



# WHAT BIDEN WAS UP AGAINST

THE AFGHANISTAN STUDY GROUP, CORRUPTION, AND  
CONFLICTS OF INTEREST IN WAR-POLICYMAKING

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of expert former military, intelligence, and civilian national security  
officials, offering credible, independent, and critical analysis.



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# INTRODUCTION

Since his election, President Joe Biden has repeatedly promised to bring ethics back to Washington and the White House. Undoubtedly, his administration has been a marked improvement over that of Donald Trump.

Yet, on general war policy—particularly the profound decisions on whether to end America’s endless wars—his performance has been halting, uneven, and remains uncertain. That has particularly been the case in Iraq and Syria<sup>3</sup>, the “New Cold Wars” with Russia and China<sup>4</sup>, and across Africa<sup>5</sup>.

Still, Biden’s decision to announce a full withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan—site of the nation’s longest-ever war—no later than September 11, 2021, was ultimately the right call<sup>6</sup>. As vice president, Biden had been perhaps the Obama administration’s staunchest opponent of the Afghan War “surge”—which three of our EMN senior fellows fought in<sup>7</sup>, and one resigned<sup>8</sup> from the State Department in protest of. In that regard, the current president had been prescient. So far, Biden seems to have stayed mostly true to his earlier insightful instincts.

3 Danny Sjursen, “Joe Biden Is Following a Blueprint for Forever War,” In These Times, March 2, 2021, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/joe-biden-syria-bombing-saudi-arabia>

4 David E. Sanger, “That Was Fast: Blowups With China and Russia in Biden’s First 60 Days,” New York Times, March 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/20/us/politics/china-russia-biden.html>

5 Danny Sjursen, “The Military’s Africa Gambit,” LA Progressive, March 12, 2021, <https://www.laprogressive.com/africa-gambit/>

6 Dan Berschinski, “I lost both my legs fighting in Afghanistan. Staying there doesn’t honor our troops,” USA Today, April 13, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2021/04/13/war-afghanistan-veteran-joe-biden-intelligence-pull-out-column/7191660002/>

7 Greg Jaffe, “Love for wounded soldier upon return from Afghanistan,” Washington Post, October 8, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/love-for-wounded-soldier-upon-return-from-afghanistan/2011/10/03/gIQAdaGSWL\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/love-for-wounded-soldier-upon-return-from-afghanistan/2011/10/03/gIQAdaGSWL_story.html); Danny Sjursen, “A US Military Officer Explains Why Another Surge in Afghanistan Is Not a Good Idea,” The Nation, June 29, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/a-us-military-officer-explains-why-another-surge-in-afghanistan-is-not-a-good-idea/>; Erik Edstrom, *Un-American: A Soldier’s Reckoning of Our Longest War* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

8 Martha Raddatz, Huma Khan and John Parkinson, “Matthew Hoh, a Senior Civilian Official in Afghanistan, Resigns Over U.S. Strategy,” ABC News, October 27, 2009, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/matthew-hoh-resigns-us-strategy-afghanistan/story?id=8924500>





Nevertheless, as president-elect, and since taking office, Biden has mostly filled foreign policy positions with establishment insiders<sup>9</sup> holding deep, voluminous ties to the war industry (military-industrial complex<sup>10</sup>), related strategic consultancy firms, and hawkish—defense contractor-funded<sup>11</sup>—think tanks.

That fact, and the entrenched power of war-profiteers with their incestuous connections to political, military, and media elites—including important figures on Biden’s national security team—make it even more remarkable that the President didn’t decide to decisively override Trump’s eleventh-hour decision to pull uniformed U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

Because, as this report decisively demonstrates, there were countless conflicts of interests and **at least 81 past employer or organizational overlaps** between members of the Biden administration, war industry-related entities, and—specifically—the very body charged with advising the new president on Afghan War policy: the Afghanistan Study Group (ASG).<sup>12</sup> Some of the Biden appointees’ military-industrial complex (MIC) and consultancy ties had been rather widely reported in the months after his election, but an in-depth analysis of the ASG-Biden-MIC connective triad proves the potential conflicts of interest are more embedded than expected.

Whatever the President’s ultimate outcome, the administration’s Afghan War-policy process was characterized by “revolving door” conflicts of interest and the potential for real corruption.

