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**ENDING THE U.S. MILITARY MISSION IN  
AFGHANISTAN**

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**COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS**

**FIRST SESSION**

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**HEARING HELD  
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COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

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## ENDING THE U.S. MILITARY MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

*Washington, DC, Wednesday, September 29, 2021.*

The committee met, pursuant to call, at 9:30 a.m., in room 2118, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Adam Smith (chairman of the committee) presiding.

### **OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ADAM SMITH, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM WASHINGTON, CHAIRMAN, COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES**

The CHAIRMAN. I call the hearing to order. Good morning. As has been the case for a while, this is a hybrid hearing. We have some members participating remotely in addition to the members who are present, and there are rules for that. So I need to read a statement that sets out those rules before we get going.

Members who are joining remotely must be visible on screen for the purposes of identity verification, establishing and maintaining a quorum, participating in the proceeding, and voting. Those members must continue to use the software platform's video function while in attendance unless they experience connectivity issues or other technical problems that render them unable to participate on camera. If a member experiences technical difficulties, they should contact the committee staff for assistance.

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Finally, I have designated a committee staff member to, if necessary, mute unrecognized members' microphones to cancel any inadvertent background noise that may disrupt the proceeding.

Thank you.

Good morning. I would like to welcome our witnesses here today. We have the Honorable Lloyd Austin III, Secretary of Defense;

General Mark Milley, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; and General Frank McKenzie, Commander, U.S. Central Command. I want to thank them for their time today as they provide an update on the issues surrounding the end of the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan and our mission going forward dealing with counterterrorism in South Asia and the continuing mission to try to get as many Afghans and any remaining Americans out of the country.

I am looking forward to what I hope will be a very important policy discussion. At the center of our examination of the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan is the desire to learn from our 20-year involvement there. We must have an open and honest analysis of everything that went into that, not just the events of the last year or 6 months.

But before getting into that, we should take a moment to recognize the service of the over 800,000 men and women who served in Afghanistan over the last 20 years. More importantly, I would like to remember and honor the 2,461 who made the ultimate sacrifice, along with the over 20,000 who bore the physical wounds of war and those who bear the unseen wounds of war.

While we will vigorously debate policy decisions related to the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan, I believe that I speak for the entire committee when we express our gratitude to those and their families who have sacrificed so much over those last 20 years. We owe them a debt that cannot be repaid.

I agreed and continue to agree with the decision that was made to end our military presence in Afghanistan. It was the right decision. Our larger mission to help build a government in Afghanistan that could govern effectively and defeat the Taliban had failed. More money and more lost American lives were not going to change that. The events we witnessed in Afghanistan in the wake of the collapse of the Afghan Government in August happened primarily because of this reality, because of the fundamental reality that our mission to try to stand up a government in place of the Taliban had failed. That reality is what caused the overwhelming majority of the problems that we faced.

There was no easy or safe way to get everyone out of that country we wanted to get out. Yet, in the face of that, our military conducted the largest human airlift in history, in coordination with the rest of the interagency and our allies evacuating over 120,000 people. This evacuation, however, did not come without costs. We lost 13 U.S. service members and dozens of innocent Afghans due to ISIS-K's [Islamic State - Khorasan Province's] attack at the Abbey Gate on August 26.

There was also a tragic mistake on August 29 when a drone strike killed as many as 10 civilians. Following this mistake, I and others expect to be provided with the results of the timely, comprehensive, and transparent investigation of this tragedy, including accountability measures and any changes to procedures that are deemed necessary.

Importantly, our work is not done, as there are more who remain in Afghanistan who would like to leave. And we must work to ensure the interagency has all the tools required and is coordinated to assist those remaining individuals.

There are some, going back to the issue of whether or not we should have left Afghanistan, who imagine that there was sort of a middle option that we could have kept 2,500 troops there in a relatively peaceful and stable environment. I think the way that option has been presented by many of the critics has been fundamentally disingenuous. The option of keeping 2,500 troops in Afghanistan in a peaceful and stable environment did not exist. I have heard many compare this to the troops that we have left in South Korea and Japan. I find that analogy just completely idiotic, if I am being honest.

In South Korea and Japan, we are not under attack. We are there as a deterrent. In Afghanistan, we would have been under attack, and that is the fundamental fact that too many people are forgetting. The peace agreement that was signed by the previous President was based on requirement that we get all of our troops out by May 1. That is the only reason the Taliban had not attacked us in the previous 18 months.

Once that expired, once we said, nope, we are staying, they would have been under attack. And this has been a subject of a huge misunderstanding in the last 24 hours that, again, I find very, very disingenuous. People are saying that the President said nobody offered, no one said that we should keep 2,500 there. What the President actually said was there was no option on the table to keep 2,500 troops in Afghanistan in a stable environment. That is what he said.

Not that no one presented that option. That option didn't exist in reality and no one presented it. The President, in fact, made it clear earlier in that same interview that, yes, some of his military leaders had said that we should keep 2,500 troops there. What he said was, none of them said that we could do it in a stable, peaceful environment. And that is the key point.

The other key point is—and I know a lot of energy will be expended today trying to get these gentlemen to admit that they didn't agree with the President's decision.

First of all, I never engage in that exercise because I believe the President—Democrat, Republican, no matter who it is—deserves the, you know, unabridged advice of his or her commanders. I mean, you can't give that if you are then going to have to go out in public and talk about it.

But second of all, the President is the one in charge. This is ultimately what civilian control of the military means. And what I believe is, I believe certainly there were military commanders who said, nope, we should stick it out, we should keep the 2,500 there. I think they were wrong. And so did the President. It is not that they didn't make the advice; it is that they were wrong.

This committee has enormous amount of respect for our military leadership. That does not mean that the military leadership is incapable of being wrong. And over the course of the last 20 years, in Afghanistan, I would have thought we would have learned that lesson. President Biden had the courage to finally make the decision to say, no, we are not succeeding in this mission. Placing more American lives at risk will not change that.

If we could credibly say, you know, if we just stuck it out for another year, another 5, another 10 and got to a better result, that

would be a difficult call. Was that worth the risk? But we can't credibly say that. So we would have been putting American lives at risk for a mission that we had to know was not achievable. The President made the right call on that.

There is the issue of how we withdrew, and I will say—and I have been critical of this—I think the effort to get the SIVs [Special Immigrant Visas] and the others who wanted to get out of Afghanistan certainly could have been handled better and could have been started sooner. It certainly seemed rushed, and I want to hear from our leaders today about how that played out, but, again, let's remember that the other alternative was not easy.

The alternative of let's start pulling people out sooner, the Ghani government, the government that was in charge of Afghanistan at the time we would have been doing this, was adamantly opposed to us pulling all of the military equipment and hundreds of thousands of their Afghan supporters out, for obvious reasons. How would we have done that against the objection of the existing Afghan Government while the Taliban were rolling across the countryside?

It would not have been easy no matter how it was done, but we do deserve an accounting for how those decisions were made going forward. I think today is an excellent opportunity to do that. I look forward to the questions and answers, as well as the testimony of our witnesses.

And with that I yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Rogers.

**STATEMENT OF HON. MIKE ROGERS, A REPRESENTATIVE  
FROM ALABAMA, RANKING MEMBER, COMMITTEE ON  
ARMED SERVICES**

Mr. ROGERS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. While I have great admiration for my friend the chairman, I could not disagree more with his observations about Afghanistan and the President's decision. The fact is our coalition partners and our military leadership felt that we should have maintained our 2,500 troops there, along with this roughly 7,500 to 8,000 coalition troops, and the thousands of contractors that the Afghan Army was dependent upon to fight successfully. And I think they could have continued, as they have in past years, to fight valiantly had we given that support and the President had listened to his generals' advice.

But regardless of how you feel about the decision to remove troops from Afghanistan, I think we can all agree that the withdrawal was an unmitigated disaster. Hundreds of Americans were left behind, thousands of Afghan allies stuck with little hope of escape, potentially billions worth of U.S. provided military equipment now in the hands of the Taliban.

Thousands of hardened al-Qaida and ISIS terrorists freed from prisons, 10 innocent Afghans, including 7 children, killed in a botched air strike. But worst of all, 13 brave American service members were murdered by a coward in a suicide vest. What is more infuriating is that all of this could have been avoided if the President had a plan.

In briefings and hearings since April, we have demanded to know a plan to (a) safely evacuate Americans and Afghan allies and (b)



conduct counterterrorism operations. For 4 months, the response from the Biden administration was, we are working on it.

Now it is clear they never had a plan. The President repeatedly assured the American people that the Taliban takeover was not inevitable; that we had plenty of time to safely evacuate Americans and Afghan allies; that this was not going to be a fall like Saigon.

As late as August 19, the President promised us that if there is an American citizen left, we are going to stay to get them all out. Now it is clear the President has misled us more than once. On August 31, hundreds of Americans left behind, the 13 service members murdered, the President stood in the East Room of the White House and called the withdrawal, quote, an extraordinary success, close quote.

I fear the President is delusional. This wasn't an extraordinary success; it was an extraordinary disaster. It will go down in history as one of the greatest failures of American leadership. We are here today to get answers on how the hell this happened.

I expect our witnesses to give us an honest accounting of exactly what went wrong. I also want answers on how we are going to conduct counterterrorism operations now that we have zero presence in Afghanistan. This was the first question we asked you in April and we still don't have an answer.

According to the latest intelligence assessment, it could be as little as 12 months before al-Qaida will use Afghanistan as a base to conduct air strikes or strikes against the United States. And that is unacceptable. And this talk of over-the-horizon capability is a farce. Sure, we can send a drone out to take out a terrorist, but we didn't know where the terrorists are.

Without persistent ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] capabilities or reliable intelligence on the ground that is impossible. We have neither of those now. It doesn't help that we need to fly that drone nearly 1,600 miles to reach Afghanistan, leaving little time on station, or that we have to fly over Pakistan, an ally of the Taliban, who could revoke overfly privileges at any time.

None of this is giving us much confidence that this administration can successfully conduct counterterrorism in Afghanistan. We want to know what capabilities we need, where they will be based, and how they will be used. In other words, we want to see a plan and we want to see it today because, frankly, after this debacle of a withdrawal, I don't think anyone can trust anything this President says about Afghanistan.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Secretary, you are recognized.

**STATEMENT OF HON. LLOYD J. AUSTIN III, SECRETARY OF  
DEFENSE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE**

Secretary AUSTIN. Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Rogers, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss our recent drawdown and evacuation operations in Afghanistan. I am pleased to be joined by Generals Milley and McKenzie who I know will be able to provide you with additional context. I am incredibly proud of the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces who conducted themselves with tremen-

dous skill and professionalism throughout the war, the drawdown, and the evacuation. Over the course of our Nation's longest war, 2,461 of our fellow Americans made the ultimate sacrifice, along with more than 20,000 who still bear the wounds of war some of which cannot be seen on the outside.

We can discuss and debate the decisions, the policies, and the turning points since April of this year when the President made clear his intent to end American involvement in this war, and we can debate the decisions over the last 20 years that led us to this point, but the one thing not open to debate is the courage and compassion of our service members who, along with their families, served and sacrificed to ensure their homeland would never again be attacked the way it was on September 11, 2001.

I had the chance to speak with many of them during my trip to the Gulf region a few weeks ago, including the Marines who lost 11 of their teammates at the Abbey Gate in Kabul on the 26 of August. I have never been more humbled and inspired. They are rightfully proud of what they accomplished and the lives they saved in such a short period of time.

The reason that our troops were able to get there so quickly is because we planned for just such a contingency. We began thinking about the possibilities of foreign noncombatant evacuation as far back as the spring. By late April, 2 weeks after the President's decision, military planners had crafted a number of evacuation scenarios. In mid-May, I ordered CENTCOM [U.S. Central Command] to make preparations for potential noncombatant evacuation operation. Two weeks later, I began prepositioning forces in the region to include three infantry battalions.

On the 10th of August, we ran another tabletop exercise around a noncombatant evacuation scenario [NEO]. We wanted to be ready and we were. By the time that the State Department called for the NEO, significant numbers of additional forces had already arrived in Afghanistan, including leading elements of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit who were already on the ground in Kabul.

Before that weekend was out, another 3,000 or so ground troops had arrived, including elements of the 82nd Airborne. To be clear, those first 2 days were difficult. We all watched with alarm the images of Afghans rushing the runway and our aircraft. We all remember the scenes of confusion outside—

The CHAIRMAN. Sorry. We will get that under control. Go ahead, sir.

Secretary AUSTIN [continuing]. Outside the airport, but within 48 hours our troops restored order and the process began to take hold. Our soldiers, airmen, and Marines in partnership with our allies, our partners, and our State Department colleagues secured the gates, took control of the airport operations, and set up a processing system for the tens of thousands of people that they would be manifesting on to airplanes. They and our commanders exceeded all expectations.

We planned to evacuate between 70,000 and 80,000 people. They evacuated more than 124,000 people. We planned to move between 5,000 and 9,000 people per day. And on average they moved slightly more than 7,000 people per day.

On military aircraft alone, we flew more than 387 sorties, averaging nearly 23 per day. At the height of this operation, an aircraft was taking off every 45 minutes and not a single sortie was missed for maintenance, fuel, or logistical problems. It was the largest airlift conducted in U.S. history and it was executed in just 17 days.

Was it perfect? Of course not. We moved so many people so quickly out of Kabul that we ran into capacity and screening problems at intermediate staging bases outside of Afghanistan, and we are still working to get Americans out who wish to leave. We did not get out all of our Afghan allies enrolled in the special immigration visa program, and we take that seriously.

And that is why we are working across the interagency to continue facilitating their departure and even with no military presence on the ground, that part of our mission is not over.

Tragically, lives were also lost. Several Afghans killed climbing aboard an aircraft on that first day, 13 brave U.S. service members, and dozens of Afghan civilians killed in a terrorist attack on the 26th and we took as many as 10 innocent lives in a drone strike on the 29th. Noncombatant evacuations remain among the most challenging military operations even in the best of circumstances, and the circumstances in August were anything but ideal.

Extreme heat, a landlocked country, no government, a highly dynamic situation on the ground, and an active, credible, and lethal terrorist threat. In the span of just 2 days from August 13th to August 15th, we went from working alongside a democratically elected, long-term partner government to coordinating warily with a longtime enemy. We operated in a deeply dangerous environment and it proved a lesson in pragmatism and professionalism.

We also learned a lot of other lessons too like about how to turn an Air Force base in Qatar to an international airport overnight, about how to rapidly screen, process, and manifest large numbers of people. Nothing like this has ever been done before and no other military in the world could have pulled it off, and I think that that is crucial.

And I know that members of this committee will have questions on many things, such as why we turned over Bagram Airfield and how real our over-the-horizon capability is, and why we didn't start evacuations sooner, and why we didn't stay longer to get more people out.

So let me take each in turn. Retaining Bagram would have required putting as many as 5,000 U.S. troops in harm's way just to operate and defend it. And it would have contributed little to the mission that we had been assigned and that was to protect and defend the Embassy, which was some 30 miles away.

And that distance from Kabul also rendered Bagram of little value in the evacuation. Staying at Bagram, even for counterterrorism purposes, meant staying at war in Afghanistan, something that the President made clear that he would not do. And as for over-the-horizon operations, when we use that term, we refer to assets and target analysis that come from outside the country in which the operation occurs. These are effective and fairly common operations.

Just days ago we conducted one such strike in Syria eliminating a senior al-Qaida figure. Over-the-horizon operations are difficult, but absolutely possible. And the intelligence that supports them comes from a variety of sources and not just U.S. boots on the ground.

As for when we started evacuations, we offered input to the State Department's decision, mindful of their concerns that moving too soon might actually cause the very collapse of the Afghan Government that we all wanted to avoid, and that moving too late would put our people and our operations at greater risk.

As I said, the fact that our troops were on the ground so quickly is due in large part to our planning and prepositioning of forces. As for the mission's end, my judgment remains that extending beyond the end of August would have greatly imperiled our people and our mission.

The Taliban made clear that their cooperation would end on the first of September. And as you know, we face grave and growing threats from ISIS-K. So staying longer than we did would have made it even more dangerous for our people and would not have significantly changed the number of evacuees we could get out.

So as we consider these tactical issues today, we must also ask ourselves some equally tough questions about the wider war itself and pause to think about the lessons that we have learned over the past 20 years.

Did we have the right strategy? Did we have too many strategies? Did we put too much faith in our ability to build effective Afghan institutions? An Army, an Air Force, a police force, and government ministries? We helped build a state, but we could not forge a nation. The fact that the Afghan Army that we and our partners trained simply melted away, in many cases without firing a shot, took us all by surprise and it would be dishonest to claim otherwise.

We need to consider some uncomfortable truths, that we did not fully comprehend the depth of corruption and poor leadership in their senior ranks; that we did not grasp the damaging affect of frequent and unexplained rotations by President Ghani of his commanders; that we did not anticipate the snowball effect caused by the deals that the Taliban commanders struck with local leaders in the wake of the Doha Agreement; that the Doha Agreement itself had a demoralizing effect on Afghan soldiers; and that we failed to fully grasp that there was only so much for which and for whom many of the Afghan forces would fight.

We provided the Afghan military with equipment and aircraft and the skills to use them, and over the years they often fought bravely, and tens of thousands of Afghan soldiers and police officers died. But in the end, we couldn't provide them with the will to win. At least not all of them. And as a veteran of that war, I am personally reckoning with all of that. But I hope, as I said at the outset, that we do not allow a debate about how this war ended to cloud our pride in the way that our people fought it.

They prevented another 9/11, they showed extraordinary courage and compassion in the war's last days, they made lasting progress in Afghanistan that the Taliban will find difficult to reverse and that the international community should work hard to preserve.

And now, our service members and civilians face a new mission: Helping these Afghan evacuees move on to new lives in new places, and they are performing that one magnificently as well.

I spent some time with some of them up at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst this past Monday and I know that you share my profound gratitude and respect for their service, their courage, and professionalism, and I appreciate the support that this committee continues to provide them and their families.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Secretary Austin can be found in the Appendix on page 101.]

The CHAIRMAN. Chairman Milley.

**STATEMENT OF GEN MARK A. MILLEY, USA, CHAIRMAN, JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF**

General MILLEY. Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Rogers, thank you for the opportunity to be here with Secretary Austin and General McKenzie to discuss Afghanistan.

During the past 20 years, the men and women of the United States military, along with our allies and partners, fought the Taliban, brought Osama bin Laden to justice, denied al-Qaida sanctuary, and protected our homeland for two consecutive decades. Over 800,000 of us in uniform served in Afghanistan.

Most importantly, 2,461 U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines paid the ultimate price; 20,698 were wounded in action; and countless others suffered the invisible wounds of war. There is no doubt in my mind that our efforts prevented an attack on the homeland from Afghanistan, which was our core mission. And everyone, everyone, whoever served in that war in Afghanistan should be proud. Your service mattered.

Beginning in 2011, we steadily drew down our troop numbers, consolidated and closed bases, and retrograded equipment from Afghanistan. At our peak in 2011, we had 97,000 U.S. troops alongside 41,000 NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] troops in Afghanistan.

Ten years later when Ambassador Khalilzad signed the Doha Agreement with Mullah Baradar on 29 February 2020, the United States had 12,600 troops with 8,000 NATO and 10,500 contractors in Afghanistan. This has been a 10-year, multi-administration drawdown, not a 19-month retrograde or 17-day noncombatant evacuation operation.

Under the Doha Agreement, the United States would begin to withdraw its forces contingent upon the Taliban meeting certain conditions which would lead to a political agreement between the Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan. There were seven conditions applicable to the Taliban and eight to the United States.

While the Taliban did not attack the United States forces, which was one of the conditions, it failed to fully honor any other condition under the Doha Agreement and perhaps, most importantly for the United States national security, the Taliban has never renounced their linkages with al-Qaida or broke their affiliation with them. We, the United States, adhered to every condition.

In the fall of 2020, my analysis then was that an accelerated withdrawal without meeting specific and necessary conditions risks

losing the substantial gains made in Afghanistan, would potentially damage U.S. worldwide credibility, and could precipitate a general collapse of the Afghan security forces and the Afghan Government resulting in a complete Taliban takeover or general civil war. That analysis was a year ago.

Based on my advice and the advice of the commanders at the time, then-Secretary of Defense Esper submitted a memorandum on 9 November recommending that we maintain the U.S. forces which were then at about 4,500 in Afghanistan until conditions were met for further reductions. Two days later on 11 November, I received an unclassified signed order directing the United States military to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan by 15 January 2021.

After further discussion regarding the risks associated with such a withdrawal, the order was rescinded. On 17 November we received a new order to reduce troop levels to 2,500 plus enabling forces no later than 15 January.

When President Biden was inaugurated, there were approximately 3,500 U.S. troops, 5,400 NATO, and 6,300 contractors in Afghanistan tasked to train, advise, and assist a small contingent of counterterrorism forces and the strategic situation was stalemate.

The Biden administration through the National Security Council process conducted a rigorous interagency review of the situation in Afghanistan in February, March, and April. During this process, the views of all of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all of us, the CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie, USFOR-A Commander General Miller, and myself were all given serious consideration by the administration. We provided a broad range of options and our assessment of their potential outcomes.

