliban – insurgent Sunni Islamic fundamentalist political and military movement and organization in Afghanistan

The United States' involvement with the war in Afghanistan began less than a month after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Nearly 3,000 people were killed when hijacked airplanes crashed into the north and south towers at the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan, New York as well as the Pentagon Building in Washington, DC and a field in Pennsylvania ("September 11 Terror"). These are known as the deadliest terrorist attacks on American soil in all of US history.

The United States believed that Osama bin Laden, the leader of **al-Qaeda**, was responsible for these attacks. In October 2001, the US started bombing Afghanistan while targeting al-Qaeda fighters and the **Taliban** ("The History of the Afghanistan War"). By November 2001, the Northern Alliance—with the help of the US and other countries—successfully drove the Taliban out of the capital city Kabul, resulting in the Taliban regime's collapse. However, after an extended period of time, the Taliban gradually regained their influence; the **War on Terror** persisted.

The United States' main focus during this time was to combat terrorism and deter groups from imposing threats against the US in regard to US foreign policy. The 9/11 attacks sparked an important relationship between the US and Afghanistan in their fight against terrorism, working to help eliminate al-Qaeda, ISIS-Khorasan, and their affiliates ("U.S. Relations"). The Afghanistan War is the longest war that the US has ever fought in. Due to the complexities of the United States' engagement with Afghanistan, you all—as congresspeople—will have to explore current and past efforts of bringing this war to an end while evaluating the best avenues to ensure the wellness of US soldiers and the people in Afghanistan.

EXPLANATION OF THE ISSUE

Historical Development

War on Terror – an international military campaign launched by the United States government in the wake of the 9/11 attacks



Afghanistan's president Ashraf Ghani attends a news conference to discuss potential peace negotiations
Atlantic Council

Washington has committed to spending \$86 billion to help support Afghan security forces.

The United States recognized Afghanistan in 1921 and initiated diplomatic relations with the country almost 14 years later on May 4, 1935 (“History of the U.S.”). On December 25, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, launching the Soviet-Afghan War. Once the US began attacking the Soviet Union with anti-aircraft missiles, Soviet planes and helicopters were regularly shot down, leading to the soldiers becoming demoralized and ultimately retreating in 1988; the last Soviet soldier crossed over the border in February 1989, ending the Soviet-Afghan War (“Soviet Union Invades”).

This war created a hub for terrorism and the emergence of Osama bin Laden. When the Soviet forces eventually withdrew, the Afghan government in Kabul lasted for only three years. Its collapse in 1992 led to a civil war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. Once the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, they were able to control most of Afghanistan (Azami). After the 9/11 attacks, the US led an invasion which removed the Taliban from power. Almost two decades have passed since this war began, and it has yet to end. The US has made a long-term commitment to helping rebuild Afghanistan after all of these years of war; they have provided resources in numerous areas such as humanitarian relief and assistance, security needs, and infrastructure projects (Pike). They plan to remain engaged—politically, diplomatically, and economically—with Afghanistan for a great period of time.

Most recently, President Donald Trump signed the US-Taliban agreement in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020, declaring that it was a step to achieve peace (Burns). The US essentially agreed to withdraw military forces, intelligence agency personnel, private security contractors, trainers, and advisers from Afghanistan; this deal also specified that the Taliban would initiate intra-Afghan peace negotiations. Despite this agreement, turmoil continues to persist in Afghanistan.

Scope of the Problem

The terrorist groups that hail from Afghanistan pose a serious threat to the United States as well as the civilians that reside in that country. It is for this sole reason that the United States has been engaged in the war in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. Three presidents have held office in the US since the beginning of this war. President George W. Bush aspired to reconstruct Afghanistan in order to promote peace and combat evil; President Barack Obama wanted to prevent and limit terrorist safe havens in

Afghanistan; and President Donald Trump aimed to bring home American troops as quickly as possible. All of these efforts are inherently tied with one another, further increasing the complexity of the United States' relations with Afghanistan.