# The Study Group

Congress charged the ASG to advise the very members of the Biden team they've been professionally connected with for years in various defense contractor, war industry-funded, and/or related think tanks and consultancies. Thus, it was hardly a surprise when the ASG's capstone report<sup>13</sup> strongly advocated for continuing the war beyond the May 1, 2021, deadline and perhaps even undertaking another mini-surge of U.S. troops to "stabilize" the security situation.

What *was* surprising is that, so far, Biden seems to have resisted their well-funded Washington-insider pressure.

Per its own website, [www.afghanistanstudygroup.org](http://www.afghanistanstudygroup.org)—which itself falls under the government-funded United States Institute of Peace (USIP)—the ASG was a congressionally appointed (in December 2019) 15-member<sup>14</sup> bipartisan/nonpartisan group, charged with identifying policy recommendations that "consider the implications of a peace settlement, or the failure to reach a settlement, on U.S. policy, resources, and commitments in Afghanistan." After 10 months of extensive deliberations and consultations, the ASG submitted its report to Congress, the Biden administration, and the public.

The ASG was co-chaired by Kelly Ayotte, a former U.S. senator (R-New Hampshire); Joseph Dunford, a retired Marine Corps general and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Nancy Lindborg, former USIP president and CEO.

These co-chairs also appointed a senior advisors group. According to the ASG website, "The senior advisors offer deep subject-matter expertise spanning a range of specialties. They shared their insights and provided analysis on topics addressed by the ASG. They also presented their findings to the study group members on specific issues."

In reality, the ASG's co-chairs, members, and senior advisors alike are mostly interventionist insiders deeply tied to defense contractors, consultancies, and think tanks with a professional and pecuniary interest in continuing the Afghan War. Furthermore, ASG personnel possess innumerable overlapping and recent professional ties with common organizational affiliations to the very Biden national security officials they were charged with counseling.

9 Danny Sjrursen, "What Our Forever Wars Will Look Like Under Biden," *The Nation*, January 23, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/biden-endless-war/>

10 Christian Sorensen, "A People's Guide to the War Industry," *Consortium News*, June 2, 2021, <https://consortiumnews.com/2021/06/02/a-peoples-guide-to-the-war-industry-5-portfolio-of-conflicts/>

11 Ben Freeman, "U.S. Government and Defense Contractor Funding of America's Top 50 Think Tanks," Foreign Influence Transparency Initiative (FITI) of the Center for International Policy (CIP), October 2020, [https://3-ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usrfiles.com/ugd/3ba8a1\\_c7e3bfc7723d4021b54cbc145ae3f5eb.pdf](https://3-ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usrfiles.com/ugd/3ba8a1_c7e3bfc7723d4021b54cbc145ae3f5eb.pdf)

12 ASG website: <https://www.usip.org/programs/afghanistan-study-group>

13 Afghanistan Study Group Final Report: "A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, February 3, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/02/afghanistan-study-group-final-report-pathway-peace-afghanistan>

14 Afghanistan Study Group website, "Afghanistan Study Group Leadership, Members, Senior Advisors," <https://www.usip.org/afghanistan-study-group-leadership-members-senior-advisors>

# The Overlaps and Interest-Conflicts

Here's the crux of it: there has been insufficient reporting on the serious—and abundant—affiliation and relational overlaps, conflicts of interest, and corruption-indicators between the ASG and key Biden administration national security officials.

Below is a basic breakdown by brands of shared previous employers:

## Defense Contractor Corporations

- Lockheed Martin Corporation: one of the most lucrative aerospace, arms, defense, security, and advanced tech companies; FY 2019: \$53.23 billion (total arms sales), \$13.03 million (on lobbying).
  - ASG Members/Advisors:
    - ASG co-chair Joe Dunford—member of the board of directors
  - Biden Administration:
    - Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco—formerly lobbying work
- Raytheon Technologies: one of the largest aerospace, intelligence services providers, and defense manufacturers in the world; FY 2019: \$25.32 billion (total arms sales), \$4.04 million (on lobbying).
  - ASG:
    - Meghan O'Sullivan—board of directors
    - Stephen Hadley—former board member
  - Biden Administration:
    - Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin—former board member
    - Counselor to the President Steve Ricchetti—former contracted lobbyist
- BAE Systems Inc.: an international defense, aerospace, and security company that delivers a full range of products and services for air, land, and naval forces; according to a *Barron's* report on (ironically) Veterans Day 2020, "Defense and aerospace giant BAE Systems said it expects arms sales growth to continue in the U.S.—its largest market—under Joe Biden's administration."<sup>15</sup>
  - ASG:
    - ASG co-chair Kelly Ayotte—board member
  - Biden Administration: (Only ties to Biden's VP tenure, but perhaps relevant and instructive ones)
    - Frank Ruggiero—Senior VP of Government Relations at BAE, responsible for all legislative affairs; under Obama-Biden, he was the senior civilian representative for Southern Afghanistan and the U.S. Senior Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Denton, "BAE Expects Arms Sales Growth to Continue Under Biden, and Lifted Its Earning Guidance. The Stock Rose," *Barron's*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.barrons.com/articles/bae-expects-arms-sales-growth-to-continue-under-biden-the-stock-rose-51605108175>