We couched that in cost, benefit, risk to force, risk to mission, all of that was evaluated against the national security objectives of the United States.

On 14 April, the President of the United States, President Biden, announced his decision. The U.S. military received a change of mission to retrograde all U.S. military forces, maintain a small contingency force of 6- to 700 to protect the Embassy in Kabul until the Department of State could coordinate contractor security support, and also to assist Turkey to maintain the Hamid Karzai International Airport, and to transition the U.S. mission to over-the-horizon counterterrorism support and security force assistance.

It is clear, it is obvious to all of us that the war in Afghanistan did not end on the terms that we wanted with the Taliban now in power in Kabul. Although the NEO was unprecedented and is the largest air evacuation in history, a tactical, operational, and logistical success evacuating 124,000 people, the war was a strategic failure. It came also at an incredible cost in the end with 11 Marines, 1 soldier, and a Navy corpsman. These 13 gave their lives so that people they never met would have an opportunity to live in freedom, and we must remember that the Taliban was and remains a terrorist organization and they still have not broken with al-Qaida.

I have no illusions who we are dealing with. It remains to be seen whether or not the Taliban can consolidate power or if the country will further fracture into civil war, but we must continue

to protect the United States of America and its people from terrorist attacks from Afghanistan. A reconstituted al-Qaida or ISIS with aspirations to attack the United States is a very real possibility and those conditions to include activity in ungoverned spaces could present themselves in the next 12 to 36 months.

That mission will be much harder now, but not impossible, and we will continue to protect the American people. Strategic decisions have strategic consequences. Over the course of 4 Presidents, 12 Secretaries of Defense, 7 Chairman, 10 CENTCOM commanders, and 20 commanders in Afghanistan, and hundreds of congressional delegation visits in 20 years of congressional oversight, there are many lessons to be learned.

Among those lessons is the unprecedented speed of the collapse of the ANDSF [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces]. However, one lesson we can never forget is that every soldier, sailor, airmen, and Marine who served there for 20 years protected our country against attack from terrorists. And for that, we all should be forever grateful and those soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines should be forever proud.

Mr. Chairman, with your permission, I would like to address a couple of comments about my personal conduct that has been in the media lately.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes, yes. Mr. Chairman, you may. Go ahead.

General MILLEY. I have served this Nation for 42 years. I spent years in combat and buried a lot of my troops who died while defending this country. My loyalty to this Nation, its people, and the Constitution hasn't changed and will never change as long as I have a breath to give. My loyalty to the Constitution and to this Nation is absolute and I will not turn my back on my fallen.

With respect to the Chinese calls, I routinely communicated with my counterpart General Li with the knowledge and coordination of civilian oversight. I am specifically directed to communicate with the Chinese by Department of Defense guidance in a document known as the Policy Dialogue System.

These military-to-military communications at the highest levels are critical for the security of the United States in order to deconflict military actions, manage crisis, and prevent war between great powers armed with nuclear weapons. The calls on 30 October and 8 January were coordinated before and after with Secretary Esper and Acting Secretary Miller's staffs and the interagency.

The specific purpose of the October and January calls was generated by concerning intelligence which caused us to believe the Chinese were worried about an attack by the United States. And last night I briefed that intelligence in detail to the Senate Armed Services Committee and I will be happy to brief it to any member or group of members at your discretion in a classified session.

And I know and I am certain President Trump did not intend on attacking the Chinese and it is my directed responsibility by the Secretary of Defense to convey that intent. My task at that time was to de-escalate. My message was, again, consistent, calm, steady, de-escalate. We are not going to attack you.

At Secretary of Defense Esper's direction, I made a call to General Li on 30 October. Eight people sat on that call with me and I read out the call within 30 minutes of the call ending. On 31 De-

cember the Chinese requested a call with me. The Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia-Pacific policy helped coordinate my call, which was then scheduled for 8 January, and he made a preliminary call on 6 January.

Eleven people attended the call with me and readouts of this call were distributed to the interagency that same day. On 14 December, then-Acting Secretary of Defense Miller had been briefed on the entire program. Shortly after my call ended with General Li, I informed both Secretary of State Pompeo and White House Chief of Staff Meadows about the call among several other topics.

Soon after that I attended a meeting with Acting Secretary Miller where I briefed him on the call. Later that same day on 8 January, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi called me to inquire about the President's ability to launch nuclear weapons. I sought to assure her that nuclear launch is governed by a very specific and deliberate process. She was concerned and made various personal references characterizing the President. I explained to her that the President is the sole nuclear launch authority, but he doesn't launch them alone; and that I am not qualified to determine the mental health of the President of the United States. There are processes, protocols, and procedures in place and I repeatedly assured her, there is no chance of an illegal, unauthorized, or accidental launch of nuclear weapons.

By Presidential Directive and SecDef [Secretary of Defense] Directives, the Chairman is part of this process to ensure that the President is fully informed when determining the use of the world's deadliest weapons. By law I am not in the chain of command and I know that. However, by Presidential Directive, the Department of Defense instruction signed by the President and Secretaries of Defense, I am in the chain of communication to fulfill my legal statutory role as the President's primary military adviser.

After the Speaker Pelosi call, I convened a short meeting in my office with key members of my staff to refresh all of us on these procedures which we practice three times a day at the action officer level. Additionally, I immediately informed Acting Secretary of Defense Miller of her call. At no time was I attempting to change or influence the process, usurp authority, or insert myself into the chain of command, but I am expected to give my advice and ensure the President is fully informed on military affairs.

I am submitting for the record, and I believe you have it, a couple of memorandums for record in addition to detailed timelines and I am happy to discuss in further detail in either classified or unclassified sessions with any or all of you about my actions surrounding these events. I welcome a thorough walk-through. I will be happy to provide whatever documents, phone logs, emails, memoranda, witnesses, or anything else you want that will help you understand these events.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 121.]

My oath is to support the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and I will never turn my back on that oath. I firmly believe in civilian control of the military as a bedrock principle and essential to the health of this



republic and I am committed to ensuring the military stays clear of domestic politics.

Thank you, Chairman, for the extra time, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of General Milley can be found in the Appendix on page 106.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. General McKenzie.

**STATEMENT OF GEN KENNETH F. MCKENZIE, JR., USMC,  
COMMANDER, U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND**

General MCKENZIE. Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Rogers, distinguished members of the committee, thanks for the opportunity to testify about recent events in Afghanistan. As a theater commander, I will confine my opening remarks to those matters that were under my direct operational control, specifically, the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the subsequent noncombatant evacuation operation. These were two distinct combat missions, both conducted in contact with the enemy.

We had a plan for each of them. We executed those plans. And thanks to the valor and dedication of thousands of men and women in harm's way we completed both missions, fulfilling the President's order to withdraw all U.S. forces and evacuating over 124,000 noncombatants from Afghanistan. I last appeared before this body only days after President Biden announced his decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from that country and my testimony regarding that decision is already a matter of public record.

I will only reiterate that I had an opportunity to offer my professional advice to the President through the Secretary and I am confident that he weighed it carefully. That is all any commander can ask.

Once the President made his decision, my headquarters and that of U.S. Forces Afghanistan under General Scott Miller made the withdrawal of our forces our top priority. We did this in close coordination with our allies and partners. Every departure of every element was carefully synchronized across the coalition and with our Afghan partners. On no occasion were they caught unaware by our movements. Every base was handed off to Afghan forces according to a mutually understood plan.

This is particularly true of Bagram Airfield. Many of you have visited Bagram at some point over the past 20 years and were probably struck by two of its defining features: Its sprawling size and its isolation. Virtues for most of its life span, they rendered it untenable under the circumstances.

The guidance I received in April was to conduct the complete withdrawal of U.S. combat forces and plan for a diplomatic security force of absolutely no more than 650 service members. It was not feasible to preserve the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, hold and defend Hamid Karzai International Airport, the Embassy's key link to the outside world, and also defend Bagram Airfield with 650 soldiers and Marines. This is important.

The Bagram option went away when we were ordered to reduce our presence to the 650 personnel in Kabul. I would like to shift briefly to the NEO, which, as I have noted, was a completely different operation than the withdrawal. They were separate.

The withdrawal began in April following the President's direction. The decision to conduct a NEO rested with the Department of State, and they made that decision on 14 August. In our NEO planning, Central Command assumed that we would have to bring out a very large number of people. We did not regard the size of a potential NEO as overwhelming or too much to accomplish. We did not regard a Taliban takeover as inevitable, but neither did we rule it out, and we identified critical indicators of an impending collapse of the Afghan National Defense Forces.

We crafted branches to our base plan to account for a complete collapse of the Afghan Security Forces. The Secretary took action in May to make forces available to me for planning. On July the 9th, I requested that our base NEO force, the core package that would go in, be put on 96-hour prepare-to-deploy orders.

By August 11th, it was evident to me that Kabul was at risk and I requested the deployment of a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division and other elements of our own alert preplan force package, and I requested that they be deployed into HKIA, Hamid Karzai International Airfield. These forces flowed swiftly into theater even as the Afghan National Defense Forces disintegrated allowing thousands of civilians access to the airfield.

Working with Afghan partners composed of elite commando units who did not fall apart and our arriving NEO forces on August the 16th, we cleared the airfield and resumed flight operations in a matter of hours. With security re-established by force ultimately compromising 5,784 U.S. troops, 8 maneuver battalions, and hundreds of coalition forces, operations continued without interruption until our final flights. By that time we evacuated over 124,000 people from Afghanistan.

This was a difficult mission made possible by the exceptional professionalism and valor of the joint force on the ground in Afghanistan and across the entire world. I would specifically like to use this opportunity to thank the C-17 crews of the Air Mobility Command for a feat rivaling and exceeding, in fact, the Berlin airlift.

Moments after the last of the final five C-17s lifted off from HKIA, I held a briefing with the Pentagon press corps and expressed my gratitude and admiration for the forces who carried out this NEO. I also provided various figures that conveyed the magnitude of their accomplishment.

I won't reiterate those figures here and now, but I will say that after the passage of nearly a month, my pride in their accomplishment remains undiminished. I don't need to tell this body that on 26 August, 11 Marines, 1 sailor, and 1 soldier made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of their country. We will never forget them.

This was a combat operation of the most difficult sort, a non-combatant evacuation carried out in contact with the enemy. The enemy, in this case, was ISIS Khorasan, a vile, tenacious foe that would undoubtedly have killed many, many more Americans and innocent Afghans at HKIA if it were not for the vigilance of our forces there.

On 29 August, we undertook an MQ-9 strike against what we thought was an imminent threat to HKIA. That strike was a mistake and I take full responsibility for that strike. I was under no

pressure from any quarter to conduct the strike. It was based on our intelligence read of the situation on the ground.

While in many cases we were right with our intelligence and forestalled ISIS-K attacks, in this case, we were wrong, tragically wrong. I appreciate that there are many other topics of interest to this committee and I look forward to answering your questions on all of them.

I will close here by reiterating my profound gratitude and appreciation for every soldier, sailor, Marine, airmen, and guardian, as well as our intelligence and Department of State comrades who contributed to each of these difficult missions. I remain humbled by their sense of duty and courage.

Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Mr. Secretary, I want to drill down a little bit on the keeping 2,500 troops there and I am struck as I listened to the comments that, I think the real problem here is you have to make decisions in the real world. You don't get to imagine an outcome that would make it more palatable. And I think that is what really factored in to the 2,500.

And as we talk about the 13 service members who died and attack the leadership here for not having prevented that, how you can do that and then advocate that we should have stayed in Afghanistan longer so that more service members—I guess the only way you can advocate that is to imagine a scenario whereby we could have stayed in a chaotic war zone, not had soldiers get killed, not have made any mistakes—how you cannot make mistakes in that chaotic environment, I don't know, and every member serving on this committee has been in those environments in one way or another.

So you don't have the luxury of waving a magic wand and making all the problems go away and simply making a decision where nothing goes wrong. And it is really frustrating to hear people advocate that we should stay and still decry what happened.

Do you think fighting in a war zone there wouldn't be similar mistakes if we had stayed there for another 5 or 10 years, more civilians killed accidentally, more U.S. service members dead in exactly the same way that we just saw?

Sorry. That is very frustrating, but could you talk to us a little bit about the 2,500 soldiers or service members who could have been left there and then how you approached that decision and what exactly—not what exactly your advice was to the President for what I said earlier, but how you approached that decision and then how you attempt to deal with that while advising the President?

Secretary AUSTIN. First of all, Chairman, let me be clear that I support the President's decision to end the war in Afghanistan. I did not support staying in Afghanistan forever. And let me also say we have talked about the process that we used to provide input to the President.

I think that process was a very thorough and inclusive policy process and the recommendations of the commanders were taken into consideration, discussed, and deliberated on throughout that process.

As you indicated, I typically—I will always keep my recommendations to the President confidential, but I would say that, in my view, there is no, was no, risk-free status quo option. I think that the Taliban had been clear that if we stayed there longer, they were going to recommence attacks on our forces.

I think while it's conceivable that you could stay there, my view is that you would have had to deploy more forces in order to protect ourselves and accomplish any missions that we would have been assigned. It is also my view, Mr. Chairman, that the best way to end this war was through a negotiated settlement and sadly that did not happen.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. And let me just also say that I know there are members of this committee who think we should have stayed, who are honest about that.

Sorry. I think of Congressman Waltz who has been very honest about the fact—both under President Trump and under President Biden—that we should have stayed. He is very honest about the fact that there were costs and risks and lives would have been lost.

That is the type of discussion that we need to have, but to jump down the President's throat because he actually had to make the decision in an impossible situation I think does a grave disservice to this committee's ability to do effective and honest nonpartisan oversight. Costs were going to be borne here. There was no easy option. And I do hope that people remember that as we go through the questions and answers that will proceed.

With that, I yield to the ranking member.

Mr. ROGERS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley, was the DOD [Department of Defense] in charge of making decisions about troop strength in this withdrawal or were you in a support role?

General MILLEY. Let me put it this way—you talking about the NEO or—

Mr. ROGERS. I am talking about—let me go back even further.

In January of this year were you of the opinion, in your professional military judgment, that we should've maintained 2,500 troops, U.S. troops in support of the coalition effort and contractors in Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. Yeah. My assessment that I read in the opening statement remained consistent and—

Mr. ROGERS. Did that professional military opinion change over the course of the next few months?

General MILLEY. Not until Presidential decision and I rendered my opinions and it was a fulsome debate on all of that. And once decisions are made, then I am expected to execute lawful order.

Mr. ROGERS. And you have made that very clear. So my question is, when the troop levels were ordered to be drawn down to zero and first stopping at 650 as General McKenzie outlined, was that your decision or General McKenzie's decision to draw down to 650?

General MILLEY. It was a task and then a troop-to-task analysis with the task being to go to zero, but you also have to defend the Embassy—

Mr. ROGERS. I am thinking about the chain of command. Somebody's making decisions about troop levels and my understanding is it was not the DOD; it was the State Department or the White

House. I want to know who said we are going to go from 2,500 to 650 and just protect Kabul and the State Department.

General MILLEY. It was a military analysis that 6- to 700 could adequately defend the Embassy until the contractors come up and that was then approved up through the chain and approved at the highest levels.

Mr. ROGERS. Who made the decision?

General MILLEY. I would say that decision was made in a national security consultative process by the highest levels of our government.

Mr. ROGERS. General McKenzie, did you receive advice from General Miller in the end of 2020 and early 2021 related to troop levels in Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. Ranking Member, I did.

Mr. ROGERS. What was that advice?

General MCKENZIE. The advice, his view and my view, were essentially the same view. My view was that we needed to maintain about 2,500 and that we also needed to work with our coalition partners who had about 6,000 troops in there, NATO and other core countries that would remain there.

Mr. ROGERS. Did your professional military opinion change over the course of the spring?

General MCKENZIE. It did not.

Mr. ROGERS. Did you communicate—well, I know you communicated to the President. You said you did. Were you present in the room when General Miller's recommendations were relayed to the President?

General MCKENZIE. General Miller was present in executive sessions that involved myself, the Secretary here, the Chairman, and the President.

Mr. ROGERS. And those recommendations of the parties as Secretary Austin said were debated fully—

General MCKENZIE. They were debated fully. I felt that my opinion was heard with great thoughtfulness by the President.

Mr. ROGERS. Well, you know, Secretary Austin just made the point that there was a fulsome debate of the pros and cons and the costs and risks, yet in August of this year, President Biden told George Stephanopoulos in an interview, no. No one said that to me, referring to keeping some 2,500 troops in Afghanistan.

Was that an inaccurate statement by the President?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, I am not going to comment on a statement by the President.

Mr. ROGERS. Okay. General McKenzie, in mid-June your commanders on the ground were informing you that things were deteriorating as you testified a little while ago. At that time, in your judgment, you should stop withdrawal, increase forces, or all proceed with the retrograde.

What did you decide at that time?

General MCKENZIE. We decided to proceed with the retrograde.

Mr. ROGERS. Okay. Were you ordered to do that by the President?

General MCKENZIE. We followed our original—we had original orders. We followed those orders through to completion.

Mr. ROGERS. Was it the President's orders?

General MCKENZIE. My orders come from the Secretary of Defense to the President. So that is a very short chain of command for me.

Mr. ROGERS. Okay. Secretary Austin, on the 23rd, you told this committee that you had developed a very detailed plan to conduct safe, orderly, and responsible withdrawal and were executing that plan. On August 18, the President said, quote: The idea that somehow there was going to be a way that we could have gotten out with chaos ensuing, I don't know how that happens, close quote.

How do you reconcile those discrepancies between what you assured the Congress and what the President is telling us?

Secretary AUSTIN. Thank you, sir. First of all, in terms of the withdrawal of our troops and the retrograde of equipment, that plan as developed by General Miller and General McKenzie was executed as planned, and all of our equipment was retrograded and we drew down the force that we wanted to draw down to that very small force that you saw at the Embassy at the very end there.

The chaos that ensued followed the collapse of the military and the collapse of the government, and when those two things happen, then it was going to be a chaotic situation.

Mr. ROGERS. And the collapse of the government and the collapse of the military was solely responsibility of this administration. I know you are all trying to be careful politically, but it was the State Department and the White House that told you to make those drawdown of troops from 2,500 to 650 to zero. It was the speed with which they had done it—that they carried out that order that is what caused the chaos that we had.

If they had allowed the DOD to be in a command situation, we wouldn't have had this problem. General McKenzie has testified that the only reason he couldn't keep Bagram was because he had to draw down to 650 troops and his primary orders were to keep Hamid Karzai and the State Department safe.

We just have to admit this was—the State Department and the White House that caused this catastrophe, not the Defense Department.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Langevin.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning. I want to thank our witnesses for your testimony today and for your service to our Nation. My constituents and I have obviously a lot of questions about the planning that led up to this, and I'll admit that I am concerned that, based on the conditions on the ground, General Milley and General McKenzie recommended against final withdrawal, I wish the administration had been more thoughtful and not had rushed this.

I have yet to hear an answer to the question, though, of why did we not start withdrawing American citizens and SIVs sooner? We knew we were going to be withdrawal whether we started doing that withdrawing of the Americans and SIVs in January or May or sooner than the actual execution of the order to withdraw.

I would like that question answered. Also Secretary Austin, given the generals' concerns, were the discussions about pushing the withdrawal back to spring of 2022 or conditioning it on the criteria

in the Doha Agreement to ensure that we did the handoff correctly, we already weren't going to fully withdraw by May 2021.

And Secretary Austin, what was the military rationale of leaving by the end of August when the Taliban are at their strongest in the fighting season as opposed to waiting in the winter months when there is more of a lull in the Taliban fighting season? It is a relatively low level of activity and they are at their weakest. I will start with those questions.

The CHAIRMAN. And I am sorry. Before you get into it, I'm going to stick to the 5-minute rule. So when the clock hits zero, we are going to move on to other people. Go ahead.

Secretary AUSTIN. Thank you, sir. On the issue of why we didn't bring out civilians and SIVs sooner, again, the call on how to do that and when to do it is really a State Department call. We provided input, as I said in my opening statement, to the State Department. Their concerns rightfully were that, number one, they were being cautioned by the Ghani administration that if they withdrew American citizens and SIV applicants at a pace that was too fast, it would cause a collapse of the government that we were trying to prevent.

And so I think that went into the calculus and when you add also into the calculus that SIV process was very, at that point, very slow, deliberate, and not very responsive. With your help, we were able to curtail the time that it took to work through that process, but a number of things kind of came together to cause what happened to happen.

But, again, we provided our input and we certainly would have liked to have seen it go faster or sooner but, again, they had a number of things to think through as well.

In terms of adjusting or why we chose to—why the President chose to leave in the summer versus waiting until the next year, obviously, a number of things went into his decision calculus, but, you know, as we came on board, the agreement that had been made was that we were going to depart by May 1.

We were able to work to get more time to ensure that we could conduct a deliberate and safe and orderly retrograde, but, again, you know, the President made the decision that we would leave in the summer versus going into the next year. So—and I will leave it at that, sir, pending any more questions.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Secretary, I want to know how we now protect the country going forward.

Former CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] Director and Secretary of Defense Panetta said that our national security is threatened by the Taliban takeover. One of our missions was to prevent a haven for terrorist groups, and—and I quote—"we have failed in that mission," end quote.