Decreasing US Presence in Afghanistan

President Trump signed the US-Taliban Peace Deal in February 2020 asserting that the United States would decrease their number of troops to 8,600 by July 15, 2020 and completely abandon five bases (Burns). All foreign forces are required to withdraw by spring of 2021, subsequently ending America's longest war. Although the administration would be successful in bringing soldiers back home, many representatives are still concerned about the most effective way to coordinate this while ensuring that there is a pathway to peace. More vocal representatives have articulated that this decision should be constructed on America's national security interests instead of desired outcomes derived from promises stated by the Taliban—which are, unfortunately, unlikely to happen (Brufke and Kheel).

The absence of a **verification mechanism** from the agreement is also quite concerning for the United States as well as Afghanistan; as of May 2020, the Afghan government has failed to participate in **peace talks** with the Taliban in order to establish a civil and secure environment for their country. With the removal of US soldiers, Afghanistan is at a higher risk of erupting into a civil war, similar to the aftereffects of the Soviet-Afghan War in 1989. If this current deal fails, then the Taliban will be able to try and capture the state again. On account of this, Defense Department officials argue that they cannot guarantee that Afghanistan will be used as a haven for planning attacks against the United States. Without the pressure of foreign troops, terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State will have free reign to impose violence in Afghanistan, the US, and the world.

Commanders also worry that a precipitous removal of troops will unravel all the progress made in the past two decades (Gibbons-Neff and Barnes). However, as the year continues and bleeds into 2021, the next president to hold office—whether that is Trump or a new elected individual—might reassess whether an American military presence is necessary in Afghanistan. The political pressure to remove troops might shift depending on the level of Taliban violence and the effectiveness of the peace agreement.

While some believe that the current situation in Afghanistan is fragile and that a slower removal of troops will allot for a better turnover, others reckon that an immediate removal is more productive for the United States. As the longest war in American history, many are unable to describe what winning the war in

Verification mechanism – a safeguard measure invoked when an acceding state has failed to implement commitments undertaken in the context of the accession negotiations in the fields of the areas of freedom, security and justice, or internal market policy

Peace talks – a conference or series of discussions aimed at ending hostility



Staff Sgt. Francisco Narewski sees his daughter Evelyn after returning home from Afghanistan
The New York Times

Afghanistan would look like (Ward). The US has been in a state of continued armed conflict for the past 19 years. Their main military missions consist of two parts. The first mission entails that US troops train and advise Afghan security forces so that they are prepared to fight the Taliban and other groups on their own. The second mission requires that US forces fulfill raids and air strikes against terrorists themselves. It is at the point, however, where groups of individuals believe that: there is little the US military can do about Afghanistan's already dire situation, and it is best to prioritize American lives by restricting any more troops from entering this war. Consequently, the sudden removal of US troops could strain America's relations with Afghanistan due to their impending fall without military assistance.

Counterterrorism Operations

Ever since the War on Terror began, the United States government has been concerned with the ways they can protect United States infrastructure from terrorist attacks. By deploying troops to Afghanistan, they have tried to improve the safety and security of the US while preventing diplomatic chaos in Afghanistan, which could potentially lead to the rise of terrorist groups and political unrest across the world. The deal that President Trump signed in February 2020 charted how the Taliban needed to publicly renounce al-Qaeda and the Islamic State before removing all of their troops (Gibbons-Neff and Barnes). The remaining 8,600 US troops will largely rely on **Special Operations** forces and regional targeting teams focused on counterterrorism missions across Afghanistan.

However, as the president continues to remove soldiers from the war, Afghan security forces will continue to lose their strength and thus give grounds for the Taliban to reign over their country once again. The US is encouraging the Afghan government to implement strong actions to improve governance and combat corruption (Pike). Political fallout and widespread protests from the killings of 17 civilians allegedly by a US soldier in 2012 strained US-Afghanistan relations. In April 2012, the two countries finalized a partnership agreement detailing America's military and financial support for Afghans for at least a decade beyond 2014. In July 2012, the Obama administration labeled Afghanistan a **Major non-NATO Ally**. By supporting the training of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), Afghanistan can independently protect itself against internal and external threats, and ultimately aid in the United States' fight against terrorism.