## Defense-Related Strategic Consultancies

- WestExec Advisors, LLC: a strategic advisory firm “that offers unique geopolitical and policy expertise to help business leaders make the best decisions.”<sup>16</sup>
  - ASG Members/Advisors:
    - Michèle Flournoy—co-founder and managing partner
    - Meghan O’Sullivan—senior advisor
  - Biden Administration:
    - Secretary of State Anthony Blinken—co-founder
    - Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines—former principal
    - Deputy CIA Director David S. Cohen—former principal
    - Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco—former principal
    - Senior Advisor to the Secretary of State Julianne Smith—former senior advisor
    - NSC Director for Russia and Central Asia Andrea Kendall-Taylor—former senior advisor
- Booz Allen Hamilton: a consulting firm “with expertise in analytics, digital, engineering, and cyber,” to “help businesses, government, and military organizations transform;” that “has billions of dollars in federal contracts including a 2018 contract for cybersecurity services to six federal agencies.”<sup>17</sup>
  - ASG:
    - Michèle Flournoy—board member
  - Biden Administration:
    - Special Assistant to the President and NSC Director of Resilience and Response Caitlin Durkovich—former associate
    - Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco—former lobbying work
    - Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Christopher Hanson—former consultant
- Albright Stonebridge Group: a “global business strategy firm” doing “international strategic consulting”<sup>18</sup> chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.
  - ASG:
    - Nisha Biswal—recent senior advisor
    - Daniel Feldman—former senior advisor (\*He later joined the Biden administration\*)

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16 WestExec Advisors website: <https://westexec.com/>

17 Eric Lipton and Kenneth P. Vogel, “Biden Aides’ Ties to Consulting and Investment Firms Pose Ethics Test,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/28/us/politics/biden-westexec.html>

18 Albright-Stonebridge Group website: <https://www.albrightstonebridge.com/>

- Biden Administration:
  - Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman—former senior counselor
  - Chief of Staff to Climate Envoy John Kerry, Daniel Feldman—former senior advisor
  - UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield—former senior vice president
  - Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland—former senior counselor
  - NSC Director for South Asia Sumona Guha—former vice president
  - Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya—former senior advisor
- The Cohen Group: a “business advisory firm providing corporate leadership with strategic advice and assistance in business development, regulatory affairs, deal sourcing, and capital raising...in critical regions...including the Middle East,”<sup>19</sup> founded by former Defense Secretary William Cohen.
  - ASG:
    - Ambassador Marc Grossman—vice chairman
    - General (ret.) Curtis Scaparrotti—senior counselor
  - Biden Administration:
    - NSC Director for the Western Hemisphere Juan González—former Associate VP
    - 2020 campaign foreign policy advisor Nicholas Burns—former senior counselor
- Pine Island Capital Partners: Investment fund that raised \$218 million in November 2020 “for a new fund to finance investments in military and aerospace companies;” in 2020, went “on something of a buying spree...purchasing the weapons system parts manufacturer Precinmac and InVeris, which sells computer-simulated weapons training systems to the Pentagon.”<sup>20</sup>
  - ASG:
    - Michèle Flournoy—former advisor
  - Biden Administration:
    - Secretary of State Anthony Blinken—former advisor
    - Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin—former team member
- CACI International Inc: a “multinational professional services and information technology company providing services to...the federal government including defense, homeland security, intelligence.”<sup>21</sup>
  - ASG:
    - Susan Gordon [considered for DNI or CIA Director]—board member

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19 The Cohen Group website: <https://www.cohengroup.net/?view=category&id=12>