Similarly, the Director of the DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] has assessed that al-Qaida could threaten the homeland in 1 to 2 years.

So I agree that over-the-horizon operations can be effective. However, I am concerned that, without complementary operations, they will be insufficient to keep us safe.

Secretary Austin, are you confident that over-the-horizon capabilities on their own can mitigate the terrorist threat we face? Are

you confident that we can prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven? And how will you keep our country safe?

The CHAIRMAN. And I apologize, but the gentleman's time has expired, so that question will have to go unanswered.

Mr. LANGEVIN. I would like that for the record.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 149.]

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Wilson.

Mr. WILSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In an interview on August 16, President Biden promised to keep military troops in Afghanistan until every American citizen who wanted to leave was able to leave. This did not happen.

Nor can we confirm the Blinken claim that he sent 19 separate messages to Americans telling them to leave the country since March of this year.

Also unclear is the truth of the Biden claim that no military commander recommended leaving behind a residual force, even though all of you, starting courageously with General Scott Miller, have now made it clear that your professional military advice was to do so.

On August 26, I formally requested all letters referenced that day by Biden from military commanders advising him on the Afghanistan withdrawal. To date, I haven't received a response.

As a 31-year Army veteran myself, grateful to have four sons who have served in Iraq, Egypt, the southern border, and in Afghanistan, I was immediately skeptical letters existed.

President Biden left behind thousands of American citizens, Green Card holders, brave interpreters, and Afghan media reporters who worked with the United States.

Biden was correct when he said the buck stops with him, as the person responsible for Afghanistan as well as for the terrorists that are now crossing the southern border to plan attacks on American neighborhoods.

In addition to betraying the American citizens and the U.S. allies in Afghanistan, the Biden decision to have a premature withdrawal left the people of Afghanistan, who had 60,000 troops killed by the Taliban, under the complete control of the Taliban, a barbaric terrorist organization, as General Milley has confirmed, with al-Qaida.

Again, Biden was correct; the buck stops with him. The war has moved from Afghanistan to American neighborhoods, equally endangering our allies of India and Israel.

Mr. Secretary, even before the withdrawal, there were frustrating reports of Americans and Green Card holders being turned away at the gates of the airport or being instructed by the administration to stay away from the airport entirely.

While other countries were sending their special forces into Kabul to retrieve their citizens and bring them to the airport, you repeatedly refused to do the same, even after promising in a Pentagon press conference on August 18 that, quote, "we are going to get everyone we can possibly to evacuate, and I will do that as long as we possibly can until the clock runs out or if we run out of capability," end of quote.



Mr. Secretary, the American public needs to know: Did the clock run out, or did you run out of capability? Did you at any point ask President Biden for any more time or more support to enable your forces to stay and complete the full evacuations of American citizens, not leaving them behind, as promised? If so, what was the Biden response?

Secretary AUSTIN. First of all, sir, thank you for your personal service in our military, and thanks for the service of your family members. We remain grateful.

On the issue of evacuating American citizens and SIV holders, or SIV applicants, this work continues on. We are not finished, and we will make sure that we stay focused on this to get out every American citizen that wants to leave and has the right credentials to be able to leave.

On the issue of the security at the airport, it was my assessment, and I remain convinced of this, that the risk to mission and risk to force was beyond significant, and had we stayed there much longer, we would have endured continued attacks by ISIS-K and potentially the Taliban.

And, you know, as each day went forward, as that risk increased, you know, we stood to have aircraft shot down, we stood to have people injured on—additional people injured on the airfield. And so, as we weighed those risks—

Mr. WILSON. Mr. Secretary, I need to have this completed. And, in fact, I will be sending you questions for the record. And—

Secretary AUSTIN. Sure.

Mr. WILSON [continuing]. —I really want to know how many Americans have been left behind. And so we will get that, but I will be providing questions for the record.

But I sadly believe that American families today are at a greater risk of murderous attacks at home than ever before. You talked about attacks at the airport. No, they are coming here. And that is that, in history, we are at greater risk.

Suicide bombers can operate from the safe haven of Afghanistan just as 9/11 and with the open southern borders. The example of May 8th mass murder of over 80 girls in Kabul have not been forgotten. The buck stops with 13 murdered Marines.

Mr. Biden is disregarding—

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. WILSON [continuing]. —The military advice, and I believe—

The CHAIRMAN. I will call—

Mr. WILSON [continuing]. —The President should resign.

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. —on Mr. Larsen.

Mr. WILSON. I yield back.

Mr. LARSEN. I am prepared to begin my questions, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Larsen is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. LARSEN. Heads-up, I don't have a speech, so I am launching into my questions right now, so get ready to answer them.

General Milley, with regards to the November 11th unclassified signed order, whose signature was on that order?

General MILLEY. Former President Trump.

Mr. LARSEN. And then 6 days later that was rescinded after—

General MILLEY. Correct.

Mr. LARSEN [continuing]. —discussion? Is that correct?

General MILLEY. Correct.

Mr. LARSEN. And what were the top three concerns with that particular order?

General MILLEY. Well, the instruction had two lines. Line one was, “Withdraw all U.S. military forces from Somalia by 31 December.” Second sentence was, “Withdraw all U.S. military forces from Afghanistan by 15 January.”

So I went over and spoke to the White House and had some conversations with some folks, not the President—

Mr. LARSEN. Sure.

General MILLEY [continuing]. —and we discussed the cost-risk-benefit, et cetera, and the feasibility, acceptability, and suitability of that order.

Mr. LARSEN. Okay. All right.

General MILLEY. And it was subsequently rescinded.

Mr. LARSEN. Was that the first time—well, I will ask Secretary Austin.

In the last 20 years, given the history in Afghanistan, is that the first order at all that has come out asking for a withdrawal? Did we have withdrawal plans or withdrawal orders at all in the last 20 years from Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. Absolutely. As you know, we increased our footprint in Afghanistan over time, and then we—

Mr. LARSEN. And shrunk it, but that is—but that is—but not—

Secretary AUSTIN. Not a complete withdrawal.

Mr. LARSEN. Not complete withdrawal. That is different. I am talking about zero.

Secretary AUSTIN. Right.

Mr. LARSEN. Down to zero.

Secretary AUSTIN. Correct.

Mr. LARSEN. So this would be the first time, then? This November 11 order would have been the first ask for a withdrawal to zero?

Secretary AUSTIN. That is correct.

Mr. LARSEN. To your knowledge.

Secretary AUSTIN. To my knowledge, correct.

Mr. LARSEN. Within the DOD. Okay. From the President or anything. Got it. From any President, I should say. Thank you. Just trying to get the timeline set.

And this relates to General McKenzie. You talked about the 2,500, the recommendation, the discussion you had about 2,500 troops. Was that for a particular set of missions, and did those missions change; therefore, that 2,500 became 650, became zero?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, when we looked at the 2,500 number—

Mr. LARSEN. Right.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. —we were looking at a force that would have the ability to do very limited advise/assist at a high level, assist in logistics management for the Afghans, but it would have been functioning at a very high level. So that was the force that we wanted to continue to keep on the ground.

As we went down to—as we looked at going down to 650, you get a force that is almost exclusively built around the ability to defend the Embassy and the airfield and provide entry-level logistics to the Afghans. By that, I mean a package comes into the airport, you give it over to the Afghans, they drive it away, and you have no way to track what happened.

Mr. LARSEN. Yeah.

General MCKENZIE. We lost that capability when we——

Mr. LARSEN. Yeah, but based on the civilian leadership saying, “This is what civilian leadership wants to do.”

You get to—and I know you are not arguing this point; you are just—you make the recommendations, given your best advice, and then civilian leadership has the opportunity to say, “Thank you, but here is what I would rather be doing.”

General MCKENZIE. That is absolutely correct.

Mr. LARSEN. So the mission changed——

General MCKENZIE. The mission fundamentally changed when we—going to zero means you are going to reduce all your capability to do any kind of real on-the-ground work, even at a truncated level, with the Afghan forces. You are going to be talking at the ministerial level, at the very highest levels of government only, and you are not going to have any real visibility about what is going on on the ground.

Mr. LARSEN. Okay.

General Milley, did you want to try to address that?

General MILLEY. I did. I just wanted to clarify one thing. The 11 November order was actually not the first one. The first one was the Doha Agreement, which directs going to zero by 1 May. The 11 November order is an accelerated withdrawal to bring it to zero by 15 January. So two different——

Mr. LARSEN. Yeah.

General MILLEY [continuing]. —instructions.

Mr. LARSEN. That is great. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

Just for the record I will ask this question, because then this gets to kind of a follow-on to all of this, is: How do you define over-the-horizon capabilities? Like, what are those specifically? And how do we execute those? And are we going to explore that a little bit more probably here today?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, I would be——

Mr. LARSEN. I have about 15 seconds.

General MCKENZIE. I would be prepared to talk a little bit about it today, but I think, more importantly, I will be prepared to come over at the direction of the Secretary and provide a classified briefing.

Mr. LARSEN. I think that would be very helpful. And there may be opportunity in the future to travel to the region and hear directly what it looks like on the ground.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. The gentleman’s time——

Secretary AUSTIN. With the chairman’s permission, sir——

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. —has expired.

Secretary AUSTIN [continuing]. —I would offer that briefing by General McKenzie, along with Joint Staff representation and my policy people.

The CHAIRMAN. Yeah, we will definitely be following up on that. I mean, the issue of what we do going forward to deal with the counterterrorism threat out of South Asia is something this committee has already looked at and will continue to look at for a very long time.

Mr. Turner is recognized.

Mr. TURNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I serve on both the House Armed Services Committee and the Intelligence Committee. The Intelligence Committee has already been briefed from the intelligence community concerning their participation of the August 29 drone attack.

General McKenzie, you have taken, in front of us, full responsibility for that. I have a series of information that I would like released to this committee so that we can adequately provide oversight to what occurred on August 29.

What we know from your prior statements is that you did not know who it was who was in the car, whose house it was, or who or how many people were in the house. This greatly concerns me as we look to the over-horizon claims that the administration has of its ability for counterterrorism.

You did not, as your goal was stated, thwart or disrupt an imminent attack. You killed an innocent man, and yet an attack didn't happen. So there are serious questions concerning both the information that you had and the manner in which the execution occurred.

So I would request that it be released to this committee and the Intelligence Committee relevant video excerpts from the drones of August 29, the protocols that were in place prior to this drone attack mission, the intelligence that an attack was imminent against our forces, and the approval of any authorization to modify those protocols, including approvals for delegation of authority, including target engagement authority, who approved at the DOD and in the administration, and the data that the Secretary released to the IG [Inspector General].

I just want to make it clear, Mr. Secretary, the fact that you have an IG investigation does not stop congressional oversight.

I will be sending you a list of all those. I would like your consent that you are going to be providing those to us. They are certainly within the jurisdiction of our two committees.

Secretary AUSTIN. Acknowledged, sir. And you are correct; there is a review going on of the strike.

Mr. TURNER. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

General Milley, with indignation in front of the House and the Senate, you have commented on the statements in the press concerning your phone conversation with your counterpart, General Li, in China.

Let's be clear. To give you some help with the indignation, those comments were in the press because that is where you put them.

Now, you claim that you had information—and it is all over—that China was worried about an imminent attack. You did not tell the President, the Vice President, the White House Chief of Staff, the National Security Advisor, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State, the Director of National Intelligence, either of the relevant committees in the House, including the big eight, which

you know include Intel. You didn't tell the Intelligence Committee. You didn't tell the Armed Services Committee.

You report that, after you took upon yourself to have this phone conversation, that you told them of the conversation, not that China believed that we were going to imminently attack them—which, by the way, has never been true in my lifetime. And it may be true, since they believed it, that is why they are digging ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] holes faster than they can fill them with ICBMs. But you chose instead to handle it yourself with a phone call.

So, General Milley, you offered all of the concerning intelligence, and I am going to request that you provide it to us. I would like you to provide us the relevant intelligence information that you based your belief that China was going to—belief that there was an imminent attack.

I also want your requests for declassification of the approval that you release that information that China believed so, including your request for declassification of your conversation that you had with General Li, and any approvals. I want a transcript of your call with General Li, and I also want any readouts, memorandums, notice of calls, or outcomes.

Now, you chose to talk to reporters instead of us. And that is of great concern. No one in Congress knew that one of two of the major nuclear powers thought that they were perhaps being threatened for attack.

Now, Mr. Secretary, that turns my questions to you, then. Mr. Secretary, if you learn that Russia or China believes that they may be subject to an attack by the United States, as a member of the President's Cabinet, do you believe that information should be handled at the Cabinet level and with the President, with the National Security Advisor, the Secretary of Defense? Do you believe the chair and ranking member of Intel and the House Armed Services Committee and Foreign Affairs Committee need to know these?

Or do you believe that a belief of the possibility of an attack by the United States against Russia and China is appropriately handled by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in a phone call with his counterpart with one of those nations?

Please tell me that you believe it elevates to the level—that you would elevate that to the Cabinet and to Congress and not just have it be subsequently told to us all by newspaper articles in The Washington Post and The New York Times, as General Milley chose to do.

Secretary AUSTIN. Thank you, sir.

Obviously, we would want to follow standard protocol. And what you described is what I would—the type of actions that I would consider taking.

But General Milley, as what I heard him say yesterday and I think again today, is that his chain of command, the Secretary of Defense at the time, was aware of the actions. And so——

Mr. TURNER. After. What he said yesterday is after.

The CHAIRMAN. I am sorry, but——

General MILLEY. No, that is not correct. What I said yesterday and today——

The CHAIRMAN. If I could—hold on just a second, everybody.

Time has expired. Mr. Turner is very clever. He made a very direct attack as his time was expiring. I am going to violate the rules here a little bit and let Chairman Milley respond to that direct attack, hopefully briefly, and then we will move on to the next witness.

General MILLEY. With respect to the intelligence, I have it right here. I will be happy to share it with you.

Mr. TURNER. Great.

General MILLEY. I guarantee that that intelligence was disseminated in the President's PDB [President's Daily Brief], the Vice President, the DNI [Director of National Intelligence], Director of CIA, the Secretary of Defense, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and others.

That was significant, and there was a lot of it. It wasn't just a singular report. There was a lot—I will be happy to share that with you and go over it with you line by line.

And it was significant, and it was concerning, to the point where Secretary of Defense Esper, Admiral Davidson, and myself, along with others, had conversations about it, and I was directed by then-Secretary of Defense Esper. First, he directed his Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia-Pacific Affairs to make calls, and then me, same thing.

This was all done with oversight, and I tried to lay that out in the memoranda. I tried to lay it out in a timeline in an unclassified way that you could use—

The CHAIRMAN. And we are going to—I am sorry. We are going to have to leave it at that.

General MILLEY. I will be happy to take it up at a later date, your convenience.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Courtney is recognized.

Mr. COURTNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to the witnesses for your service and testimony today.

One comment, Mr. Chairman, before questions. Over the last month, including yesterday's Senate hearing, we heard a lot of, in my opinion, over-the-top claims that the U.S. had lost all credibility with its allies in the wake of the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Last week, Mr. Chairman, we saw firsthand in Washington how mistaken that claim was. On Wednesday last week, I attended a ceremony over in the Senate where the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, said that Australia was proud to go into Afghanistan together and leave together, degrading al-Qaida and preventing a major terrorist attack, and, in very heartfelt terms, thanked the United States, particularly the 11 Marines, 1 Navy corpsman, and 1 soldier who perished while safely evacuating 4,100 Australians from Kabul.

Boris Johnson, last week, who was also in town, when asked about the U.S. standing post-withdrawal said, "What I said to Joe Biden is how grateful I am for the amazing work of the U.S. military in helping us extricate in 2 weeks 15,000 British nationals from Kabul to whom we owe debts of honor and gratitude. The U.S. military were heroic."

Of course, they were in town to enthusiastically endorse AUKUS [Australia-United Kingdom-United States], the new defense agree-

ment in the Pacific, which, as Politico reported, despite all the handwringing over the last couple weeks, was a powerful reminder that an American security guarantee with our allies still reigns supreme and, in the stroke of a pen, has reaffirmed our engagement and collaboration with allies in a region that the National Defense Strategy has identified as our number one priority.

Secretary Austin, I just want to follow up on the August 29 drone strike. And General McKenzie, on the 17th, again, gave, I guess, a Central Command investigation report, which described it as a tragic mistake.

You also, that day, announced that there was going to be a DOD follow-up investigation. Can you tell us, what is the difference between what you described and what CENTCOM did? And when can we expect to see results from that investigation that you described?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, I directed a three-star review of the incident. And, certainly, it will take into account all of the things that General McKenzie and his team have done. But we will look at the, you know, soup-to-nuts, you know, policy, procedures, whether or not we followed our own practices, our outlined practices.

And we will certainly look at accountability as well. If somebody should be held accountable for something that they did that was outside of standard practice, then we will take a look at that.

Mr. COURTNEY. Thank you.

General McKenzie, you mentioned on the 17th that the Department is exploring the possibility of ex gratia payments as compensation for the individuals who died in that strike. And, again, that is a \$3-million-per-year set-aside that the United States military's operation has used in the past. However, in 2020, despite 23 civilians that were killed, there were no payments made last year.

Can you give us, you know, some feeling that, you know, this agreement is sufficient to address this issue, which I think really is our country's responsibility?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, I agree with you; I believe we have a significant responsibility here. And I know that, even as we speak right now, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy is engaged in finding the best way to move forward on an ex gratia—appropriate ex gratia payment and whatever other measures may be contemplated in regard to that family. And I will just leave it at that.

Mr. COURTNEY. Thank you. And I just would reflect that that certainly is a high-volume concern in my district.

General MCKENZIE. Sure.

Mr. COURTNEY. General Milley, again, we first met in 2013 on a CODEL [congressional delegation]. You were in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. And I think many of us had that same experience of seeing you in-country there. And, certainly, your service is something that I think should be unquestioned, and commitment to our Nation.

In your testimony, you talked again about the Doha Agreement, the conditions that were put into place for the Taliban to perform, and that only one out of the eight actually had been complied with, even up through February. Nonetheless, 80 percent of the troops in the U.S. were drawn down from the date of the Doha Agreement to January 21.

Can you just talk about, you know, the noncompliance of the Taliban throughout 2020 and the predicament that I think this administration was left when it took office with just a fraction of the troop level that was there in February 2020?

General MILLEY. We had almost 13,000 U.S. troops there in February 2020. And you got the numbers for the inauguration. But the bottom line is: reduction in violence, nationwide cease-fire, and a whole series of other—

The CHAIRMAN. I apologize, but the gentleman's time has expired.

General MILLEY. I will respond to the record on that.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 145.]

Mr. COURTNEY. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Lamborn is recognized.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We on this committee have repeatedly expressed our concern that the U.S. military does not have regional basing and cooperation agreements required for an effective over-the-horizon counterterrorism capability.

In May, Mr. Helvey, in response to my question in here, confirmed that the administration had not yet secured the necessary agreements with any of the governments in the region to establish these over-the-horizon capabilities.

So, General McKenzie, has the administration, as of today, secured any necessary agreements with a neighboring country to provide the basing and overflight requirements needed to perform over-the-horizon counterterror operations in landlocked Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. Representative, as of today, I have the ability to enter Afghanistan and to fly missions. It is a long haul in, but I have the ability to do that today.

Mr. LAMBORN. But we don't have an agreement with a neighboring country. Is that true? Isn't that true?

General MCKENZIE. Obviously, it is a neighboring country that is allowing us access, but we are not based in—we are not based in any neighboring country; that is correct, sir.

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay. So we can safely assume that, as of August 31, we did not also have an agreement at that time in the past.

Okay. Thank you.

General Milley, at the June 23 hearing here, you testified to this committee that Bagram was not necessary tactically to the military's withdrawal plan. You dismissed my and other people's concerns about the military value of Bagram, and you seemed to base that on an assessment that the Taliban, at that point, had not yet taken major districts.

Yesterday, though, you told Senator Blackburn that one of the courses of action you provided the Commander in Chief was to keep Bagram Air Base open, which sounds different from what you told us on January 23.

But, for the record, was it your professional military opinion and advice that we should abandon Bagram Air Base? And, if not, was this decision forced on you by the arbitrary troop cap of roughly 650?



General MILLEY. Once the President's decision was made in mid-April, 14 April, and we had a change of mission to go to zero and bring the troops down to a number that was only required to maintain the Embassy, the Bagram decision was made at that point. Because, at that point, there was no way you could defend both Bagram and HKIA.

But one additional point. Most of the people that were required to be in a NEO were going to be coming out of Kabul. And HKIA, as Scotty Miller, General Miller, has already testified to, HKIA was always going to be the center of gravity of any NEO. But we didn't have the forces available to do both, so—

Mr. LAMBORN. Okay. Thank you.

I want to ask General McKenzie a question.

General McKenzie, had we kept control of Bagram, what forces—or what options and capabilities would that have given U.S. forces during the withdrawal, had that been in play?

General MCKENZIE. Well, in order to hold Bagram, I would have needed probably pushing 5,000 more troops on the ground. So that would have been a significant decision, to hold Bagram. And we were under the direction to go to zero, so it would require a basic policy directive to change the plan.

