# Withdrawal of US Forces from Syria

## What is the issue?

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- US President Donald Trump has decided to pull all American troops out of Syria and reduce by half the US forces in Afghanistan.
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- The move could have varied geopolitical and foreign policy implications for India's neighbourhood and the world.
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## What is Trump's rationale?

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- The US has about 2,000 troops in Syria and 14,000 in Afghanistan.
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- Right from his election campaign, Trump had criticised US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq as extremely expensive and politically foolish.
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- Rather than spend American blood and treasure abroad to serve other people’s causes, Trump insisted he would put America First.
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- He has been demanding a thorough overhaul of America’s external commitments.
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- He claims that the physical infrastructure of the IS caliphate is destroyed.
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- So the U.S. can leave the war against the remnants of the jihadist group to the Syrian government and its main backers, Russia and Iran.
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- The caliphate is actually destroyed as the IS has lost 95% of the territory it once controlled.
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- It is now confined to narrow pockets on the Iraqi-Syrian border.
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- The U.S. would also not like to get stuck in Syria forever as it is basically Russia's war.
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- The U.S. is already stranded in Afghanistan (for 17 years) and Iraq (over 15 years) without a way out.
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## What are the risk factors of the move?

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- The U.S. has only 2,000 troops in Syria, and they were not directly involved in the ground battle.
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- They were supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces, a rebel group led by Kurdish rebels who were in the forefront of the fight against the IS.
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- The U.S. support for the Kurdish rebels has irked Turkey.
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- Turkey sees them as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party, the rebels on the Turkish side who have been fighting Turkish troops for decades.
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- Turkey considers the military consolidation of Kurds as a strategic threat.
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- In the past, Turkey had attacked Kurds in some pockets on the Syrian side, but was prevented from launching a full-throttle attack because of the U.S. presence.
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- So the US pull out would in effect be leaving the Syrian Kurds at the mercy of Turkish troops.
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- A risk factor will emerge if Turkey launches an attack on the Kurdish militants, which President Erdogan has vowed to do.
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- The Kurds will then have to re-channel their resources to fight Turkish soldiers.
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- This will weaken the ground resistance against the remaining IS militants on the southern side of the border.
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## What is the larger implication?

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- The move marks the end of a prolonged phase of American military interventions in the Middle East and South Asia.
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- The decision to pull troops out of Syria has predictably upset both the Washington establishment and America’s global allies.
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- US Defence Secretary, James Mattis, who advised against the withdrawal, has resigned.
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- Its internal tussle on its external relations is making U.S. an unpredictable factor in international politics.
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- So the rest of the world has no option but to factor it into their own geopolitical calculus.
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- Besides this, Trump’s move may undermine the war against the Islamic State.
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- It would also help legitimise the Syrian ruler Bashar al Assad, and boost his backers in Moscow and Tehran.
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- In Afghanistan, the decision comes at a time when US has embarked on direct talks with the Taliban brokered by Pakistan.
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- **India** - If the decisions are implemented, India will have to take into account the consequences for its western neighbourhood.
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- This is especially the case with Afghanistan where the U.S. has been fighting the longest war in American history.
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- India must start preparing for the inevitable geopolitical turbulence.
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- These may include the resurgence of the IS and the potential return of the Taliban to power in Kabul.
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## What could have been done?

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- The ground reality is too complex and requires Mr. Trump to be more patient

and strategic in his policymaking.
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- He could have considered waiting for the conflict in the disturbed zones to de-escalate even further.
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- Also, he could have gained assurances from Turkey that it would refrain from attacking Kurdish troops.
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- The cost of being so abrupt is that it leaves a dangerous vacuum in north-eastern Syria.
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**Source: Indian Express, The Hindu**

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