As of May 2020, there is no explicit statement from the Taliban renouncing al-Qaeda and other radical groups. The risk of future terrorist attacks will be heightened if the US stops its counterterrorism operations, allowing groups such as ISIS to grow

Special operations
– unconventional
missions carried out
by dedicated elite
forces using
specialized tactics and
resources

**Major non-NATO
Ally** – a designation
given by the United
States government
that provides close
allies with certain
benefits in areas of
defense trade and
security cooperation

due to the lack of pressure on them. For this reason, the US has to work with Afghanistan to isolate terrorists from different sources of support so that these groups do not use Afghanistan's soil to plan another attack on the US. As the US-Taliban Peace Deal is enacted over the course of 2020, those in congress will have to conjure up a myriad of solutions to ensure the safety of American and Afghan people when it pertains to terrorism.

Reconciliation Efforts

According to the Department of Defense, the overall military expenditure in Afghanistan from October 2001 to September 2019 was \$778 billion (“Afghanistan War: What Has the Conflict”). The US State Department as well as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and other government agencies spent \$44 billion on reconstruction projects in Afghanistan, bringing the total cost to \$822 billion since the start of the war. The money left over from US and Afghan troops has mostly been spent on improving economic and humanitarian aid, governance and infrastructure, and anti-drug initiatives.

In the United States' reconciliation efforts, they have been able to guide the Afghan government to provide better services for the people of Afghanistan while maintaining and expanding upon their advances in women's rights. A vital portion of the US-Taliban deal centers on the exchange of 6,000 prisoners between the Taliban and Afghanistan—even though the Kabul government was not a signatory of the agreement (Gibbons-Neff and Barnes). Top American officials hope that the release of prisoners will help the Afghan government forge a peaceful negotiation with the Taliban. On Tuesday, May 26, 2020, President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan released 900 Taliban prisoners, the largest in one day since the initial release of soldiers; President Ghani is attempting to use the temporary cease-fire for the three days of the Islamic festival Eid al-Fitr as a reset for the fraught peace deal.

Before this cease-fire, many people were doubtful of the Taliban's commitment to peace—some still are. Soon after the February agreement, numerous Taliban attacks resulted in the death of hundreds of security forces. The relationship between Afghanistan and the Taliban is fragile; even with the peace deal, neither group has initiated peace talks with one another, which is an essential part of the agreement. Due to these tensions, reconciling Afghanistan with other political groups will be a challenging and long-term commitment for the United States.

Congressional Action

Home After Nobel (AFGHAN) Service Act is a bill that would repeal the Authorization for Use of Military Force enacted in response to the 9/11 attacks. It was introduced as legislation

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Members of the Taliban delegation gather for the signing ceremony with the United States in the Qatari capital of Doha

NPR News

numbered Senate Joint Resolution 12 by Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) and Sen. Tom Udall (D-MD) on March 4, 2019 (“S.J.Res. 12”). This bill sought to formally end the war in Afghanistan and declare victory since the United States’ primary mission—to overthrow the Taliban and eliminate al-Qaeda from Afghanistan—was essentially fulfilled.

Another bill called the Ensuring a Durable Afghanistan Peace Act was introduced on November 21, 2019 by Sen. Mendez (“S. 2953”). This bill would require congressional oversight for any US-Afghanistan peace agreement; it currently has two bipartisan cosponsors Sens. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) and Todd Young (R-IN). In May 2020, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations held a meeting concerning this bill as well.

These recent bills highlight the significance of formulating a viable solution for the United States’ involvement in the War in Afghanistan.

Other Policy Action

Quite a few international governments and organizations have assisted Afghanistan during this war; however, in recent years, foreign aid from other countries has diminished. The UK, for example, removed all of their combat troops in 2014, but US troops remained (Mason). The United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) was formed in March 2002 to manage all UN humanitarian, reconstruction, relief, and recovery activities (Paul). The UN’s role in Afghanistan is to promote good governance and the rule of law while helping organize elections and registering voters; however, they believe that unless Afghanistan can achieve a lasting and stable peace, then no prospect of progress—electoral or otherwise—will occur. With this being said, most policies regarding Afghanistan have stemmed from the United States.