If you are going to go to zero and you are going to keep enough forces to hold your Embassy and the airfield, it is incompatible to hold any other base anywhere in the country. So that would be a policy decision, to go out and hold Bagram, under that case.

Let me just further add that I did not see any tactical utility to Bagram.

Mr. LAMBORN. General McKenzie, isn't it true that the President rejected your best military opinion and advice as to how quickly to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. Well, I will say this. It has been my view that we should have—that I recommended a level of 2,500, a level that would have allowed us to hold Bagram and other airfields as well. Once you go below that level and make a decision to go to zero, it is no longer feasible to hold Bagram.

Mr. LAMBORN. But that was your best opinion and advice.

General MCKENZIE. That remains my view now, as it was then.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you.

And you said to hold Bagram would have taken 2,500. A minute ago, you said 5,000.

General MCKENZIE. No—

Mr. LAMBORN. It sounds like it was 2,500.

General MCKENZIE. Well, it depends on the situation. If you are talking about a situation where you are not fighting the Taliban and you have the full assistance of the Afghan Government or the Taliban's attacks against you are at a minimum, yes, you can hold it at 2,500.

If, however, you posit that you are in Afghanistan, say, beyond August the 31st without the tacit agreement of the Taliban and without the assistance of the Government of Afghanistan, who provided most of the physical security at Bagram, then you have to put a big footprint in, just as we did at HKIA. It is exactly the same sit—the two situations are analogous.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time—

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. Has expired.

Mr. Garamendi.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Gentlemen, thank you so very much for your testimony.

Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge an extraordinary effort, and successful effort, made by the U.S. military, particularly the Air Force, in the most awesome and successful evacuation of civilians ever in the history of this world. Well done. Very, very well done. And compliments to all involved in that.

Obviously, the loss of the 13 souls, members of the military, was a great tragedy. And you and all of us regret that.

The fog of war is only repeated by the fog of the committee. So let me lay out some timeframes here.

In mid-2018, former President Trump ordered formal and direct U.S.-Taliban negotiations without the Afghan Government participating.

In February 2020—excuse me—August 2019, President Trump said that he would withdraw all U.S. troops as quickly as possible.

In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a formal agreement in which the United States committed to withdraw all of its troops, contractors, and nondiplomatic civilian personnel from Afghanistan no later than May 1, 2021.

In June 2020, the U.S. troop levels reached 8,600.

In October, former President Trump tweeted, “We should have the small remaining number of our BRAVE Men and Women serving in Afghanistan home by Christmas!”

On November 17, 2020, then-Acting Secretary of Defense Miller announced that we will implement former President Trump’s orders to continue repositioning forces from Afghanistan and the 2,500 U.S. troops who remain there by January 15.

On January 15, he announced that there were indeed 2,500 troops left.

On January 20, Biden became President. Twenty-five-hundred troops were then in Afghanistan.

On April 14, President Biden announced his intention to continue to withdraw all regular U.S. troops by September 11, 4 months after the preplanned May 1 deadline.

On July 2, Italy and Germany withdrew their troops.

On July 17—we have had specific testimony here on what then happened from July 17 on. And, if I recall correctly, the Afghan Government completely collapsed on the 20th of August, wasn’t there any longer. And, from there, the evacuations commenced.

General McKenzie, were the 2,500 troops on the ground sufficient, as agreed with the Taliban? Were they there in accordance with the agreement?

General MCKENZIE. Had we held the 2,500, which I stated is my position, and as the Secretary has articulated, there would have been a clear risk that the Taliban would have begun to attack us as we moved past the 1 May deadline.

However, it was my judgment then that that would still have given us a platform to continue negotiations with the Taliban to perhaps force a political solution.

My concern was that, if we withdrew below 2,500 and went to zero, that the Afghan military and government would collapse. And, of course, that is not a potential counterfactual; that is, in fact, what happened. So we have objective—we have objective data to understand what happens if you go to zero.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Several of us attended a luncheon here in the Capitol in late June with President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, and they were very, very confident that they would be able to maintain their government through the—with the reduction and the withdrawal of American troops. If they—they specifically said that if 300,000 troops, they could do it. They needed continued financial support, they needed the necessary intelligence from the United States, and they also needed to have certain air strikes, drone strikes. That was their promise.

They also said that they did not want to allow Afghans to leave. That is what they specifically told us. They did not want Afghans to leave. Obviously, Ghani decided that he would leave.

Further questions—my time has expired. I will yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Wittman.

Mr. WITTMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, thanks so much for your testimony today.

General Milley, I want to begin with you, and I want to build on a question that Ranking Member Rogers asked.

On August 18, President Biden said that there is no way possible that U.S. troops could be withdrawn from Afghanistan without the chaos that we saw unfold.

In your best military judgment, was there a way to extract the troops without the chaos that we saw unfold?

General MILLEY. I just want to be clear, we are talking two different missions. The retrograde of the troops to 2,500 everybody is talking about, those were advisors. That was complete by mid-July. And that was done, actually, without any significant incident. And that is the handover of 11 bases, the bringing out of a lot of equipment, et cetera. That was done under the command of General Miller.

The noncombatant evacuation operation is different. The non-combatant operation, that was done under conditions of great volatility, great violence, great threat. And we inserted 6,000 troops on relatively short notice because there were some contingency plans to do that.

That is a different operation. And I think that the first 2 days of that, as we saw, were not only chaotic but violent and high-risk. But, because of the skill and leadership of our troops, they were able to get control of a situation in the airfield in that country that was falling apart and then execute the operation.

So I think it would have been difficult under any circumstances, and I think our soldiers performed extraordinarily well, actually, in 48 hours getting control of an airfield in another country eight and a half time zones away.

Mr. WITTMAN. But I understand that, but you are talking about a very compressed timeframe. I am talking about the full extent about what you are looking at. You can talk about two missions,

but I am talking about, in totality of what we are looking at there was a chaotic and disaggregated effort.

It seems like to me that your professional military judgment would probably not have been focused in your recommendations in seeing this outcome. I just wanted to get your—

General MILLEY. My recommendations at the time and my analysis at the time were aligned, actually, with what you have heard from General Miller previously and General McKenzie, was flatline at about 2,500 and go for a negotiated solution and make sure it is conditions-based.

And we all render our advice, and Presidents make decisions, and then we execute.

Mr. WITTMAN. Sure.

This morning, you stated that the withdrawal was a logistical success but a strategic failure. And I would say that probably American citizens and the Special Immigrant Visa holders would probably disagree, those that were left behind would probably disagree with your assessment of a logistical success.

That being said, I want to focus on the strategic failure aspect of that.

You said yesterday that all you can do—and you just said it now—all you can do is provide your best advice, and it is up to the President to make the ultimate decision.

In your best military judgment, did President Biden's decisions cause this strategic failure?

General MILLEY. I think, as I said yesterday—first of all, I am not going to judge a President. That is the job of the American people, that is the job of Congress, not my job.

Mr. WITTMAN. No, I am asking for your best military judgment—for your judgment.

General MILLEY. Yeah. So my assessment is, this was a 20-year war, and it wasn't lost in the last, you know, 20 days or even 20 months, for that matter.

It was a cumulative effect to a series of strategic decisions that go way back—you know, bin Laden, right on the Tora Bora, for example. We knew where he was, we were 1,000 meters away, could have ended it, perhaps, right there.

The shift from going into Iraq and pulling all the troops out of Afghanistan, with the exception of a few others—major strategic decision.

Not effectively dealing with Pakistan as a sanctuary—major strategic issue that we are going to have to really unpack.

The intelligence piece, pulling advisors off 3 or 4 years ago out of kandaks, so we blinded ourselves from our ability to see the will, the morale, the leadership, and the training.

There is a whole series of decisions that take place over 20 years. I don't think that, whenever you get some phenomenon like a war that is lost—and it has been, in the sense of we accomplished our strategic task of protecting America against al-Qaida, but certainly the end state is a whole lot different than what we wanted.

So, whenever a phenomenon like that happens, there are an awful lot of causal factors, and we are going to have to figure that out. A lot of lessons learned here.

Mr. WITTMAN. Thank you.

And I want to build with your answers to Secretary Austin.

Secretary Austin, I imagine that you had a number of opportunities in your capacity as CENTCOM commanding general to brief President Obama, and I imagine that Vice President Biden was probably privy to these briefs. Was he a regular attendee when you gave these briefs?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Vice President was frequently in the Situation Room when we conducted meetings, yes.

Mr. WITTMAN. Let me go from there, then, to the Battle of Kunduz, which, we know, Taliban took over, Afghan forces retreated.

Did you recognize that as the beginning of the weakness in the ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] mission? And were there issues at that point of intense interest to Vice President Biden?

The CHAIRMAN. I am sorry, that is going to have to be a question for the record, because the time has expired.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 145.]

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Speier is recognized.

Ms. SPEIER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you all for your extraordinary service to our country.

I want to just set the record straight on a couple of points.

It was in 2017 that then-President Trump relaxed rules of engagement for air strikes, and there was a massive increase in civilian casualties, a 330 percent increase during Trump's administration. Compared to the previous 10 years, there was a 95 percent increase in civilian deaths from 2017 to 2019.

It was then-President Trump who, in mid-2018, ordered the Taliban—ordered talks with the Taliban without the Afghani leadership. And it was in February 2020 when that formal agreement was made.

Now, Chairman Milley, you identified the Taliban as a terrorist organization. Can you tell us anything about former President Trump's intent to invite the Taliban leadership to the United States or to Camp David specifically?

General MILLEY. I have no personal knowledge of that invitation. I saw it in the media, but I was not part of any discussions or decision-making on that. I have no personal knowledge.

Ms. SPEIER. Secretary Austin, did the previous administration develop plans for a withdrawal, and was there any handoff to you of those plans?

Secretary AUSTIN. There was no handoff to me of any plans for a withdrawal.

Ms. SPEIER. So then-President Trump calls for a total withdrawal by May 1, 2021, and no plans had been made during his administration for withdrawal.

Secretary AUSTIN. I would say that, you know, I am confident that General Miller, who was anticipating, you know, a decision one way or the other, was making plans. And I certainly would defer to General McKenzie in terms of what he might have done.

But, in terms of handoff from administration to administration, Secretary to Secretary, there was no handoff to me.

Ms. SPEIER. All right.

Is it not true that, on April 27, President Biden, through the State Department, called on all Americans in Afghanistan to leave by commercial flights? Can any of you answer that question?

Well, that was, in fact——

Secretary AUSTIN. I cannot——

Ms. SPEIER [continuing]. What happened.

Secretary AUSTIN. I don't have knowledge of that.

Ms. SPEIER. All right. That was, in fact, what happened. So we put on notice all Americans in Afghanistan, on April 27, it was time to get out.

Let me ask you this, General Milley: What was the impact of President Trump's drawdown to 2,500 troops despite the Taliban's noncompliance with much of the peace agreement? And how did that affect our intelligence gathering?

General MILLEY. So there are two questions there. The first question: I think the Doha Agreement itself, because of the nature of it—and this is more 20/20 hindsight perhaps, but we now believe that the Doha Agreement itself perhaps undermined or contributed to the undermining of the morale, confidence in the government because it was a bilateral agreement, et cetera.

But, having said that, there were conditions built into that, one of which was met, many of which were not. And the drawdown to 2,500 proceeded because the fundamental condition of “they weren't attacking us” was being met.

The drawdown to 2,500, the impact that that had on the morale, the will of the Afghan military, I believe that it was a negative impact. But I don't know that yet. We need to go through all of our intelligence and analyze it in an after-action review. But I do think that was a contributing factor to the morale of the Afghan security forces.

Ms. SPEIER. General Milley, there has been a lot of talk about retaining 2,500 service members in Afghanistan. I think we all forget that there was a negotiation with the Taliban and we would have to get them to agree to allow 2,500 troops to remain in the country.

Having said that, in your view, would a small force of 2,500 be sufficient to achieve anything of value?

General MILLEY. I think that the 2,500 would have been at great risk in terms of the Taliban—I have no doubt that the Taliban would have reinitiated combat operations or attacks on U.S. forces and the 2,500 would have been at increased risk today.

What is the value of keeping the 2,500? It has as much to do with the morale and the keeping advisors with them and having the morale of the Afghan security forces and demonstrating confidence in the government.

Going to zero—it is clear to me that one of the big lessons learned we have to unpack from the military side is the mirror-imaging in the development of the Afghan military. And they became dependent upon our presence——

The CHAIRMAN. I apologize, but——

General MILLEY. Sorry.

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. The gentlelady's time has expired.

Mrs. Hartzler is recognized.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is imperative that we have this hearing today, because the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan, I believe, is the most significant foreign policy failure in a generation, and it is going to have ramifications for years to come. And so we need to get to the bottom of this.

And, first, I want to start off, to General Milley, a question, that you made a comment earlier that you would be—well, I wanted to ask you, did you tell General Li when you talked to him on the phone that, if we were going to attack China, that you would let him know ahead of time?

General MILLEY. *naudible.*

The CHAIRMAN. I am sorry. Could you get the microphone a little more in front of you there, make sure it is on.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Yes.

General MILLEY. So this is a longer conversation, and it is a VTC [video teleconference] with General Li. And there is a body of intelligence that leads up to this that was persuasive to Secretary Esper, myself, and many, many others that the Chinese thought, wrongly, that the United States was going to attack them. I am certain, guaranteed certain, that President Trump had no intent to attack. And it was my task to make sure I communicated that. And the purpose was to de-escalate—

Mrs. HARTZLER. You shared all that earlier. I understand. I just—

General MILLEY. And, as part of that—

Mrs. HARTZLER [continuing]. Wanted to say: Did you or did you not tell him that if we were going to attack you would let him know?

General MILLEY. As part of that conversation, I said: General Li, there is not going to be a war, there is not going to be an attack between great powers. And, if there was, the tensions would build up. There would be calls going back and forth from all kinds of senior officials. I said, hell, General Li, I will probably give you a call, but we are not going to attack you. Trust me, we are not going to attack you.

These are two great powers, and I am doing my best to transmit the President's intent, President Trump's intent, to ensure that the American people are protected from an incident that could escalate.

Mrs. HARTZLER. I understand your intent, but I think you articulating that, that you would tell him you would give him a call, I think is worthy of your resignation. I just think that is against our country, that you would give our number one adversary that information and tell him that.

But I would like to go on to General Austin and ask you a question. According to President Biden, he chose you to serve as his Defense Secretary primarily because you oversaw the full withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2011 from Iraq.

But, ironically, the 2011 Iraq withdrawal left similar conditions of governmental failure, the empowerment of regional terrorist organizations, most notably ISIS, and a humanitarian crisis of refugees and internally displaced people in desperate need of international emergency assistance.

The 2011 U.S. military exit from Iraq was short-lived, with President Obama redeploying U.S. forces into Iraq and Syria in 2014 to defeat the Islamic State.

Despite the administration's reassurances, it seems we may be on a similar trajectory in Afghanistan. After U.S. forces abandoned Bagram Air Base in July, the Taliban quickly took over the base and released 5,000 to 7,000 ISIS-K and Taliban prisoners.

When the last U.S. troops evacuated from Afghanistan on August 31, this administration handed over total government control to the Taliban, a known terrorist organization with leaders of the Haqqani terrorist network now in key positions within the Taliban's de facto government.

In recent weeks, the Taliban has deemed education irrelevant, barred women and girls from school and work, committed horrific retaliatory attacks on members of Afghan security forces and interpreters, and established suicide-bomber schools within the country.

We also know that al-Qaida and ISIS-K both have reestablished a presence within the country. Even before the U.S. withdrew, ISIS-K claimed credit for a suicide bombing, which you have mentioned took the lives of 13 service members on August 23.

So, Secretary Austin, is it true that the suicide bomber who attacked the Kabul airport on August 23 was a CIA prisoner at the Bagram Air Base whom the Taliban released after Biden's administration left Bagram in July?

Secretary AUSTIN. Let me just say a couple of things.

First, on why the President selected me or nominated me to be his Secretary of Defense, you would have to certainly go back to the President and ask him specifically why he did that, but it wasn't, I am sure, solely based upon my oversight of the evacuation of Iraq.

But I would point to you that there is a government in Iraq right now that is holding elections. The United States military is in Iraq—

Mrs. HARTZLER. I have 4 seconds. Could you answer my question? Was the suicide bomber—

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time—the gentlelady's time has expired.

Secretary AUSTIN. I will take the question for the record.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 145.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Gallego.

Mr. GALLEGO. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And generally I don't see eye-to-eye with many generals, and certainly General Milley and I have had disagreements, but I think what was said earlier was inappropriate in its nature, to accuse a member of the military that they would tip off our opposition in any way.

And I would like to give General Milley an opportunity to respond to that if he wants. If not, then I will gladly continue with my questions.

General MILLEY. As I said up front, I am not going to tip off any enemy to what the United States is going to do in an actual plan.



What I am trying to do is persuade an adversary that is heavily armed, that was clearly and unambiguously, according to intelligence reports, very nervous about our behavior and what was happening inside this country, and they were concerned that we, President Trump, was going to launch an attack. He was not going to launch an attack. I knew he wasn't going to launch an attack.

At the direction of the Secretary of Defense, I engaged the Chinese in order to persuade them to do that. I would never tip off any enemy to any kind of surprise thing that we were going to do. That is a different context than that conversation.

Mr. GALLEGO. Thank you, General.

Thank you to all three witnesses for taking the time to testify today.

Obviously, the resurgence of the Taliban is devastating, and it is difficult for many of us to watch. But, sadly, it unwinds the reality that, after 20 years, four U.S. Presidents, and billions of dollars, the conditions for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan could not be created.

That is why I believe President Biden made the right decision to withdraw. Staying in Afghanistan, a prolonged and stalled conflict, would have required more troops and more resources with no clear timeline. And I don't believe that we could ask our service men and women to give their lives for a mission that, in the end, wouldn't have been successful.

I do, like many of you here, applaud our troops for their tireless efforts to evacuate American citizens, our allies, Afghan citizens, and everyone threatened by the Taliban. And I still believe we have a moral imperative to help those who helped us in Afghanistan, and I and many of us will do everything in our power to continue to do that.

I have some questions to begin with.

General Milley, in your testimony, you noted that the speed and scale and scope of the collapse of the Afghan Army and the government was a surprise. Yet the Taliban was clearly gaining ground in June and especially July before the arrival—before their arrival in Kabul.

As we not only look to the future of Afghanistan but also think about our operations across the globe, what lessons specific to our intelligence gathering and analysis do you think DOD can learn from this experience? Do you think it is time for a larger rethink within the Department about how to assess intelligence in a very rapidly changing environment?

General MILLEY. I do. I think—I don't know the full answer yet, but I think that the primary reason we missed it was because we essentially cannot and we have yet to develop a really effective technique to read people's hearts, their will, their mind, their leadership sort of skills. Those are intangibles. You know, the moral is to the physical as three is to one in the conduct of war. So, very difficult to measure.

When we pull our advisors off of organizations at lower levels, you start missing that fingertip touch for that intangible of war. We can count the trucks and the guns and the units and all that. We can watch that from different techniques, but we can't measure a human heart from a machine. You have to be there to do that.

And I think that was probably one of the most significant contributing factors to missing the deterioration in the morale of the Afghan Army.

Mr. GALLEGO. And I guess one of the things that I am deeply disturbed by—and this can be either to, you know, General McKenzie or also Secretary Austin can jump in.

Speaking to a lot of service members, enlisted service members that have served for decades in and out of Afghanistan, they were always telling me something extremely different from what I was getting from reports from many of you generals here, that the Afghan Army was not ready, that they were not going to be sustainable on their own.

And so, you know, how did we miss that? How is it that a lot of, you know, 18-, 19-year-olds, mid-20-year-old E-5s were predicting this but yet some of our greatest minds, both on the civilian side and, you know, uniformed side, absolutely missed this?

And I think that is something that concerns me, because, you know, Afghanistan is done, but we are going to be, obviously, engaging all over the world. And this type of intelligence failure repeated could be, you know—could be an existential threat to the national security of the United States.

I don't know, General McKenzie, do you want to try that?

General MCKENZIE. Sure. So I think that is a—I think it is a reasonable criticism. We will have to take a look at how we actually remain connected to the people who are down at the advisory level.

I think that is something that I—I am conflicted by that as well, I will be very candid with you. And we will certainly take a look at that, because I have heard that same strain myself. It is harder to get the truth as you become more senior. We perhaps need to look at ways to ensure that that is conveyed in a more rapid and effective way.

So I will accept that criticism.

Mr. GALLEGO. Okay.

Thank you for you guys' testimony.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Scott is recognized.

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, gentlemen, I need your help fairly immediately on two issues, one of which can't be discussed in this setting, but the other one can.

And there are 145 Afghan Air Force personnel in Tajikistan. They flew 16 aircraft into that country on August the 13th. It is now September the 29th. We need to get them out of Tajikistan.

These are people who trained with us, they fought with us, they did everything that we asked of them. And we have gotten no assistance at all from the State Department to move them. And I am asking all three of you for your help in addressing the issue.

Secretary Austin, we need the help.

Secretary AUSTIN. Acknowledged, sir. And we will get with State right away to see if we can move this forward.

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you.

Secretary AUSTIN. I share your concern, sir.

Mr. SCOTT. And thank you.