20 Lipton and Vogel, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/28/us/politics/biden-westexec.html>

21 CACI International website: <https://www.caci.com/>

- Biden Administration:
  - Biden DOD transition team member Shawn Skelly—acquisition analyst

## **Defense Contractor and U.S. Government–Funded Think Tanks**

- RAND Corporation: The top think-tank recipient of combined U.S. government and defense contractor funding; receives significant funding from the U.S. Army and the Department of Homeland Security.
  - ASG Members/Advisers:
    - Ambassador James Dobbins—Senior Fellow/Distinguished Chair in Diplomacy & Security
  - Biden Administration: (Three members of Biden’s Pentagon transition team employed by RAND)
    - Special Assistant to the President for Veterans Affairs Terri Tanielian—recent senior behavioral scientist
    - Stacie Pettyjohn—Director of Strategy and Doctrine Program Project: Air Force
    - Christine Wormuth—Director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center
- Center for a New American Security (CNAS): The top think-tank recipient of defense contractor funding; co-founded by ASG member Michèle Flournoy and NSC Asia coordinator Kurt Campbell; FY 2020: received \$500,000+ from Northrop Grumman & U.S. State Department, \$100,000-250,000 from Lockheed Martin, \$50,000-99,999 from BAE Systems, Booz Allen Hamilton, and Raytheon.
  - ASG:
    - Michèle Flournoy—co-founder, former CEO and current board member
    - Dafna Rand—former deputy director of research
  - Biden Administration:
    - Senior Advisor to the Secretary of State Julianne Smith—former senior fellow/director
    - NSC Asia co-ordinator (“Asia Tsar”) Kurt Campbell—former CEO
    - Deputy CIA Director David Cohen—former adjunct senior fellow
    - NSC Director for Russia and Central Asia Andrea Kendall-Taylor—former senior fellow and director of Transatlantic Security Program
    - Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl—former senior fellow
    - Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner—former Executive VP
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: a think tank that receives funding from 10 separate U.S. government agencies and defense contractors.
  - ASG:
    - Jarrett Blanc—Senior Fellow, Geoeconomics and Strategy Program
    - Dr. Frances Z. Brown—Senior Fellow, Democracy, Conflict and Governance Program



- Stephen Hadley—trustee
- Biden Administration:
  - National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan—former senior fellow
  - CIA Director William Burns—former president
  - Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Denis McDonough—former nonresident scholar
  - NSC Coordinator for Democracy and Human Rights Shanthi Kalathil—former associate
  - NSC Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk—former senior fellow
  - State Department Director of Policy Planning Salman Ahmed—former senior fellow
- Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS): The nation’s second-highest think-tank recipient of defense contractor funding; FY 2018: received \$500,000+ from Northrop Grumman, \$200,000-499,999 from Boeing and Lockheed Martin, and \$100,000-199,999 from Raytheon.
  - ASG:
    - Alex Thier—senior advisor
    - ASG co-chair Senator Ayotte—co-chairs CSIS Commission on Health Security
    - Michèle Flournoy—former senior advisor
    - Richard Olson—senior associate
  - Biden Administration:
    - Secretary of State Anthony Blinken—former senior fellow
    - Senior Advisor to the Secretary of State Julianne Smith—former director/senior fellow
    - Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks—former senior vice president
    - NSC Director for Russia and Central Asia Andrea Kendall-Taylor—former senior associate
- Atlantic Council: an “Atlanticist” think tank in the field of international affairs; manages 10 regional centers and functional programs on international security;”<sup>22</sup> FY 2019: received \$250,000-499,999 from Raytheon & U.S. State Department, and \$100,000-249,999 from Lockheed Martin.
  - ASG:
    - ASG co-chair General (ret.) Joe Dunford—member of international advisory board
    - Ambassador James B. Cunningham—nonresident senior fellow
    - General (ret.) Curtis Scaparrotti—board of directors

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<sup>22</sup> The Atlantic Council website: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>