Nurses care for newborns in a hospital in Kabul who were rescued from an attack on a maternity clinic the day before on May 12, 2020

Time

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) was formed in March 2002 to manage all UN humanitarian, reconstruction, relief, and recovery activities.

IDEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

Conservative View

Both conservatives and liberals have emphasized the importance of maintaining security within the United States while fighting off terrorism. However, shortly after President Trump signed the US-Taliban Peace Deal in February 2020, many Republicans became a lot more vocal in voicing their objections to this agreement (Ward). Although most of America is frustrated with how incredibly long this war has lasted, quite a few conservatives have expressed concerns over this deal, stating that the sudden removal of troops could put the country’s national security at risk.

Although a few conservatives—while cautious—have said to give the deal more time, the majority believe that this agreement will result in an unbalance in Afghanistan and consequently empower members of the Taliban. This threatens American national security and weakens the United States’ ability to enforce this agreement due to their declining presence in Afghanistan. Many conservatives believe that US troops should remain in Afghanistan to ensure the security of the US from terrorism. Overall, conservatives more generally—but not always—favor aggressive foreign policy measures such as military intervention.

Liberal View

Liberals usually strive for less aggressive foreign policy solutions compared to conservatives; instead, they argue in favor of using economic or diplomatic means. In relation to the war, liberals almost entirely agree that having troops stationed in Afghanistan is unnecessary and somewhat even counterproductive. Many claim that the United States’ involvement in this war is not helping the safety and security of this country, Afghanistan, nor the world (Ward). The Democratic candidates for the 2020 presidential election debated their stances on Afghanistan, but unanimously agreed that it is time that the US remove all troops from Afghanistan, so that they can return home and ultimately put an end to this “endless war.”

Budgeting costs were a lot higher when President Obama was in office—steadily breaking \$100 billion for the first five years of his presidency (Amadeo). In his presidential campaign, President Obama pledged to end the war in Afghanistan; however, in 2010, he ended up deploying 33,000 troops to Afghanistan to meet the country’s need for more soldiers; President Trump followed this similar model when he began his term in office, blurring the lines between the Democratic and Republican parties when it came to foreign policy. After President Trump signed the US-Taliban Peace Deal, however, liberals—like conservatives—expressed their skepticism about the effectiveness of the deal, especially with regard to placing trust in the Taliban to live up to their part of the agreement.

In essence, a critical takeaway concerning the effectiveness of one’s political affiliation on this particular issue is that it pervades multiple parties. Both liberals and conservatives agree and disagree amidst their own parties on the best policy to pursue in this situation to ensure the safety of the United States. For this reason, there are many opportunities for bipartisanship and compromise, so be sure to take advantage of that.



President Obama shakes hands with troops after delivering remarks at Bagram Air Base in Kabul

Council on Foreign Relations

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AREAS OF DEBATE

Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the United States has devoted time and energy into combatting terrorism. The war in Afghanistan has been a topic of contention for years, inciting disputes among American citizens and politicians. While some believe that remaining in this war is paramount to American national security, others believe that the United States' continued engagement in Afghanistan is fruitless and will result in imminent failure. The decisions that the committee on Foreign Affairs makes is vital in shaping the lives of American citizens in years to come. Delegates will need to decide what the best solutions are to reducing the risk of terrorism for Americans while promoting peace in Afghanistan.

Completely Remove US Troops

The most frequently proposed solution by the US Congress and federal government is to remove all US troops from the war in Afghanistan. The constant battle for power between the Taliban and the Afghan government has resulted in a permanent state of inertia for the United States' and their participation in the war (Martin). By removing soldiers, the United States can begin divesting military resources and allocating that money elsewhere.