And I do want to mention this, and I think this is where the frustration of every member of the committee comes in, that we had people in Uzbekistan. The State Department ignored them, as well, and said they would get to them when they got to them. But we have a lady in Tajikistan that is 9 months pregnant that is one of our pilots. And we need help removing them.

We also need to make it clear to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan that that is U.S. military equipment and it is not to be returned to Afghanistan. And so I would appreciate if we could put that in writing to both of those countries, that the equipment belongs to the U.S., not to Afghanistan.

And, you know, with that said, I appreciate your commitment to help.

I do want to mention one thing, Secretary. You and the State Department were using the number 124,000. That 124,000 is U.S. and NATO allies, correct?

Secretary AUSTIN. That is correct.

Mr. SCOTT. We had provided a list of names of people who were P1, P2 SIVs to Central Command, to everybody we knew to get it to, and yet our people were not allowed into HKIA. They were at the gates, but they were not allowed into HKIA, even though they were on the manifest. And, yet, so many people came out of the country that appeared not to be on the manifest.

So how was the determination made in who got on a plane and who didn't get on a plane?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, I can't speak to the exact processes that were—that existed inside of HKIA at the time, in terms of how people were sorted out. I can tell you that we tried very, very hard to get everybody that we possibly could out, especially American citizens and SIV applicants that had worked with us.

We also owed it to our partners to help them get some of their people out as well. And they helped us with some security issues and other things while we were there. So——

Mr. SCOTT. Secretary, I am close on time, but I will tell you, I do think that that is a question that is going to linger and that the committee wants answers on. Because we have P1, P2 SIVs that were left behind, and other people that were not or should not have been on the manifest seem to have gotten out.

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, I will just tell you that we are going to continue to work to try to get as many out as we can. In the last 48 hours, I think we have brought out an additional 63 American citizens and 169 legal permanent residents. So we are going to continue to work this.

Mr. SCOTT. General McKenzie, you answered a lot of the questions that I had in your written testimony. You did say that in April is when you were given, effectively, a change of mission to the 650. What date in April was that?

General MCKENZIE. I believe it was on the 15th—14th——

Mr. SCOTT. Fifteenth?

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. 15th.

Mr. SCOTT. So mid-April?

General MCKENZIE. Yes.

Mr. SCOTT. When did we inform our partner forces that we had a change in mission and that we were going to retrograde from the 2,500 down to 650?

General MCKENZIE. That followed immediately. And that was through—

Mr. SCOTT. Immediately.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. CENTCOM's headquarters on the ground—

Mr. SCOTT. Okay.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. Through the process of outreach both to President Ghani and to—

Mr. SCOTT. Okay.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. Other members. It might have taken a couple of days for that—

Mr. SCOTT. Okay.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. Process, but it was not kept from them. There was no—

Mr. SCOTT. Okay. It wasn't a secret.

Very quick. Was the 650 included in the 2,500, or is the 650 in addition to the 2,500 number you talked about?

General MCKENZIE. The 650 were different capabilities than the—

Mr. SCOTT. Okay.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. 2,500.

Mr. SCOTT. So it would have been a total of 3,150.

General MCKENZIE. No, no, no. When we went from 2,500 down to an effective zero, we said we would keep 650—

The CHAIRMAN. They went from 2,500—

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. At the Embassy.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired. They went from 2,500 to 650, as I understand it, on their way to—

General MCKENZIE. That is correct, sir, but the capabilities were different. They were different forces to do different things.

The CHAIRMAN. Crucial point. Thank you.

Mr. SCOTT. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Moulton is recognized.

Mr. MOULTON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley and Secretary Austin, my first question to you at our hearing on June 23 was: Why have you not started the evacuation of our allies already? You responded that we have a, quote, "moral imperative to save the Afghans who work by our side."

Secretary Austin, you said earlier today that moving too slow with the evacuation would put our troops at risk.

So I want to know what you did personally, all three of you, between that June 23 hearing and August 15, when Kabul fell, to meet that moral imperative.

Now, I hope it is a long list of things, so I will take that for the record.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 145.]

Mr. MOULTON. But let me ask you this: Do you believe you did enough?

Chairman Milley.

General MILLEY. I do. I think that we provided the advice necessary at the time. Yes.

Mr. MOULTON. Secretary Austin.

Secretary AUSTIN. I think you heard me say in my opening comments that we engaged State early on to provide input to their decision-making process on when to move the SIVs—

Mr. MOULTON. I understand that, Mr. Secretary. You said that you and the State Department followed the advice of the Ghani government that taking out SIVs would precipitate a government collapse, yet the vast majority of these heroes weren't even working for us or the government any more because they supported a force of up to 100,000 U.S. troops over 20 years and we only had 2,500 troops left. So why on Earth did you trust President Ghani?

Secretary AUSTIN. Again, not my decision. To your point, I had input to that decision-making process, but it is not as if I was influenced by President Ghani.

Mr. MOULTON. I understand, Mr. Secretary. So you have said this repeatedly that this is State's responsibility. What responsibility do you have for the Afghans who stood shoulder to shoulder with our troops or how many do you commit to getting out by the end of the year?

Secretary AUSTIN. I have a responsibility to get out as many as I can over time. And how many do I commit to getting out? Everyone that I can.

Mr. MOULTON. General McKenzie, there are reports that DOD reduced air strikes as early as May when troops were just beginning to withdraw and then had to ramp them back up after the Taliban gained ground. There are also reports that you sat down with the Taliban leadership in August, drew a circle around Kabul, and told them that if the Taliban fighters went inside that circle, they would get hit with U.S. air strikes.

So why did you let up on the Taliban, first at the beginning of May and then at the end of our withdrawal in August right when we should have been hitting them harder to give Americans and Afghan partners time to evacuate.

General MCKENZIE. Representative, the report about me meeting with the Taliban and telling them if they came inside a 30-kilometer circle around Kabul is simply factually incorrect.

Mr. MOULTON. Okay. What about May?

General MCKENZIE. In May, as through the rest of our redeployment period, we continued strikes on the Taliban. Those strikes, however, were limited to support of Afghan forces in close combat. We were not striking deep and we did not have a tremendous amount of resources compared to resources that we have had in the past. So those strikes, while effective in certain tactical situations, at no time were enough to change the strategic calculus of the campaign.

Mr. MOULTON. General McKenzie, you went from 2,500 troops in Afghanistan in April to 650 in July and then turned around and put 5,000 back into Kabul. You have said repeatedly that you personally believe the Afghan Government would fall if we didn't maintain a certain number of troops in country. So why didn't you plan for an evacuation and leave enough troops on the ground to conduct it?

General MCKENZIE. So let's be very clear: The evacuation has to be ordered by the Department of State. The drawdown of U.S. forces was ordered by the President in April and completed in July. The noncombatant evacuation operation is a separate mission, and it was not completely under the control of the Department—

Mr. MOULTON. So you are going to fall back on the bureaucracy, the divide between DOD and State—

General MCKENZIE. Well, Representative, I am going to fall back on the orders—

Mr. MOULTON [continuing]. All of those troops out and then had to put more back in?

General MCKENZIE. I am going to fall back on the orders that I received, Representative.

Mr. MOULTON. Secretary Austin, you presided, in part, over the withdrawal of forces from Iraq, though I know you at times requested more troops on the ground. Two years later we had to send thousands of troops back into Iraq. Do you believe we will ever have to send troops back into Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, I certainly won't engage in a hypothetical. I would just say that obviously that is a decision that has to be made by the President and, you know, while I won't rule anything out, I would just say it is not preordained that we will go back or have to go back into Afghanistan, again. But if we do, the military will provide good credible options to be able to do that and to be effective.

Mr. MOULTON. Gentlemen, you and your predecessors asked tens of thousands of young Americans to fight in Afghanistan, and they did. And thousands died. Now you keep saying that our troops should be proud of that. Where here is a question sent to me by one of those soldiers. "In twenty years our troops on the ground never lost a single battle, yet we lost the war—"

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. MOULTON [continuing]. So what is left to be proud of?

The CHAIRMAN. Seth, we are trying to run a meeting here, and if you wanted to read that letter, you should have read in the first 5 minutes when you had time. So I think it is something we need to hear and it is something we should have heard during the 5 minutes that you had. The gentleman's time has expired.

Ms. Stefanik is recognized. She is appearing virtually.

Ms. Stefanik, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. STEFANIK. Thank you, Chairman Smith. I want to first start off by saying that I am honored and privileged to represent Fort Drum, home of the 10th Mountain Division the most deployed division in the U.S. Army since 9/11, and I want to take this opportunity to thank every soldier, every service men and women for deployment after deployment after the past two decades.

The North Country, this committee, and this country are forever grateful for your service and sacrifice of both you and your families.

I want to direct my question—the first question—to any of you on the panel today and it is about the evacuation and force protection efforts at the Hamid Karzai International Airport. Force protection efforts were made specifically as the ISIS-K threat intelligence came in before and after the suicide bombing at the airport.

General MCKENZIE. Representative, first of all, the 10th Mountain was a key part of our defense there at the airport and I certainly appreciate their contribution to it. Force protection is something we balanced all the time against the requirement to let people come in and be processed and get on the airplanes. So we looked at that every day and, as you know, those two things are in tension and you have to balance them every day. We had over 300 credible intelligence reports of ISIS-K plans to attack the airport.

Turns out that they were able to carry out one successful suicide vest attack. They also launched rockets at us. There were many other attacks that we were able to either vector Taliban elements onto prevent or perhaps the Taliban were able to prevent those by the outer cordon that they established. But force protection was a key thing that we balanced throughout the entire operation and we thought the risk was very high at all time, again, principally from ISIS-K. And I will pause there, ma'am.

Ms. STEFANIK. I am going to follow up. We depended upon the Taliban for security to get the evacuees and Americans behind enemy lines into the airport. Did the United States or coalition forces provide money, any form of payment, or assistance to the Taliban to expedite the evacuation of Americans as the security environment in Kabul deteriorated?

General MCKENZIE. No, we did not. What we did was, we asked the Taliban to establish a cordon, about 1,000 meters, 1 kilometer, beyond each of the gates where we could reduce the number of people that were coming down and showing up at the gates so we wouldn't have the possibility of a mass attack. They did that. They were not compensated or rewarded in any way for that. It was a very pragmatic, businesslike discussion. I don't trust the Taliban. I didn't trust them then; I don't trust them now. So that was the way we approached it.

Ms. STEFANIK. Thank you, General McKenzie. And Secretary Austin, I just want to get the Department on record in addition to General McKenzie's answer. So there was no form of payment by the U.S. or coalition forces at any time during the evacuation to the Taliban?

Secretary AUSTIN. To my knowledge, there was none.

Ms. STEFANIK. And Chairman Milley?

General MILLEY. I have no knowledge of any money that transmitted from any element of the United States Government to the Taliban whatsoever.

Ms. STEFANIK. My next question is, we are 20 years from the attacks on 9/11 and I obviously am from the State of New York and it is a very, very solemn occasion for all Americans, but particularly New Yorkers every year as we commemorate that date. I would like to get your assessment, is the terrorist threat from Afghanistan greater today or lesser than it was pre-9/11?

I will start with you, Chairman Milley.

General MILLEY. I think right this minute it is lesser than it was in 9/11; however, I think the conditions are set or could be set—and I testified to this yesterday and I will say it again. I have said it in public many times—the conditions could be set for a reconstitution of al-Qaida and/or ISIS.

And I gave some specific times in my statement, and I stand by those. I think it is a real possibility in a not too distant future—6, 12, 18, 24, 36 months that timeframe—for reconstitution of al-Qaida or ISIS and it is our job now, under different conditions, but it is our job to continue to protect American citizens against attacks from Afghanistan.

Ms. STEFANIK. Secretary Austin, your response to that question?

Secretary AUSTIN. I would agree with General Milley that al-Qaida has been degraded over time. Now, terrorist organizations seek ungoverned spaces so that they can train and equip and thrive and so there is clearly a possibility that that can happen here going forward. Our goal is to maintain a laser-like focus on this so that it doesn't happen—

The CHAIRMAN. And I apologize. The gentlelady's time has expired.

Mr. Carbajal is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to all our witnesses that are here today. And I want to start by just, you know, one of the things I like about this committee is that we are pretty bipartisan, but every once in a while, the partisan beast comes out and I am sure it happens from both sides of the aisle.

This is my third term here. The administration from the other party not in power is oftentimes—depending what perspective you come to it, one is doing everything right and the other one is doing everything wrong, and I think it is important to shed light on things irrespective of the partisanship.

One can argue that the agreement that President Trump reached with the terrorist Taliban in February 2020 was less than perfect and we should call that that from both sides of the aisle, and we can also argue that the exit from—the withdrawal was less than perfect. I certainly can say that I supported the Trump administration and the Biden administration in its goal to withdraw from Afghanistan, but, again, it has been less than perfect.

And so for me, I just want to shed a little bit of light and refresh some of the memory on some of the numbers going back a little ways.

So General Milley, I want to make sure that I understand our troop levels since the Doha Agreement that was reached with the terrorist Taliban, signed by President Trump between February 2020 when the agreement with the Taliban was signed to January 2021, and how many troops did the United States withdraw from Afghanistan—how many troops were withdrawn from January 2017 to January 2021?

General MILLEY. 12,600 U.S. troops when the Doha Agreement was signed on that day.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Can you repeat that, again?

General MILLEY. 12,600 U.S. troops on 29 February 2020 with 8,000 NATO and 10,500 contractors, and the contractors are particularly important here. With respect to on inauguration day, I am showing 3,500 U.S. troops. That is the 2,500 advisers and then there was some additional enablers that were over there; 3,500 U.S. troops on 20 January, 5,400 NATO, and 6,300 contractors in Afghanistan on that day.



Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you. And I only draw attention to that to show the withdrawal that started many years before. Secretary Austin and General Milley, over the course of the 20 years in Afghanistan, the United States Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction estimates that the United States spent \$83 billion equipping and training the Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces which included almost \$10 billion in aircraft and vehicles.

We all saw the unexpected and appalling rate of how quickly the Afghan military folded under pressure from the Taliban.

What do U.S. train and equip efforts in Afghanistan suggest about security cooperation operations going forward and what aspects about train and equip efforts do you think the Department should reassess?

Secretary AUSTIN. I will turn it over to General Milley here very quickly, but I think we should reassess everything soup to nuts. I think we put a valiant effort into providing the Afghans with a great capability.

And at the end of the day that capability was not employed because the security forces fractured and essentially evaporated. So we need to look at ourselves to see what we did and whether or not that is the right thing to do going forward.

General MILLEY. In my view, Congressman, I think when we do security force assistance, one of the things we have to guard against is mirror imaging. I think from the very beginning with the army, the Afghan Army, we wanted to create them in the image of the U.S. Army. I think a success story is the commandos with the special forces piece, but the broader Army became a mirror image, [inaudible]. That is one point.

The second point is the police forces that was assigned under the Bonn agreement in 2002 to the Germans. The Germans wanted to make polizei and that sort of thing.

And the third and last point is they became dependent upon us, contractors, U.S. air support, et cetera, and we have to avoid dependency on U.S. forces.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Dr. DesJarlais is recognized.

Dr. DESJARLAIS. Thank you, Chairman. And thank you all for being here today to answer our questions. I have had so many questions come from constituents in Tennessee that there is no way that we could even begin to get through them in 5 minutes, but let's jump right in.

General Milley, on Bagram, in your professional military opinion, which facility, HKIA or Bagram Airfield, would have been most efficient in conducting the evacuation that we were forced to do?

General MILLEY. HKIA. And there is a reason for that. The majority, the vast majority of those personnel that we expected to have to conduct a NEO with were located in Kabul. That is point one. Point two is, we were directed to maintain an Embassy open and also the international zone for the other allied nations.

So we had to do it out of HKIA. Bagram would have been a plus, but it would have required exceptional levels of resources to do that.

Dr. DESJARLAIS. Okay. I think all of you testified yesterday that it wasn't a matter of if the Afghan Army would fail and the Taliban would take over, it was a matter of when. You were all shocked by the rate at which it happened. The billions of dollars in equipment that was left behind has been under much scrutiny.

Knowing that they were going to fail, why were more steps not taken to secure that military equipment or destroy it? Knowing that now it is a well-equipped Taliban army.

Secretary AUSTIN. So the number is a big number. So let me unpack that a little bit. First of all, the \$84 billion included all of the——

Dr. DESJARLAIS. I understand that. Let's just cut right to the equipment that was left behind. Why was so much left behind? Aircraft? MRAPs [Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles]? Weapons? Why was that there when you knew they were going to fail?

Secretary AUSTIN. The other thing I would say is that all of the equipment that we had that we were using, as I stated earlier, was evacuated by General Miller. Now, the reason that the Afghans had the equipment they had is because we wanted them to be successful and they could not be successful without the appropriate——

Dr. DESJARLAIS. If they are watching these hearings yesterday and today, I am guessing that they probably feel like they were played as fools because you all just said you knew they were going to fail. So here we have an army we built up, we used them until we didn't need them any more to accomplish Biden's objective and Trump's objective of getting out of Afghanistan; however, it went horribly wrong as we can probably all agree to.

General Milley, you started today and talked about your commitment to your office. You are the principal military advisor to the President, correct?

General MILLEY. That is correct.

Dr. DESJARLAIS. And that is to President Trump and President Biden?

General MILLEY. That is correct. And the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Council.

Dr. DESJARLAIS. Okay. And Senator Blackburn yesterday asked you about your conversations with several book writers and you were fine with giving them your opinion and I think you said that you had a rather blunt forward phone call with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi?

General MILLEY. True.

Dr. DESJARLAIS. And you were—she was concerned over the safety of nuclear weapons?

General MILLEY. Correct.

Dr. DESJARLAIS. Okay. In a transcript obtained from CNN Political, Woodward and Costa quoted Pelosi as saying—and this was to you: “What I am saying to you is that they couldn't even stop him from an assault on the Capitol. Who even knows what else he may do? And is there anybody in charge at the White House who is doing anything but kissing his fat butt all over this?”

Do you recall that?

General MILLEY. I haven't seen the transcript.

Dr. DESJARLAIS. I think that would be firmly imprinted on my mind—

General MILLEY. Well, I would just say there was a lot of disparaging comments made and my focus was to assure her that the nuclear system and weapons were under control.

Dr. DESJARLAIS. Okay. And according to Costa and Woodward, she went on to say, you know, he is crazy. He has been crazy for a long time to which they say—and I am sure you haven't had a chance to read the book yet—Milley responded, Madam Speaker, I agree with you on everything.

If you are the principal advisor to the President and she said that to you, do you think that you were doing service to a President by agreeing with the Speaker that your Commander in Chief is crazy?

General MILLEY. I actually said—I actually said I am not qualified to assess the mental health of the President. What I am agreeing to is that we have to have a secure nuclear system.

Dr. DESJARLAIS. Have you had any conversations with the Speaker or any of our foreign leaders about our current President's mental capacity? We have a physician right here on the panel who was the personal physician to the prior three presidents who said President Biden should take a mental competency test and we see it in the press, his lack of ability to answer questions.

Have you had any conversations with anybody concerning his ability to carry out a nuclear order or any other serious engagements?

General MILLEY. No. And my answer would be the same. I am not qualified to evaluate a President's mental health or your mental health or anybody's mental health. I am not a doctor.

Dr. DESJARLAIS. But you were concerned about Trump? You said you were concerned about him when you made the call to China?

General MILLEY. No, I didn't. What I said to the call to China was I guarantee you that President Trump is not going to attack you in a surprise attack. I was carrying out his intent, President Trump's intent in order to protect the American people—

The CHAIRMAN. And the gentleman's time has expired.

General MILLEY [continuing]. To prevent an escalation or an incident.

The CHAIRMAN. That was helpful.

Mr. Brown is recognized.

Mr. BROWN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Each of my questions have been asked and answered this morning. Therefore, I will use this seldom opportunity with the two most senior officials of the Pentagon to make a statement. We cannot ask our men and women in uniform to fight forever wars and I commend President Biden for recognizing this reality in bringing our troops home. But we know the threats faced in our country aren't solely on distant battlefields. For decades we have grappled with extremist ideologies within our own civilian communities and our military ranks, and there are no signs that we are winning this fight.

As FBI Director Wray testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee earlier this year, January 6th was not an isolated event. Director Wray stated the problem of domestic extremism has been metastasizing across the country for a long time now and is not

going away anytime soon. We know now that 12 percent of those charged in the riot on the Capitol had military experience with at least one indicted rioter on active military duty. That is well above the participant patient rate of adults in the military. The last time you both were before this committee, you spoke about the issue of extremism in our Armed Forces.

General Milley, you stated from private to general there is no room for extremist behavior in the United States military and I commend you, Secretary Austin, for ordering the extremism stand down this past February to deal with the threat. You recognize this issue within the ranks, but I am gravely concerned that too many of our military leaders do not.

In April, at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, STRATCOM [United States Strategic Command] Commander Admiral Richard said he was, quote, very confident that the number of extremists in my force is at zero. And at the same hearing, General Dickinson, Commander of Space Command, echoed that assessment claiming, "In the formations that I have had throughout my career, I have not seen that. So I believe it is close to zero in my organization if not zero." This ignores the clear evidence on this issue.