- Vali Nasr—nonresident senior fellow
- Biden Administration:
  - Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman—board of directors
  - NSC Director of Legislative Affairs Rebecca Brocato—former nonresident senior fellow
  - Special Assistant to the President / NSC Director of Resilience and Response Caitlin Durkovich—former non-resident senior fellow
- Brookings Institution: a “research group conducting research and education in the social sciences, primarily in economics, governance, foreign policy, global economy, and economic development;”<sup>23</sup> FY 2020: received \$250,000-499,999 from Northrup Grumman.
  - ASG:
    - Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown—Senior Fellow
    - Dr. Michael O’Hanlon—Senior Fellow and Director of Research, Foreign Policy
  - Biden Administration:
    - Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines—former senior fellow
    - NSC Director for Technology and National Security Tarun Chhabra—former fellow
    - NSC Director for Europe Amanda Sloat—former senior fellow
- Institute for Study of War (ISW): a think tank founded by ASG Senior Advisor Kimberly Kagan; considered “hawkish” and favoring an “aggressive foreign policy;”<sup>24</sup> funding from CACI International.
  - ASG:
    - Dr. Kimberly Kagan—founder and president (and sister-in-law of Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland)
  - Biden Administration:
    - Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland—Kim Kagan’s sister-in-law
- The McCain Institute: a think tank whose mission is to “advance leadership based on security, economic opportunity, freedom, and human dignity, in the United States and around the world;”<sup>25</sup> FY 2018: received \$100,000+ from the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, and \$25,000–\$99,999 from Raytheon.
  - ASG:
    - Co-chair Kelly Ayotte—board member

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23 Brookings Institution website: <https://www.brookings.edu/>

24 Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “Civilian analysts gained Petraeus’s ear while he was commander in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, December 18, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/civilian-analysts-gained-petraeuss-ear-while-he-was-commander-in-afghanistan/2012/12/18/290c0b50-446a-11e2-8061-253bccfc7532\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/civilian-analysts-gained-petraeuss-ear-while-he-was-commander-in-afghanistan/2012/12/18/290c0b50-446a-11e2-8061-253bccfc7532_story.html)

25 McCain Institute website, “What We Do,” <https://www.mccaininstitute.org/about/>

- Ambassador Mark Green—executive director
- Biden Administration:
  - NSC Asia coordinator (“Asia Tsar”) Kurt Campbell—former fellow

# Biden administration-ASG political, and military command connections

## Past Military Relationships

- At the tail-end of the Obama administration, when ASG co-chairman General Joe Dunford was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he was a rung up the military chain from current Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin—then a general commanding U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), with overall responsibility for the Afghan War. Earlier, in 2014, the roles were reversed—Austin, still CENTCOM commander, was superior to Dunford, who was commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan.
- During that 2014–15 Afghan War rotation, another ASG senior advisor, retired Major General Edward Reeder, served under Dunford while commanding NATO Special Operations in Afghanistan.
- Another ASG member, retired Army General Curtis Scaparrotti, served as General Austin’s fellow theater commander as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (2016–2019). They go even further back—when Scaparrotti commanded the 82nd Airborne Division, his direct commander was Austin, then commanding the XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

## Past Political Roles/Positions:

- ASG Board member, former Senator Joe Donnelly (D-Indiana), has a hawkish legislative record on the Afghan War. In 2011, Donnelly aligned himself with Republicans and seven other members of the “Blue Dog Coalition” to successfully vote down an accelerated withdrawal from the Afghan War.<sup>26</sup> He reaffirmed opposition to an accelerated withdrawal by voting against the Lee Amendment to the FY ‘13 National Defense Authorization Act.
- Donnelly is also a partner at the international law firm Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld—one of the highest-revenue U.S. lobbying firms. Its website states: “We are a leading advisor to aircraft and component manufacturers, foreign governments, defense contractors, investors, and boards of directors on a host of government contracts, trade, regulatory, corporate, and strategic issues;” and notes that in 2017, it was “Recognized by Legal 500 for advising on a full range of government contract matters.”<sup>27</sup>

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26 Tom Hayden, “House Votes Today on Afghanistan Exit Plan,” *The Nation*, May 26, 2011, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/house-votes-today-afghanistan-exit-plan/>

27 Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP website: <https://www.akinump.com/en/experience/practices/government-contracts/index.html>



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# CONCLUSION



Regardless of the outcomes in the particular case of the Afghan War, the systemic impropriety and corruption characterizing the advisory process for America's longest war remains standard fare in Washington. As such, that story—in both its statistical and human manifestations—not only remains relevant, but mustn't go unnoticed. Should it be forgotten, ending the U.S. military's role in Afghanistan could turn out to be an anomaly—as new and similar theater or conflict-specific “study groups” offer an intellectual veneer for other interminable and ill-advised American wars from West Africa to Central Asia.