This solution allows the United States to ultimately terminate their role in the War in Afghanistan. The spread of **coronavirus** has also amplified the urgency to bring US troops home and has accelerated several closures of US military bases as well (Gibbons-Neff and Barnes). The graveness of this pandemic is critical, and it is imperative that social distancing methods are implemented to reduce one's risk of exposure. However, in the state of war, following these health guidelines is nearly impossible. If US and Afghan soldiers get infected with the coronavirus, then those who experience severe symptoms will not have the capacity to fight in the war, ultimately weakening their military forces.

However, others believe that this "signal of retreat" will alleviate pressure from terrorist groups. Without the military aid from the United States, the Afghan security forces will lose their strength, resulting in thousands of troops deserting their military (Ward). Regardless of the United States' involvement, however, in order to ensure a solid transition to peace within Afghanistan, the Afghan government must maintain military and social pressure on the Taliban.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Many liberals believe that a military solution will not resolve the conflict in Afghanistan. This war has persisted for almost two decades, leading many individuals to be frustrated at the

Coronavirus (COVID-19) – an illness caused by a virus that can spread from person to person that resulted in a global pandemic in 2020



A soldier braces themselves during an explosion in Afghanistan
Washington Post

Stalemate – a situation in which neither side in an argument or contest can successfully move or make progress



US Army Sgt. Lidya Admounabdfany records information from Afghan women at a local Women's Center near the Zhari District Center
The Atlantic

In 2010, President Obama announced the deployment of an additional 30,000 US troops.

stalemate (“Overcoming Inertia”). Conservatives, on the other hand, are concerned with the safety and security of the United States in the result that the US removes all of their troops. President Trump, although Republican, has initiated the removal of US soldiers from Afghanistan; there is political unrest from multiple parties concerning the productiveness of the US-Taliban deal.

Maintain a US Presence in Afghanistan

Some individuals believe that keeping US troops in Afghanistan will help diminish the violence in that country as well as mitigate the threats of instability, conflict, and terrorism within that region. Political dissent, the coronavirus, and deadly Taliban attacks have essentially thwarted the little progress made since February 2020 when the deal was first signed (Gibbons-Neff and Barnes). Due to this rise in violence, having military aid from the United States will help the Afghan government deflect attacks from the Taliban and ensure a secure environment for the Afghan people.

However, deploying troops to Afghanistan and training Afghan soldiers require a lot of funding from the Department of Defense. With this war raging on for the past 19 years with no clear cut solution to alleviating tensions between the Afghan government and the Taliban, some people argue that America’s continuation in the war isn’t leading to any tangible resolutions, and that this funding should be utilized for a more thorough plan for ensuring America’s safety and security.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Many conservatives believe that maintaining a US presence in Afghanistan during this war is a viable solution to countering terrorism. A precipitous removal could result in the rise of other terrorist groups, thus unraveling their efforts in ensuring that Afghanistan is not used as a haven for attacks against the US (Gibbons-Neff and Barnes). For the most part, liberals would rather refer to diplomacy in order to combat terrorism; they believe that a military presence will accomplish nothing, especially without the use of successful negotiations. Economically, liberals believe that reinvesting America’s money in other political spheres would be more beneficial for the United States as well.

Many Afghan citizens would prefer this solution as well; with the retreat of the US comes the fear of undoing all advancements in democratic reform and women’s rights since 2001. Many minorities and women have begun to lead better lives since the US stripped the Taliban of their power. In the 1990s when the Taliban reigned over Kabul, women were banned from public life and faced punishments including public stoning and amputations (Azami). By

maintaining a US presence, these women will be able to sustain their current freedom liberties.

Increasing Oversight and Humanitarian Aid

Afghanistan remains one of the world's poorest and most dangerous countries ("Overcoming Inertia"). If the United States is not careful about how they implement foreign policies in this country, then Afghanistan could descend into another catastrophic civil war. By overseeing the negotiations made by the Afghan government and the Taliban, the United States could help facilitate a cordial environment while ensuring that peace talks are successfully enacted. There are different ways to instilling peace in Afghanistan; however, the actual implementation is incredibly difficult, as seen by the last 19 years of combat.