A 2019 Military Times survey found more than one-third of Active Duty service members have witnessed White nationalism or ideologically driven racism in the ranks. You yourself, Secretary Austin, spoke of your experiences with extremism while you were in uniform.

The Army's CID's [Criminal Investigation Division's] 2020 gang and domestic extremist activity threat assessment found a 66 percent increase in gang or domestic extremist activity from the previous year and then in October of 2020, a Pentagon report to Congress detailed how domestic extremists actively recruit military personnel.

We have a problem, the scope of which we don't fully understand, but Democrats and Republicans have asked the Department for a definition of extremism, improved screening processes, and a status report on implementation of recommendations. You still have not yet received it—We have not received it, which is why just last week the House passed the fiscal year 2022 NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act] giving DOD additional authorities and resources to counter extremism in the Department.

So I was extremely disappointed to see the administration's statement of policy which opposes the countering extremism provisions in the NDAA, citing overburdensome training and data collection requirements, not a single sentence suggests on how to improve the provisions just opposition to Congress.

Congress is about to authorize and appropriate \$768 billion to the Department, nearly \$25 billion more than the President's budget request, yet the administration views additional data collection and training requirements to counter the threat of extremism as onerous.

We heard the same pushback when it came to addressing sexual assault in the military for 10 years before the Department finally realized it was failing and that it needed greater tools. And we've documented systemic racism under the Uniform Code of Military

Justice for at least 50 years, yet the Department is making little, if any, progress to address that.

Whether it is sexual assault or racial injustice, the Department repeatedly tells Congress we can handle it, commanders are responsible, we are studying it, we are ready to fight tonight. We cannot wait years, let alone decades, in the face of obstinance from the Department before meeting the challenges of extremism in the Armed Forces. The time to address it is now.

As this hearing reveals, there are many important issues for our military to address, in addition to the ongoing American Afghan evacuations and anticipated over-the-horizon operations. We have got to care for our troops and the families and that includes combating extremism in your formations in a way that we can take care of our troops and secure the Nation.

So please stop fighting Congress. Partner with us and accept the tools that you need to fix the problem. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I yield back the balance of my time.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Mr. Kelly is recognized.

Mr. KELLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all for being here and, Chairman Milley, I just want to start, I understand the conversation with the Chinese leader. What I don't understand is you going to the press, Chairman Milley, and that disappointments me that you talked to the press about that. None of the other stuff, I think, you were—I am okay with that; I am not okay with you talking to the press or authors.

I want to talk just a little bit about Bagram. There is two runways at Bagram and only one at HKIA. Is that correct?

General MCKENZIE. That is correct.

Mr. KELLY. So there is strategic value to two runways versus one. You would agree with that?

General MCKENZIE. It is entirely dependent on the mission.

Mr. KELLY. And the other thing is, there is standoff versus an urban environment and there are strategic advantages and disadvantages to that. You would agree with that, General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. That is correct.

Mr. KELLY. I want to talk a little bit about the strike on August the 29th, I think. Who set the rules of engagement? Where were the rules of engagement? At what level?

General MCKENZIE. So under the rules of engagement, we would need to get into the details in a classified setting. We had—

Mr. KELLY. No, I don't want to know what the rules of engagement were; I want to know whose rules of engagement were they.

General MCKENZIE. The U.S. military's rules of engagement.

Mr. KELLY. Was that President Biden's? Was that Secretary Austin's? Was that CENTCOM's?

General MCKENZIE. They are wholly neutral as to the party in power. It has nothing to do with the rules of engagement.

Mr. KELLY. Okay. And I want to refer to a New York Times article on March 3rd described a policy change of the Biden administration that placed greater restrictions on drone strikes and raids conducted outside conventional battlefield zones. Previously authorized by ground commanders, these operations now require White House approval.

Did the strike on August 28th or 29th, the one that killed 10 innocents, did it require Presidential approval prior to the strike?

General MCKENZIE. No, it did not.

Mr. KELLY. Okay. At what level, who was the approval authority for that strike?

General MCKENZIE. The target engagement authority was forward in the theater at the over-the-horizon cell that oversees those activities.

Mr. KELLY. At what level? One-star? Two-star? Three-star?

General MCKENZIE. Flag officer level.

Mr. KELLY. Flag officer level. Okay. And at what point, General McKenzie—and this is for all three of you—at what point did you know that the strike was bad; that it hit civilians?

General MCKENZIE. So we knew the strike hit civilians within 4 or 5 hours after the strike occurred and U.S. Central Command released a press release saying that. We did not know, though, that the target of the strike was, in fact, an error—a mistake until some time later. It took us a few days to run that down, but we knew pretty soon——

Mr. KELLY. Secretary Austin, when did you know it was a bad strike that killed civilians?

Secretary AUSTIN. As soon as General McKenzie reported that there were civilians that had been injured.

Mr. KELLY. So 4 or 5 hours timeframe. That is all I need.

Secretary AUSTIN. Typically, as soon as that happens, we investigate. We begin an investigation.

Mr. KELLY. When did you know that civilians were killed in that strike? That is my question. It is really easy. It is a time. It doesn't take much to answer that.

Secretary AUSTIN. Right. Several hours after that.

Mr. KELLY. General Milley, same.

General MILLEY. Same thing.

Mr. KELLY. Okay. So I am assuming there is 15 sixes [O-6 rank officers] at multiple levels that will get to see those investigations. There is a lot of questions I have that have to be in a classified environment, but I hope that you guys know I also sit on a different committee that has different insight to this and I think it is important that we know who authorized, at what level, and that we take accountability.

Listen, I have made strikes. I have lived under rules of engagement. I have had rules of engagements I liked and didn't like. I have had to make hard decisions. I hope most of them are right, but I understand. I don't want to blame some O-6 or some O-5.

I want to make sure we get the level and that the rules of engagement were proper and that they were followed at whatever level who didn't follow those or either wrote those because that just—I think the strike was done to show we had over-the-horizon capabilities and we didn't because we reported a secondary explosion that was not. We reported all kind of stuff.

Now my next question is the other strike. Who did we kill?

General MCKENZIE. I prefer to pass you that name in a classified setting.

Mr. KELLY. Okay. Can you tell me, was it an HVT [high-value target] or just a low-level terrorist?

General MCKENZIE. I think it was a facilitator and it was a good strike. We got someone who, while not directly involved in the attack on Abbey Gate on the 26th, certainly fell within that circle—

Mr. KELLY. In a classified I would like to know that. And then my next question is, I just don't understand. I guess maybe I went to Union Public High School of 1,100. My math—11 to 15,000 U.S. citizens, 5,400 out—that leaves thousands, not hundreds, left that want to get out.

And I know for a fact every office here we had people calling us wanting to get out, U.S. citizens, that were not allowed to get in the gate or were kicked off the base or were not allowed out. And with that, I just ask, guys, we got to get our folks home.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman yields back.

Mr. Khanna is recognized.

Mr. KHANNA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley, I want to first thank you for your 42 years of service, for your principled commitment to civilian rule, for your commitment to military-to-military communication that kept this country safe for three decades during the Cold War, and for the sacrifice and patriotism that you and your family have shown. As a son of immigrants, I am in your family's debt. And I want to thank the three of you for ending America's longest war and executing the largest airlift in history.

Now Secretary Austin, you have testified that had 2,500 troops stayed past the deadline, the military would likely have needed reinforcements and I want to just make this clear: The choice for President Biden wasn't zero troops or 2,500 troops. It was zero troops or potentially many more troops.

General Milley, just briefly, would you agree that at some point more than 2,500 troops would have been needed had the Taliban engaged in offensive strikes?

General MILLEY. I am sorry. There is a reasonable prospect we would have had to increase forces past 2,500 given that the Taliban were very likely was going to start attacking us. And there was a range of forces. We are really talking about 2,500 to 4,500, in that range.

Mr. KHANNA. Appreciate that. I want to talk about the strike that killed civilians, and I know—look, I think our military cares more about the loss of civilian life than any military in the world, any superpower ever in history. And that is why I think we ought to talk about this candidly and I brought pictures of the seven children who were killed, along with the three adults, to remind us that this is not what America wants; this is something that we need to prevent in the future.

Press Secretary Kirby who did a fine job during those 10 days said, you would support evacuating these family members as they have requested and resettling them in the U.S. Is that correct, Secretary Austin?

Secretary AUSTIN. It is.

Mr. KHANNA. My question is, can we get the family and the co-workers evacuated now and brought to safety? I get the legal

hoops, but could that happen after? Can we just get them into the U.S. or some safe place?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, we will continue to work through State Department channels to engage the family and if they desire to leave, then we will certainly do everything we can to facilitate getting them out.

Mr. KHANNA. I hope we can just expedite that and expedite the compensation. It is the moral thing to do, it is the right thing to do, it is how America conducts itself. And so I hope you will take that into consideration.

General McKenzie, I admire and respect your leadership, but I want to see how we can improve the intelligence to prevent these kind of strikes in the future. One aspect you said is that there was a white Toyota Corolla that led to the attacks. I am sure you are aware, is there any car more common than a Toyota Corolla in Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. It is a very common car. Of course, there were many other factors that went into that decision, not simply the fact that it was a Toyota Corolla.

Mr. KHANNA. According to the Stars and Stripes, roughly 90 percent of cars registered in Afghanistan have been Corollas. One of the other things that concern me is, based on my reading and obviously you know more, the Corolla was parked next to a U.S. registered California-based NGO [non-governmental organization] that was delivering humanitarian assistance. And I guess the question is, did the DOD know about the NGO in advance of the strike?

General MCKENZIE. I would prefer since that is under investigation now, I would like to defer that question.

Mr. KHANNA. I would just hope that we can make sure going forward that our Department will cross-check its intelligence to make sure that aid organizations are on no-strike lists. I assume that if there is an aid organization or hospital, those are on no-strike lists?

General MCKENZIE. Representative, as are mosques, which are often used by ISIS-K as training sites as well.

Mr. KHANNA. Right. Again, I believe that our military goes through extraordinary lengths to prevent this. It is not to try to be an indictment of anyone; I just want to make sure we continue to improve the processes and that we do right by the families who suffered this unspeakable tragedy. Thank you, again, to the three of you for your leadership and thank you to everyone who served.

Regardless of one's view in Afghanistan, I find the attacks on your integrity and patriotism to be a dishonor to this committee and a dishonor to your service.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. The gentleman's time has expired.

I have to ask the witnesses a question. We have a little complicated scheduling thing going on here. We are scheduled to have votes at 1:30-ish. My plan would be to, if we could go to that period, get through that, take the break then, but it has been a while. If you need a break earlier, we can take a 15-minute break at 12:30.

And I wish there was an easier way to do this, but totally up to you. Would you like to break at 12:30 or would you like to just go until votes?



Secretary AUSTIN. I think we are good for right now, Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. If you need a break just, you know——

Secretary AUSTIN. We will fire the star cluster.

The CHAIRMAN. We all have overprotective aides who are like pounding on us that they need a break, they need a break. So I just figured I would ask. So we will proceed and I appreciate that.

Mr. Gallagher is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Thank you.

General McKenzie, the Washington Post reported on August 28th that the Taliban offered to allow the U.S. military to take responsibility for security in Kabul. Did you meet with Mullah Baradar to discuss such an offer?

General MCKENZIE. I met with Mullah Baradar in Doha on 15 August to pass a message to him that we were withdrawing and if they attempted to disrupt that withdrawal, we would punish them severely for that.

Mr. GALLAGHER. But did he offer to allow you to have security over all of Kabul?

General MCKENZIE. As part of that conversation, he said, well, why don't you just take security for all of Kabul. That was not why I was there. That was not my instruction. And we did not have the resources to undertake that mission.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Did you convey the offer, however, to the President?

General MCKENZIE. The offer was made in the presence of the President's Special Representative to Afghanistan.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Do you know if the SRAP [U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan] conveyed it to the President?

General MCKENZIE. I don't know, but it was conveyed to my chain of command.

Mr. GALLAGHER. So who made the decision to turn down the Taliban offer to allow the U.S. military to secure Kabul and put the safety of our troops in the hands of the Taliban?

General MCKENZIE. I did not consider that to be a formal offer and it was not the reason why I was there, so I did not pursue it. So if someone actually made a decision that would have been me.

Mr. GALLAGHER. So we don't know if it was conveyed to the President? We don't know——

General MCKENZIE. I do know it was conveyed to my chain of command.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Okay. In military terms, what do you call the retreat of military forces under security provided by and with the permission of enemy forces?

General MCKENZIE. Don't know. I have never done one of those operations.

Mr. GALLAGHER. I think you just did one of those operations.

General MCKENZIE. I disagree.

Mr. GALLAGHER. You disagree. So you did not withdraw forces from Afghanistan after negotiation with the Taliban?

General MCKENZIE. That is correct. We did not do that.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Okay. So this would not be a conditional surrender, in your opinion?

General MCKENZIE. This would not be a conditional surrender.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Well, what would you describe the operation?

General MCKENZIE. I would describe it as a noncombatant evacuation operation that we conducted with our own timing and with our own forces, and we warned the Taliban that if they interfered with that operation, we would strike them hard. They chose not to interfere with that operation.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Okay. So you are saying the meeting you had in Doha was just to let the Taliban know this is what we are doing, you know, take or leave it, but you were operating at that point under the agreement we had negotiated with the Taliban for surrender, right, the Doha Agreement?

General MCKENZIE. I was there to tell the Taliban that we were conducting a noncombatant evacuation operation.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Wait, wait. Not a NEO by DOD definition does not definitionally include the evacuation of combatants. You were also evacuating combatants. So the NEO was part of the operation?

General MCKENZIE. Actually, no, you are wrong. When I met with the Taliban on 15 August, we had completed the withdrawal operation. Further forces that went in were forces that were core to the NEO operation and, in fact, DOD doctrine would include the insertion and extraction of combatant forces as part of a NEO operation—

Mr. GALLAGHER. But what do we call the withdrawal of combatants whether it happened before—

General MCKENZIE. It can be called a retrograde, it can be called a withdrawal.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Was it in your orders, though? What were you tasked with doing?

General MCKENZIE. I was tasked to conduct a noncombatant evacuation operation.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Which you just said happened after you had withdrawn forces?

General MCKENZIE. Largely, that is correct.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Okay. And you didn't get tasking—what did the tasking to withdrawl the forces call that operation?

General MCKENZIE. I would have to go back and take a look at it. I believe it was a withdrawal.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Withdrawl. Okay. Which I believe the definition is a repositioning of forces. I would call it a conditional surrender. I guess we will have to check the dictionary definition on that. Just to go to something that General Milley said before, has al-Qaida sworn bayat to the Taliban?

General MCKENZIE. I believe there is a deep relationship between the Taliban—

Mr. GALLAGHER. But have they sworn bayat? Just yes or no.

General MCKENZIE. I couldn't answer that question for you right now.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Oh. I believe General Milley said it before. Has the Taliban renounced the previous oath that al-Qaida swore?

General MCKENZIE. The Taliban and al-Qaida have a very close relationship, and I do not expect the Taliban to seriously interfere with their basing and repositioning in Afghanistan, which is, I think, the question you are asking.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Okay. Yeah. Let me get at it a different way. The new interior minister for the Taliban Government is Sirajuddin Haqqani. He is a known al-Qaida associate. Is there any evidence that he or the Haqqani network has broken with al-Qaida?

General MCKENZIE. None.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Did the March attack on FOB [Forward Operating Base] Chapman breach the Doha Agreement, in your opinion?

General MCKENZIE. No, it did not.

Mr. GALLAGHER. It did not. General McKenzie, do you know which Taliban forces were actually providing security in front of the airport?

General MCKENZIE. Yes, we do.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Was it Badri 313?

General MCKENZIE. They were part of it. There were other elements as well. It was a hodgepodge of units—

Mr. GALLAGHER. But Badri 313 was part—

General MCKENZIE. Among others.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Among others? A group that specialized in suicide bombing attacks. Had the suicide bomber been imprisoned—I think you suggested to Congresswoman Hartzler that the suicide bomber might have been in prison in Bagram before. Do we know?

General MCKENZIE. I don't believe—I don't recall suggesting that.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Okay. So do we know whether he had been?

General MCKENZIE. We are still working very hard to find out where the suicide bomber came from.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Did we have an opportunity to take him out prior to the suicide bombing attack?

General MCKENZIE. We did not.

Mr. GALLAGHER. We did not have an opportunity to take him out. And just, finally, does the over-the-horizon posture that we are now adopting, would that be more or less difficult now that we are out of the country?

General MCKENZIE. I have said on the record it will be very difficult to do. It is not impossible to do.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Kim is recognized.

Mr. KIM. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General McKenzie, I wanted to start with you. You said reports about you engaging with the Taliban about a red line around Kabul before its fall were false. Does that mean that there was no discussion or consideration in the U.S. of a plan to defend Kabul in early August before its fall?

General MCKENZIE. There was never a discussion about a plan to defend Kabul before its fall. I will say that when I went to Doha, I took with me a graphic. It was a map of Kabul with a 30-kilometer ring on the outside. Our original proposal was, we would ask the Taliban to stay outside that ring, but we were not going to threaten them. We felt that was the best way to do deconfliction; however, on the day of the meeting, they were already in downtown Kabul, so the graphic was outdated and we had to proceed from the new reality.

Mr. KIM. Secretary Austin, I wanted to get your thoughts on this. When I spent some time in the Situation Room with you in 2014 when we were fearing the fall of Erbil and Baghdad, U.S. CENTCOM Commander immediately drew up some CONOPS [concept of operations] defending those positions using air assets. The effort was to buy time for the Iraqis and the Iraqi Kurds to reconstitute.

Did it not cross your mind to consider something like that in early August before the fall of Kabul?

Secretary AUSTIN. This is certainly something we considered, you know. We took a look at what we would need to do to protect the Embassy and if we had to do a NEO, what could we do to buy time for that operation to take place.

Mr. KIM. Chairman Milley, I wanted to switch to you. Yesterday you said that you were asked on August 25th to make a decision about the August 31st deadline. Was there an actual formal request made to the Taliban by the United States to stay past August 31st? Was that a request that was then denied that you were taking into account in that decision?

General MILLEY. I don't make decisions, Congressman. I provide advice.

Mr. KIM. In your recommendation.

General MILLEY. I was asked for what is called best military advice. I am not aware of a formal request to the Taliban one way or the other on staying past the 31st. I am very familiar with the advice that we provided on the 25th.

Mr. KIM. Before the fall of Kabul, did we actually have formal Taliban agreement upon an August 31st departure date?

General MILLEY. I am not sure what you mean by "formal," but I do—I think—

Mr. KIM. Had there ever been a point where the United States went to the Taliban saying that we are planning to leave on August 31st? I am talking about prior to the fall of Kabul.

General MILLEY. I think from a policy perspective Zal Khalilzad could give you the detailed information on that. I do believe the Taliban knew that we were departing on the 31st. We announced it.

Mr. KIM. But you weren't aware of it—

General MILLEY. I am not aware of a formal agreement per se, but I think Zal Khalilzad could give you better definition of that.

Mr. KIM. General McKenzie, I want to turn back to you then because you were saying that you talked with the Taliban on August 15th. Did you use August 31st as a date to end the operations? Was there a date set at all in your discussions with—

General MCKENZIE. I did not use a specific date when I talked to them.

Mr. KIM. So no date was set on August 15th—

General MCKENZIE. I did not convey a specific date as part of my conversation.

Mr. KIM. I wanted to switch gears one more time here.

Secretary Austin, moving forward, when we are looking at the fundamental viability of the over-the-horizon effort, is the air space over Afghanistan currently considered sovereign air space? And I guess I will frame it in a slightly different way. Is it currently legal

for the United States to conduct ISR sorties and air strikes in Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. Yes.

Mr. KIM. Under what authority is that legal?

Secretary AUSTIN. Same authority as we were using before.

Mr. KIM. And that would be under the Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement of 2014. Is that correct?

Secretary AUSTIN. No. I think what we are prosecuting now is—are the authorities that were referred to by General McKenzie earlier and you mentioned he would have to take that into a classified setting.

Mr. KIM. Okay. I will certainly follow with you that way. General McKenzie, something I wanted to follow with you on. Yesterday in your hearing in front of the Senate, you made a comment when asked about the war on terror and you said that the war on terror is not over, but then you also went on and said that the war in Afghanistan is not over. So I just wanted a clarification from you. In your opinion, is the war in Afghanistan over?

General MCKENZIE. So I believe the war in Afghanistan is not over. I believe we are no longer a party to that war, but that doesn't mean that ISIS and the Taliban aren't going to engage in a furious fight this fall that may result in ISIS being crushed or it may result—

Mr. KIM. Oh, I see. So when you are saying that you are referring that you believe that there is a civil war in Afghanistan, but in terms of the United States war against Afghanistan, you would say that that is over?

General MCKENZIE. We have no forces in Afghanistan. Our only interest in Afghanistan is looking for ISIS—K—

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. Gaetz is recognized.

Mr. GAETZ. February 26, 2020, House Armed Services Committee, General Mark Milley: "We know we are not going to defeat the Taliban militarily and they are not going to defeat the Government of Afghanistan militarily". You really blew that call, didn't you, General?

General MILLEY. I believe that that was an issue of strategic stalemate and that if we had remained in Afghanistan with the advisory levels of effort, then the Government of Afghanistan—

Mr. GAETZ. Well, that is an interesting answer to a question. It is just not what I asked. You spent more time with Bob Woodward on this book than you spent analyzing the very likely prospect that the Afghanistan Government was going to fall immediately to the Taliban, didn't you?

General MILLEY. Not even close, Congressman.

Mr. GAETZ. Oh, really? Because you said right after Kabul fell that no one could have anticipated the immediate fall of the Ghani government. When did you become aware that Joe Biden tried to get Ghani to lie about the conditions in Afghanistan? He did that in July. Did you know that right away?

General MILLEY. I am not aware of what President Biden—

Mr. GAETZ. You are not aware of the phone call that Biden had with Ghani where he said, whether it is true or not, we want you to go out there and paint a rosy picture of what is going on in Af-

ghanistan? You are the chief military adviser to the President. You said that the Taliban was not going to defeat the Government of Afghanistan militarily, which, by the way, they cut through them like a hot knife through butter, and then the President tries to get Ghani to lie. When did you become aware of that attempt?

General MILLEY. There is two things there, Congressman, if I may. One is what I said was the situation was stalemate and if we kept advisers with there, the Government of Afghanistan and the army would have still been there. That is what I said. Whether that is right or wrong, I don't know, but——

Mr. GAETZ. Seems wrong now with the Taliban in control. I have a question for Secretary Austin.

Secretary Austin, are you capable of assessing whether another has the will to fight?

Secretary AUSTIN. No, we are not and that is the point that the Chairman made earlier.

Mr. GAETZ. That is just like an incredibly disappointing thing for the Secretary of Defense to simply say, I can't assess whether someone has the will to fight, but it is consistent with your record.

I mean, during the Obama administration, I think they gave you about \$48 million to go train up some folks in Syria to go take on the Assad government and I think your testimony was that only four or five survived first contact with the enemy.

So what confidence should this committee have in you or should the country have in you when you have now confessed to us and whether it is the swing and a miss in Afghanistan that General Milley talked to the Senate about yesterday, total failure, or whether it was your failures in Syria, you don't seem capable to look at a fighting force and determine whether or not they have the will. Is that an embarrassment?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, you will recall, Congressman, that the end result was the SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] that we stood up that was very, very instrumental in turning the tide of battle up in Syria.

Mr. GAETZ. Oh, yeah. Turned it so much you got Assad in power in Syria, you got the Taliban in power in Afghanistan. Where have you been?

Secretary AUSTIN. The focus was ISIS, Congressman, and those forces had significant affect on the ISIS network.

Mr. GAETZ. It just seems like you are chronically bad at this and you have admitted that, I guess, which is to your credit, but when people in the military like Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller stand up and demand accountability, when they say that you all screwed up, when they point out that General Milley's statement that the Government of Afghanistan is not going to get defeated by the Taliban, well, he ends up in the brig and you all end up in front of us and your former employer Raytheon ends up with a lot of money, and we have poured cash and blood and credibility into a Ghani government that was a mirage. It fell immediately. And while the guy sitting next to you was off talking to Phil Rucker and was off doing his thing with Bob Woodward, we were buying into the big lie, the big lie that this was ever going to be successful and that we could ever rely on the Afghanistan Government for anything at all.

You know, General Milley, you kind of gave up the game earlier when you said you wanted to address elements of your personal conduct that were in question. We are not questioning your personal conduct. We are questioning in your official capacity going and undermining the chain of command, which is obviously what you did. You have created this whole change——

General MILLEY. I did not undermine the chain of command——

Mr. GAETZ. Yeah, you did. You absolutely did.

General MILLEY. Did not.

Mr. GAETZ. Well, you know what? You said yesterday that you weren't going to resign when Senators asked you this question and I believe that you guys probably won't resign. You seem to be very happy failing up over there, but if we didn't have a President that was so addled, you all would be fired because that is what you deserve. You have let down the people who wear the uniform in my district and all around this country. And you are far more interested in what your perception is and how people think about you and insider Washington books than you care about winning——

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman's time has expired.

Ms. Houlahan is recognized.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you, Mr. Chair. And, gentlemen, I apologize for the behavior of my colleague. I am deeply, deeply appreciative of your service and of the decades of experience that you all bring to this conversation. Thank you so much for the opportunity to ask important questions of you, questions that ought to be asked of you in the spirit of our responsibility of oversight rather than provocation.

So I just have a couple of questions of clarification from this testimony that has happened so far, and the first one is for you, General McKenzie. You mentioned something about in your opening remarks about you having looked at different branches to account for the complete collapse of the government and the Afghan military. That is the first time, frankly, that I have heard that scenario being articulated out loud.

Most of the testimony that I have heard prior to this has been we could have never foreseen that. So as somebody who is a branching engineer type person, that is what I do, I am intrigued to see if that is, indeed, what you did have and what the likelihood you put to that and the cost that you associated with that would be.

General MCKENZIE. So, as we drew up the NEO plan, one of the assumptions of the NEO plan was that the Afghan military would be able to continue to secure HKIA, the airfield, because the Turks were there, but they only actually secured a small fraction of the airfield, maybe 20 percent of it. The rest of that long perimeter around the entire runway was actually secured by Afghan military forces.

So our assumption was they would continue to perform that function. But we also—since we stated that as an assumption, by the way we plan, we have to say if that assumption is wrong, because an assumption is a future hypothetical condition that we believe is going to occur, we felt that was always something that we should challenge.

So we developed a plan if that assumption failed, if they melted away. So we had a branch plan that was developed as part of the overall NEO plan where we would introduce adequate combat forces to physically take over securing the perimeter of that airfield in case the ANDSF did melt away. Well, as we got into the first week of August, it began to look increasingly likely that they would melt away.

So I talked to the Secretary, talked to the Chairman, and we agreed to begin to flow forces in for that contingency.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you. And my question to you related for—all three of you, and perhaps we'll start with you, General, is, how long have you believed that the Afghan military might not be up to the task of taking over and maintaining security against the Taliban?

We discussed a lot of different timelines over the course of the last few months. Has it been inevitable for 5 or 10 years? How long have you been relaying that information or that concern possibly to any of our senior leaders or senior administration if you could share that with us as well.

General MCKENZIE. Ma'am, so I will start. I think it actually from the relatively short-term perspective, I think the Doha Agreement and the signing of the Doha Agreement had a really pernicious affect on the Government of Afghanistan and on its military. Psychological more than anything else, but we set a date certain for when we were going to leave and when they could expect all assistance to end.

So for the first time there was something out there in front of them. Now, I also—I think that is an important thing. The other point would be it has been my position and my judgment that if we went below an advisory level of 2,500, I believe that the government of Afghanistan would likely collapse and that the military would follow. And one might go before the other, but I believe that was going to be the inevitable result of drawing down to zero. And I have expressed that opinion in writing for quite a while.

Now, so taking a look at that, that was sort of my best judgment on that. I believe that—so going below 2,500, I think, was the other sort of nail in the coffin, if you will, that allowed the Afghan—that led to conditions where, first of all, we could no longer see what was happening to the force because our advisers were no longer down there with those units.

So let me give you an example. If we shipped a box of mortar rounds into Afghanistan, we would sign it over on the ramp at HKIA and the Afghans would truck it away. There would be nobody below that level to help them disburse it, to see if it went to the bazaar, or if it went down to the unit that needed mortar rounds.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you. I appreciate that.

And, Secretary Austin, it looked like you had something to contribute as well.

Secretary AUSTIN. I certainly agree with the comments that General McKenzie has made. I would just add to that that as a part of that agreement, we agreed to cease conducting air operations against the Taliban. So the Taliban got stronger, they increase



their offensive operations against the Afghan Security Forces and the Afghans were losing a lot of people on a weekly basis.

In addition to that, we caused them to release 5,000 prisoners, you know, and those prisoners, many of those prisoners, went back to fill the ranks of the Taliban. So they got a lot stronger, they continued their attacks. You know, we got smaller. And so I agree with General McKenzie. That is when you could begin to see things really begin to go in a different direction—

Ms. HOULAHAN. So with the last 4 seconds, I very much appreciate your time and a very intriguing that it seems like the Doha Agreement might have been a pivotal point. And thank you.

And with that, I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Bacon is recognized.

Mr. BACON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General Milley, you said today that you saw this as a strategic failure. As a 30-year veteran and someone who has been deployed four times myself, and I haven't served as long as the three of you, but it breaks our heart and I think most veterans feel heartbroken knowing that both the blood and the treasure split was—ended up in a strategic failure. I think we are enraged by it.

Then we have the President come out and say that this was a success. He had no regrets. That does not break our heart; that makes us mad as hell that he would say it that way. So I wanted to say that upfront.

Secondly, the fact that President Biden on ABC said that no one that he can recall advised him to keep a force of about 2,500 troops in Afghanistan. It is not true. We heard yesterday and we have heard today that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the CENTCOM Commander advised differently. I have no other view to see this as a lie, a falsehood from our President. That makes us mad as hell too. Thirdly, I think it is important to point out that this committee for well over a year cautioned both Presidents against a premature withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In fact, Republican and Democratic members of both the House and Senate were so concerned at the risk of a calendar-based withdrawal that we passed a lot to prevent it. In fact, the chairman of this committee voted for one that restricted President Trump. Section 1215 of the 2021 NDAA prohibited any President, regardless of political party, from drawing down below 2,500 troops until the Secretary of Defense in consultation with the Secretary of State and the DNI provided Congress a detailed plan explaining how the U.S. would continue to conduct counterterror operations in Afghanistan following U.S. withdrawal.

How would the U.S. conduct an orderly transition of security functions to the Afghan military? And how would the U.S. protect Americans who remained in country and how would the U.S. coordinate any such withdrawal with our NATO allies?

In short, every single failure that we are now witnessing, Congress warned against in writing in a law over a year ago. But after taking office, President Biden I am referring to wrote, to the—we wrote to the Biden administration reminding them it was not permitted to go below 2,500 until it provided assurances to Congress that our vital interest could be secured.

Despite clear congressional intent backed by statute this did not happen. The day after taking office, the newly confirmed Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl wrote to the members of this committee essentially stating that President Biden was smarter than Congress, was confident he had all the angles covered, and believed it was not in the national interest to provide Congress with the assurances required in section 1215.

Mr. Chairman, I ask unanimous consent to enter this letter into the record.

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection, so ordered.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 131.]

Mr. BACON. Okay, my first question here: General McKenzie, I think one of the reasons that the Afghan forces crumbled much quicker than we ever assessed was that we pulled most of our air cover, we took the mechanics away from the Afghan forces, and we pulled out a lot of our logistics capabilities.

Do you see this as underlying reasons why the Afghan forces collapsed?

General MCKENZIE. I think all of those reasons contributed to why they collapsed.

Mr. BACON. Should it have even surprised us, when we take away most of our air power that they were used to having, that that would just pull the rug out from underneath them? General.

General MCKENZIE. Well, my position all along has been, if you go to zero, if you go to a state where you are not going to be able to maintain their forces on the ground, that a collapse is inevitable.

I have to further say, I did not see it coming as fast as it did. I thought it would be a matter of into the fall or into the winter. I did not see it happen in 11 days in August.

Mr. BACON. Thank you.

General Milley, I appreciate your candor about this being a strategic failure. How does this embolden al-Qaida, ISIS, and what does it do to Russia, China, and Iran, seeing how we responded in this retreat?

General MILLEY. I think the Taliban sitting in Kabul significantly emboldens the radical jihadi movement globally. The analogy I have used with many others is, it likely will put a shot of adrenaline into their arm. Their grandfathers defeated the Soviet Union in the war in Afghanistan many, many years ago, and they are taking this on their own networks right now and declaring it a major victory. So I think it is a big morale boost.

I think it remains to be seen—I think the Russians are quite scared—not “scared”—I guess, concerned of terrorists coming across the borders into their near abroad.

China is very complicated. They’ve got a significant issue in their western hemis—or in their western part of their country.

I think Iran now has to deal with a very complicated issue on their border that may or may not be friendly—

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman’s time has expired.

Mr. BACON. Thank you, General.

I yield.

The CHAIRMAN. And I do want to make a comment, because I actually watched the George Stephanopoulos interview before this

hearing. Joe Biden did not say that no one suggested that we should keep 2,500 troops there.

Mr. BACON. I read the quote, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. I have the time at the moment—

Mr. BACON. It was my quote.

The CHAIRMAN. I have the time.

Mr. BACON. Well, it better not be inaccurate.

The CHAIRMAN. And what he said was, you cannot have 2,500 troops stay there in a stable situation.

So we should at least be accurate about what information was provided. I would urge everyone to go back and actually look at the words and not take what is being said here as accurate.

Mr. BACON. Chairman, I read the quote.

The CHAIRMAN. I read it too, and I read it with a clear, open vision of what he was saying, not with a bent to try and make sure that we could successfully have a partisan attack on him.

He was asked, could they stay there in a stable environment? That is the option he said wasn't on the table, not because it wasn't offered, but because it didn't exist.

And, while we are ripping apart these three gentlemen here, I want to remind everybody that the decision the President made was to stop fighting a war that, after 20 years, it was proven we could not win. There was no easy way to do that. If he just kept—

Mr. WILSON. Mr. Chairman, I believe that General Bacon was clear—

The CHAIRMAN. If he had just kept—

Mr. WILSON [continuing]. And needs to be defended. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. I would be happy to yield Mr. Rogers time when I am done.

What he made clear was we needed to stop fighting a war that, for 20 years—we have had these conversations over and over again. Democrats bash on the Republican President more than they bash on the Democratic Presidents. Republicans bash on the Democratic Presidents more than they bash on the Republican Presidents.

But the end result was the same: 20 years of an endless series of decisions by very intelligent, very capable, very committed people. Any implication that the three gentlemen in front of us are not very capable, very intelligent, and very committed to this country is simply partisan, political opportunism.

We can look at 20 years. Pick your favorite general, pick your favorite President, pick your favorite leader. Okay? None of them could successfully do what so many members of this committee are sitting here telling these gentlemen that they are basically idiots for not being able to do.

We should pause for just a moment and think about the fact that maybe that's the wrong argument. Maybe the mission itself was really hard to achieve.

And what President Biden said is: We are done. We are not going to have these hearings anymore. We are not going to have the funerals anymore. We are not going to lose the servicemembers, fighting a war that it is clear we cannot be successful.

And we all pick nits on that decision, that decision, why didn't you say this, why didn't you do that. Twenty years of a whole lot

of different people leading has led us to this point, and we said, we are going to stop. Once——

Mr. WILSON. Mr. Chairman——

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. We said that——

Mr. WILSON [continuing]. This is inconceivable.

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. It was not——

Mr. WILSON. They are bringing the war here.

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. Going to——

Mr. WILSON. The war is not over. It is coming to America.

The CHAIRMAN. Joe——

Mr. WILSON. The funerals are here——

The CHAIRMAN. I——

Mr. WILSON [continuing]. Mr. Chairman. And we count on you and your leadership and these——

The CHAIRMAN. It is clear——

Mr. WILSON [continuing]. Generals to know the war is not over.

The CHAIRMAN. It is clear——

Mr. BACON. A point of order. Chairman, we are not done with this war.

The CHAIRMAN. The point is, yes, we are going to have to continue to contain this threat——

Mr. ROGERS. And 20 years of mistakes——

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. No question about it, but——

Mr. ROGERS [continuing]. Aren't an excuse for the failure——

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. Having U.S. troops in Afghanistan——

Mr. ROGERS [continuing]. Of the withdrawal.

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. Was not succeeding.

Mr. BACON. Mr. Chairman, a point of order.

The CHAIRMAN. I have to make that point.

Mr. Rogers is the Ranking Member on the committee, and I will give him the time to respond.

Mr. ROGERS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I did note the Stephanopoulos interview, and I disagree with your interpretation. Mr. Stephanopoulos came back and asked him again, "So you are saying that nobody advised you to leave the troops," and that was his response.

But I think the general officers here and the Secretary have made it very clear that they gave the President advice that he wouldn't listen to. The last President, they gave him advice, and he did listen to it.

So, I mean, I am not challenging and I have not in any way disparaged these great gentlemen. In fact, in my opening remarks, I made it abundantly clear, I don't want them shouldering blame for what happened on this withdrawal, when it was the administration and the State Department and National Security Advisor.

And, with that, I will yield——

Mr. BACON. Thank you, Mr. Rogers, for correcting the record.

Mr. ROGERS [continuing]. A minute to Mr. Bacon.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Crow is recognized.

Mr. CROW. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dovetailing on Chairman Smith's comment, I just can't help but think back to my last deployment in Afghanistan in 2005. And there was a moment where I had been awake for several days,

walking with a heavy rucksack in the mountains of Afghanistan, and wondering and asking myself, where was the debate? Why weren't people asking the questions then? Why weren't people paying attention?

I am glad they are now. I am glad we are having this debate. But, as Chairman Smith adequately pointed out, we could have been doing this a long time ago. Four administrations, Republican and Democrat; 10 Congresses, Republican and Democrat—this is a 20-year conflict that our country owns, and we have to have a broader discussion. It is not a 2-month conflict.

And I appreciate your candor, and I appreciate the seriousness with which all three of you have dealt with this.

So, with that in mind, the fact that there are serious issues that have to be addressed, I have two lines of questioning, one about our continuing obligation to our partners and the next about the planning in advance of the evacuation.

Now, I want to start the partner question with the recognition that I believe firmly that all three of you share as deeply as I do a sense that we have a continuing obligation, because all three of you served, and I know that all three of you have friends who are still there. They have names and faces. So I am not going to question your commitment to this.

The Department has a very narrow but important role going forward here, and that role is to provide employment verification to folks so they can be properly vetted and evacuated. That is very hard to do without boots on the ground now.

So what can the Department do more going forward, and what is the plan to do that employment verification, to get that paperwork in the hands of our friends so we can get them evacuated?

Secretary AUSTIN. One of my Under Secretaries is leading an effort to ensure that we can help improve the process of employment verification.

If you think back 20 years, you know, ago, when people were actually helping us, helping contractors that were working for us, some of the documentation, very, very difficult to get your hands on now.

So we are working to see what we can do to improve this. We want to work with Congress to—if there is any way that we can adjust requirements or adjust, you know, our ability to ease this process along, we certainly want to do that.

But this—we are taking this on in a very serious way.

Mr. CROW. Well, I appreciate that, and we stand ready and willing to continue to work with you to solve this. Because, certainly, our combat operations are over, but we have that continued obligation, as you have often noted.

The last is about the evacuation planning. There were two tabletop rehearsals, one in June and one in August. The June 11 one dealt with the processing of evacuees. These are interagencies—interagency tabletop exercises that involve the Department of State. The August 6 one, my understanding, dealt with scenarios for both a permissive and a nonpermissive NEO.

So, for the August 6 tabletop, the State Department was involved in that tabletop. Coming out of that tabletop exercise, did the Department have, in your opinion, adequate understanding as to the

State Department's plan and role to conduct vetting and processing of evacuees at HKIA?

General MCKENZIE. I believe they did, but I also urged State—I felt that, by nature, the Department of Defense can move very fast on issues like this. I felt that we were not completely aligned with State on that. There were still some things they could do faster.

And I believe they tried their very best to address those, particularly in terms of providing additional processing power, if you will, to move people through the chain, from the consular officers and other people, to move them forward. State representatives took that message on board very seriously at the tabletop exercises.

Mr. CROW. So the lack of complete alignment, in your view, has to do with the processing power that was necessary to push forward on the ground?

General MCKENZIE. There were probably other things. That was the—from my perspective, as who was going to be responsible for identifying people, getting them out of Afghanistan, and getting them into the pipeline, that is what I was personally most concerned about. There were other issues; that was my principal concern.

Mr. CROW. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

General MILLEY. Congressman Crow, if I could just—there were two other sessions before that, 28 April and 8 May. I think we owe you some answers for the record.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 146.]

Mrs. LURIA [presiding]. The gentleman's time has expired.

I now recognize Mr. Banks for 5 minutes.

Mr. BANKS. Thank you.

General Milley, why is it important for the military to be non-political?

General MILLEY. I think an apolitical military is critical to the health of this Republic.

Mr. BANKS. General, why did you spend—you have already established yesterday and today that you spent a significant amount of time talking to political book authors and political reporters, including Bob Woodward. What compelled you to do that?

General MILLEY. I believe that part of my job is to communicate to the media what we do as a government, what we do as a military, to explain to the people. And so I do interviews regularly, with print media, books, documentaries, videos on TV, TV interviews. I think it is part of a senior official's job to be transparent, and I believe in a free press.

Mr. BANKS. What happens when a military general becomes a political figure?

General MILLEY. I have done—

Mr. BANKS. You would agree that it is dangerous?

General MILLEY. I think it is dangerous, and I have done my best to remain personally apolitical, and I try to keep the military out of actual domestic politics. And I have made a point of that from the time I became the Chairman and especially beginning last summer.

Mr. BANKS. You told the Senate yesterday you hadn't read the book or any of the other political books that have come out, but I don't know how anybody could read the Bob Woodward book—I don't know how you could read it and not be greatly embarrassed about its contents, especially in how it is related to you.

Are you embarrassed by the book?

General MILLEY. I haven't read the book yet——

Mr. BANKS. Are you embarrassed by the portrayals of the book? No doubt you are aware of them.