Democratic reform might be closely tied to securing peace within Afghanistan. Many Afghan children and families suffer from malnourishment and are frequently killed because of this war. Implementing programs using foreign aid for youth engagement, job opportunities, and local infrastructure could result in a hopeful future for the citizens of Afghanistan, and possibly, a hopeful future for the United States in their triumph against terrorism.

Political Perspectives on this Solution

Liberals highly favor diplomacy over aggressive foreign aid policy; due to this, monitoring and verification mechanisms will be crucial in assuring the Taliban implement their promises (Martin). By preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists, the United States can protect their own national security as well. In 2017, President Trump wanted to slash the US foreign assistance programs by more than 20% ("U.S. Foreign Aid"). While conservatives are less likely to favor foreign assistance, many agree that foreign aid cuts could hurt US National Security, especially with defeating international terrorism.

BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

Congress granted the Department of Defense \$712 billion dollars in the fiscal year 2020 (Snow). \$72 billion from this amount was allocated to the US military for the war in Afghanistan that year. The US military has requested \$69 billion—the lowest request in the past decade—for the fiscal year 2021. Although this request has not yet been approved, you can expect the estimated budget to be within a few million dollars of this proposal. As members of the committee on Foreign Affairs, you all will have to consider the budgetary considerations that coincide with the policy decisions you present.



President Trump addresses US troops at Bagram Air Field in Afghanistan in November 2019
The New York Times

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CONCLUSION

Ultimately, ensuring the safety and security of Americans has been at the center of policy discussions for Afghanistan. There are no simple answers when it comes to discerning the ways in which the US can approach these problems, so be open minded and creative in determining effective legislation.

Women’s rights were not included in the US-Taliban Peace Deal, nor were they heavily discussed between the US and Afghan governments in promoting peace. I encourage you to explore the ways in which women’s rights in Afghanistan are directly correlated to democratic reform and how you, as congresspeople, can incorporate these findings into your solutions.

As you explore a myriad of issues and prepare for debate and discussion, I highly encourage you all to combine different ideas while incorporating solutions of your own—regardless of whether or not I mentioned them in this briefing. Be sure to consider the economic, political, and moral implications of the policies you intend to propose.

It is vital that you all, as delegates, come up with a solution for these prominent issues. Negligence and a lack of responsibility could result in the emergence of new violent extremist groups which could ultimately wreak havoc not only in Afghanistan and the United States, but also the rest of the world. Introducing negotiations and signing deals is only the start of a difficult and complicated process; being able to effectively implement and enforce these mechanisms is important for genuine peace and security.

GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH

There are numerous articles regarding the diplomatic, economic, and political relations between the US and Afghanistan. Be sure to read reputable news articles—such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*—detailing the pros and cons of policy solutions towards the current war in Afghanistan as well as negotiations for peace. Reading opinion pieces will also prepare you for debate and discussion once you arrive at the conference. This issue is continuously expanding due to the recent agreement that was made, so make sure that you are paying attention to bills that have been introduced in Congress and follow the trajectory of their status. The more research you do before conference, the more prepared you will feel!

Women’s rights were not included in the US-Taliban Peace Deal, nor were they heavily discussed between the US and the Afghan government in promoting peace.



Taliban members gather together in March 2020 in Alingar District of Laghman Province, Afghanistan
The New York Times

GLOSSARY

Al-Qaeda – a militant Islamic organization founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden

Coronavirus (COVID-19) – an illness caused by a virus that can spread from person to person that resulted in a global pandemic in 2020

Major non-NATO Ally – a designation given by the United States government that provides close allies with certain benefits in areas of defense trade and security cooperation

Peace talks – a conference or series of discussions aimed at ending hostility

Special operations – unconventional missions carried out by dedicated elite forces using specialized tactics and resources

Stalemate – a situation in which neither side in an argument or contest can successfully move or make progress

Taliban – insurgent Sunni Islamic fundamentalist political and military movement and organization in Afghanistan

Verification mechanism – a safeguard measure invoked when an acceding state has failed to implement commitments undertaken in the context of the accession negotiations in the fields of the areas of freedom, security and justice, or internal market policy

War on Terror – an international military campaign launched by the United States government in the wake of the 9/11 attacks

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