General MILLEY. Embarrassed, no. I am concerned that there is mischaracterizations of me becoming very politicized as an individual and that it is my willingness to become politicized, which is not true. I am trying to stay apolitical, and I believe I am. That is part of my professional ethic.

And I am trying to keep the military, the actual military, out of actual domestic politics. I think that is critical to this Republic.

Mr. BANKS. Do you regret with speaking with Bob Woodward?

General MILLEY. No. I think that it is important for me to speak to the media.

Mr. BANKS. I want to talk about some of the contents of the book. Since you haven't read it——

General MILLEY. Okay.

Mr. BANKS [continuing]. Maybe I can read some of it to you.

We have already heard a little bit about the back-and-forth with you and Speaker Pelosi. But, in that conversation, you said—in a phone call with Speaker Pelosi, she said, quote, “Republicans are enablers of President Trump's behavior. You know he's crazy. He's been crazy for a long time.” You replied, “I agree with you on everything.”

That was repeated three times in the prologue of the book “Peril,” that you told Speaker Pelosi you agree with her on everything.

Is that an accurate portrayal of your recounting to Bob Woodward about those conversations?

General MILLEY. Not exactly, no. I think that—in fact, I know——

Mr. BANKS. So is Bob Woodward wrong? Is that portrayal wrong?

General MILLEY. In fact, I know what I said, which was, “Madam Speaker, I am not qualified to determine the mental health or assess the mental health of this President——

Mr. BANKS. Did you tell——

General MILLEY [continuing]. Or any President.”

Mr. BANKS.—the Speaker that you agreed with her on everything?

General MILLEY. And what I was referring to when I said that was I agree that we need to have the processes and procedures in place to make sure that we don't have an accidental or illegal or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons. And I do agree with that. And we do have those procedures.

Mr. BANKS. You said you agree with her, according to Bob Woodward——

General MILLEY. I am not agreeing with——

Mr. BANKS [continuing]. And either Bob Woodward is right or you are right.

General MILLEY. I am not agreeing with her assessment of the President, nor the——

Mr. BANKS. The book also goes on—in talking about the January 6 riot, it says that you told Bob Woodward that you wrote a list in your notebook of groups that you personally believe are responsible for the attack and that you associated with it. And you called these groups, quote, “domestic terrorists,” or this, “domestic terrorism.”

That list included, in your notebook, according to Bob Woodward from your conversations with him, Nazis and Oath Keepers. But it also included two conservative media outlets that you listed in your notebook, including The Epoch Times, which, by the way, is a news outlet that was founded by critics of the Chinese Communist Party, and Newsmax, which is the second-most-watched conservative media outlet in the country today.

Do your notes about January 6 reference both Epoch Times and Newsmax as on a list of domestic terrorists?

General MILLEY. I am not recalling this conversation at all. I don’t——

Mr. BANKS. It is in the book.

General MILLEY. It may be in the book. I haven’t read the book. I am not recalling a conversation about Newsmax, Epoch Times——

Mr. BANKS. Do you have a notebook that lists Newsmax and Epoch Times as domestic terrorists, as recounted by the Bob Woodward book “Peril”?

General MILLEY. I——

Mr. BANKS. Or is Bob Woodward lying to us in the book?

General MILLEY. I don’t know. I don’t recall any conversation about Epoch Times or——

Mr. BANKS. Do you believe that Newsmax and Epoch Times are domestic terrorists or their——

General MILLEY. No.

Mr. BANKS [continuing]. Viewers——

General MILLEY. I think——

Mr. BANKS [continuing]. Or readers——

General MILLEY. No. I think——

Mr. BANKS [continuing]. Are domestic terrorists?

General MILLEY. No, not at all. I don’t think Epoch Times nor Newsmax are domestic terrorist organizations.

Mr. BANKS. Will you produce the notes——

General MILLEY. I believe they are——

Mr. BANKS [continuing]. to this committee——

General MILLEY. I will produce any notes you want.

Mr. BANKS [continuing]. That you relayed to Bob Woodward in the book that you listed different groups who were responsible for January 6?

General MILLEY. Sure. Absolutely.

Mr. BANKS. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. The gentleman’s time has expired.

I will just note for the record that I was quoted in that book as well, and a lot of what I said was conflated and not 100 percent accurately portrayed. It does happen. Just because someone says something doesn’t mean that it is an accurate portrayal and doesn’t



even mean they are lying. It could be a misunderstanding about what was actually said.

Ms. Slotkin is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. SLOTKIN. Thank you.

And thank you, gentlemen, for being here and for the work that you have done.

I think, obviously, the level of back-and-forth on the committee today represents some real stress in the system about the withdrawal and what it means but also about, you know, an interest in politicizing national security issues, which I have real issues with.

Could I just ask—I think the question I get asked the most in my district about our withdrawal from Afghanistan is, are we safer now than we were on September 10, 2001?

And I believe and I have certainly answered many veterans who have reached out that I believe their work was valuable and worthy. We kept al-Qaida and other groups distracted and destabilized so that we could build up our national security apparatus, our homeland security here, to make us safer.

So it is, of course, hard to hear from this panel that right now we are safer but we have to watch for the reconstitution of these terrorist groups. No one likes to hear that.

I would ask that we get a classified briefing on our over-the-horizon posture just so we understand—I understand we can't do it in open session, but just so we understand, on this committee, what we can expect when it comes to watching those threats. So I would ask for that commitment.

But, as someone who served in Iraq with the CIA, we watched the reconstitution of al-Qaida in western Iraq, which became ISIS.

What are the tripwires, I guess Secretary Austin and then General Milley, that you are looking for that would push you to engage the White House and say, "Hey, we have a real problem here"? What are those specific things that you are looking for that would change your assessment from one of, you know, "We are all right now," to, "We need to take more significant military action"?

Secretary AUSTIN. Thanks.

First, on your request for an over-the-horizon capability brief, we will certainly sign up for that. I committed to the chairman to do that early on. And I will have General McKenzie and the Joint Staff and my policy people in that brief as well.

Ms. SLOTKIN. Thank you.

Secretary AUSTIN. In terms of specific areas that we are focused on, we are looking at their ability to develop a capability to export terror to the homeland here. Whether or not—you know, if we see senior leaders beginning to have freedom of movement in Afghanistan, if we see them developing capability in training camps and other things, if we see them moving people back and forth across international boundaries, those are things that we are looking for.

And, again, it will take time to develop a true intel picture of what is going on. And we have begun that work, and we will continue—we will remain focused on this throughout.

Ms. SLOTKIN. General Milley.

General MILLEY. The specific indicators and warnings I would like to take to a different session.

But, in general, what we are looking for: leadership, capability, training, those sorts of things, and demonstrations of intent that al-Qaida and/or ISIS is going to do external operations against the United States or our interests.

If we pick up on those, then it is our obligation to present the President with options to deal with it.

Ms. SLOTKIN. And, General Milley, we have seen some reports that, in our attempts to try and get over-the-horizon posture in countries around Afghanistan, that we have had discussions with the Russians about some cooperation.

Can you help us understand that? For many of us, that just gives us—like, the hair on our neck starts to go up. Can you explain to us what we are discussing with the Russians and what we are willing to do and not do with the Russians?

General MILLEY. Again, I would prefer to take that into a classified session.

As you probably know, about a week or 10 days ago, I discussed over in Europe with the Russians, had a session with 32 CHODs [Chiefs of Defences] from all the European NATO nations, and then I had a separate session with my counterpart, General Gerasimov. And I can talk to you in a classified session about that.

But, in the main, we are not asking permission, we are not negotiating, I guess is the word, but President Putin and President Biden had a conversation, and I was following up on that conversation at other direction—at the——

Ms. SLOTKIN. Thank you.

General MILLEY [continuing]. Direction of my superiors.

Ms. SLOTKIN. I would just say, I think, given that it is not permissible right now to share classified information, this committee should be informed should there be any movement towards that with the Russians.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

The gentlelady's time has expired.

And we have had classified—we will have continued classified briefs. As we have said, as many members have said, I think accurately, the counterterrorism strategy in South Asia is going to be a crucial policy issue for all of us to deal with going forward.

Ms. Cheney is recognized.

Ms. CHENEY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley, on January 6, we had a violent attack on our Capitol. It was an effort to stop the constitutionally prescribed process of counting electoral votes—the first time in our Nation's history that we did not have a peaceful transfer of power.

In the aftermath of that attack, many of the members of our constitutional system failed to do their duty. Many of them punted. Many of them, today, are still attempting to obstruct the investigation into that attack, attempting to whitewash what happened.

General Milley, you found yourself, in your constitutionally prescribed role, standing in the breach. And for any member of this committee, for any American to question your loyalty to our Nation, to question your understanding of our Constitution, your loyalty to our Constitution, your recognition and understanding of the civilian chain of command, is despicable.

I want to apologize for those members of this committee who have done so. And I want to thank you for standing in the breach, when so many, including many in this room, failed to do so.

With respect to Afghanistan, the only question for us with respect to the deployment of forces in Afghanistan or anywhere else is, what does U.S. security require?

In the circumstances we found ourselves in in Afghanistan, the deployment of our forces was allowing us to conduct counterterrorism operations, counterintelligence operations, enabling us to prevent terrorists from establishing safe havens.

General Milley, terrorists now have an entire country of Afghanistan. Could you tell the committee whether or not you think the current situation in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of forces, which began with the Doha Agreement and the orders that you have described in the Trump administration, which was carried out in the Biden administration, can you tell the committee whether or not you think we are now more safe or less safe, whether Afghanistan presents more of a threat or less of a threat to our homeland than when we were able to conduct counterterrorism/counterintelligence operations there?

General MILLEY. I think, right now, right this minute, we are more safe because of the efforts over the last 20 years.

However, I do think that conditions are more likely than not to develop over the course of time that will allow for the reconstitution of al-Qaida and/or ISIS. And that time varies depending on which analyst you are listening to, but sometime between, say, 6 to 12 and maybe 36 months.

Ms. CHENEY. And when you look at the situation that we face today, in terms of what is going to be necessary—the loss of life, the loss of treasure has been tragic, has been devastating. But when you look at where we are likely to find ourselves, do you think that our ability to defend ourselves will now be more expensive, will cost us more in terms of lives and treasure going forward, or do you believe that the withdrawal will present a situation where we have to devote less resources to the war on terror?

General MILLEY. I think the ends are going to remain the same, to protect the American people, but the ways and means are going to change. And I think it is going to become much more difficult now in order to conduct counterterrorism operations against a reconstituted al-Qaida or ISIS in Afghanistan. Not impossible. We have the capabilities and means to do that. But it will be more difficult.

Ms. CHENEY. Secretary Austin, are members of the Haqqani Network still a potential target for the United States military?

Secretary AUSTIN. We do recognize that the members of the Haqqani Network are recognized terrorists, yes.

Ms. CHENEY. So they are a potential target for the United States military?

Secretary AUSTIN. Potentially, yes.

Ms. CHENEY. So, Secretary Austin, the Biden administration has been saying that the Doha Agreement is still in effect and that they will hold the Taliban to their, quote, “counterterrorism commitments” in the Doha Agreement.

But the Taliban is using this agreement to protect terrorists. The Taliban is intertwined with the Haqqani Network. And al-Qaida has, in fact, sworn bayat to the Taliban.

So can you explain exactly how that agreement that is enabling terrorists is going to be useful as some kind of a tool to hold the Taliban to any kind of a commitment?

Secretary AUSTIN. I think we should do everything within our power to keep pressure on the Taliban to do what they said that they were going to do. And we heard what they have said. We will watch their actions.

But I think we should continue to apply pressure, wherever possible, to cause them to keep al-Qaida activity in check.

And, again, you have heard us say a couple of times today that we recognize that this is the Taliban, and trust is not an issue here, necessarily. We hear what they are saying; we are watching what they do.

Ms. CHENEY. Thank you, Mr. Chair. My time has expired.

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Sherrill is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. SHERRILL. Thank you, Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie. I have quite a few questions, and some I may have to submit for the record, because I think it is important to start with this and somewhat echo my Republican colleague's opening.

We have continued to see attacks on our democracy and our values from Members representing what, at least historically, would have been the extreme elements of the Republican Party—attacks including, but not limited to, the horrible attack on our Capitol and our Congress on January 6.

And one of the cornerstones of our democracy and our government is civilian, not military, rule. This is sacrosanct to those of us who have worn the uniform and, judging from the attacks by some members of this committee, poorly understood by those who have not.

I have concerns about how the NEO was executed, but I must applaud all of you for scrupulously ensuring our civilian government remained the decisionmaking authority as you continued to provide your best military advice, even when, at times, your advice differed from the decisions made. Thank you.

I would like to now turn to some questions that I have related to the timeline of events.

So, as I understand it, in February of 2020, President Trump made an agreement with the Taliban to withdraw U.S. troops by May 1, 2021, in exchange for several conditions, including a halt to attacks against U.S. forces and cutting ties with al-Qaida.

By the time he left office, President Trump had drawn down forces to 2,500 and publicly indicated his intent to complete the withdrawal if he had been reelected.

And I think, Chairman Milley, you mentioned the 10 November 2020 withdrawal of troops by 15 January 2020, which was rescinded, and then the 17 November 2020 drawdown to 2,500 by 19 January. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. It was a memo dated 11 November, 2 days after Secretary Esper was fired. And then, on the 17th, it was rescinded. The first memo said go to zero. The second one said go to 2,500.

Ms. SHERRILL. Thank you.

And so were you consulted on the decisions to open negotiations solely with the Taliban, to the exclusion of the Afghan Government, General?

General MILLEY. Very, very late in the game, like, days before the signing.

Ms. SHERRILL. And, General Milley, were there concrete plans for a withdrawal from the previous administration that were shared and developed with military leadership?

General MILLEY. Well, we were 12,600 on the day that the Doha Agreement—12,600 U.S. military in Afghanistan when the Doha Agreement was signed. Part of that agreement was to go to 8,500 within, I think it was, 135 days. I would have to go back to the agreement and look at it. And then it was to bring down all the U.S. military, NATO, contractors, close all the bases by 1 May.

So it was an agreement signed by our government. We dutifully executed it and delivered drawdown over time, from February of 2020 all way through, based on a set of milestones. So we did withdraw, and we had a plan to withdraw.

Ms. SHERRILL. Did any of those plans include plans to evacuate civilian American personnel, citizens, and SIV holders?

General MILLEY. Yes. General McKenzie and CENTCOM did develop NEO plans, but not, like, the large SIV holders and lots of American citizens. It was primarily the Embassy and their personnel.

But I would defer to Frank McKenzie to talk about the details of the NEO plans at that time.

Ms. SHERRILL. General McKenzie.

General MCKENZIE. So we hold a NEO plan for every country in the Central Command region. So, yes, we had a plan to bring out mainly American citizens and people associated with the Embassy.

Planning later began to encompass the larger population, the at-risk Afghan population, the SIV population. But, initially, just like every other plan, it centered on American citizens and their families.

Ms. SHERRILL. And when you say the planning later grew to include that, what is the timeframe for when you began to include SIV holders?

General MCKENZIE. No later than the early spring of this year.

Ms. SHERRILL. So under this administration?

General MCKENZIE. Yes. Yes.

Ms. SHERRILL. And, General Milley, in your testimony to the SASC [Senate Armed Services Committee] yesterday, you testified that the Trump administration's plans had not been developed via a robust interagency process.

How closely were you and other senior military leaders consulted on President Trump's plans as they were developed?

General MILLEY. I wasn't consulted on the 11 November order that I received. That is why I went over to the White House with Acting Secretary Miller and White House Chief of Staff Kash Patel to discuss that order. So I wasn't consulted on it.

Ms. SHERRILL. Thank you.

And my time has expired. I will submit the rest of my questions for the record.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Waltz is recognized.

Mr. WALTZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And here is where I think we are really talking past each other. This war is not done. It is not over. This is a war against Islamic extremism. It is a war against an ideology. And, just as it took decades—decades, not 20 years, not 30 years, many more—to defeat the idea of communism, to defeat the idea of fascism, it is going to take decades to defeat the idea of Islamic extremism.

General McKenzie, you testified yesterday al-Qaida is still at war with us. Do you stand by that statement?

General MCKENZIE. Absolutely, Representative.

Mr. WALTZ. DNI Haines, Biden's Director of National Intelligence, briefed the Congress that al-Qaida fully intends to attack the West again if given the chance.

The head of al-Qaida, Osama bin Laden's former deputy, has pledged allegiance to the head of the Taliban, except now they have an entire state to work with—an army, an air force, a functioning international airport, and I think, if things continue on the path they are, possibly billions in international currency reserves.

So, Mr. Chairman, respectfully, we are not done with this war. I would have thought we would have learned the lesson from Iraq. I would have thought, Mr. Secretary, you had learned the lesson from Iraq, where we pulled out in 2011—Mr. Chairman, you issued a statement praising that pullout as ending that war—and yet we found ourselves, 3 years later, with soldiers going back in.

But let's look at the situation, because I think the American people need to understand this.

Here we have Iraq. We pulled out. Led to a rise of the ISIS caliphate, which was obviously a morphed entity from al-Qaida.

Look at all of the bases that we had to deal with when we went back. We had bases in the Gulf, we had bases in Kuwait, we had bases in Turkey, in Jordan, of course in Israel, allied bases in Cyprus. We had allies on the ground in the Kurds.

We didn't let ISIS take over the government in Baghdad and the army and all of the functions of the state. We had all of these assets to work with to go clean up that mess. And how many soldiers and lives did we lose from cleaning up that mistaken withdrawal, Mr. Chairman?

But let's transition over here to Afghanistan. What do we see?

General McKenzie, do we have a single base in Afghanistan now?

General MCKENZIE. We have no base in Afghanistan.

Mr. WALTZ. Do we have a base in any country neighboring Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. We do not.

Mr. WALTZ. Do we have any local allies approaching the capability of the Kurds?

General MCKENZIE. We do not. There may be—

Mr. WALTZ. No.

General MCKENZIE [continuing]. Some options, but we do not.

Mr. WALTZ. We have the Northern Alliance. The Panjshir has been taken. Frankly, they are being slaughtered right now, as we speak, with our weapons. With our damn equipment, our allies are being slaughtered. Every morning, we wake up to beheading vid-

eos, to executions, to people being hunted down with our own database.

But, when and if you have to present options to the President, how many soldiers are we going to lose because we have no allies on the ground, we have no bases in the region?

Now, we are going to get to, really, the crux of the issue, which is over-the-horizon counterterrorism. Those drones have to fly all the way around Iran and all the way up Pakistan and lose 70 to 80 percent of their fuel before they even get anywhere near a target.

And we just saw from the failed attack, the botched attack, that you have to have multi-INT [multi-intelligence] intelligence confirming what that drone operator is seeing. I have called it in, and I know that drone operator would have appreciated somebody on the ground saying, no, that is a civilian, don't pull that trigger.

So I appreciate your candor in saying how difficult this is going to be, but the President of the United States is selling this country a fiction that we can do over here with nothing what we are doing over here with neighboring base access, with allies on the ground, and with ocean access. That is a fiction that I think you all need to own, and we need to be honest with the American people.

I am just livid at the fact of the future Americans that are going to have to go back to clean up this mess. We are watching this horror movie that Representative Slotkin experienced, that we all experienced after Iraq.

The President continues to say, well, we can do what we do in Somalia, we can do what we do in Syria. Mr. Secretary, you just briefed about a strike in Syria. We have a lot more capability there.

One more question. Do we have any evidence, intelligence or otherwise, of Pakistani troops on the ground—intelligence officers, air support, or any troops on the ground—assisting the Taliban or command and control assisting the Taliban offensive?

General MCKENZIE. I would prefer to answer that question in closed session.

Mr. WALTZ. I will take that as a yes.

And, Mr. Chairman—

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Waltz, your time has expired.

Mr. WALTZ [continuing]. That is not going to go to a civil war; it is going to go to a regional war.

The CHAIRMAN. And, just for the record, we are not going to put words in the mouths of our witnesses. You can't take it as a yes if it was not, in fact, a yes.

Ms. Escobar is now recognized.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, thank you so much for your incredible leadership, your patriotism, and your service to our country. I am very grateful for it.

I want to begin by saying that I am incredibly privileged to represent Fort Bliss. I represent El Paso, Texas. And Fort Bliss is offering hospitality right now to nearly 10,000 Afghan guests. And I want to say to those service members how proud I am of the work that they are doing to offer that hospitality.

I had the privilege to tour the Doña Ana village last month with NORTHCOM [United States Northern Command] Commander

General Van Herck, got to speak to many of those service members. Morale is high, and I could not be prouder of what they are doing. Had an opportunity, also, to speak to our Afghan guests, as well, and get a sense from them how they are doing.

We know that the die was cast with the Doha Agreement, an agreement that former President Trump entered into with the Taliban and the Taliban alone. We have learned that that agreement—it was that agreement that demoralized the Afghan Army, and the Taliban moved in and began making deals with them, which expedited their control. We know that that demoralization contributed to the rapid fall—the rapid fall of Afghanistan which shocked us all.

General Milley, earlier, you told us that when former President Trump entered into the Doha Agreement there was a setting out of very specific conditions that were to be met by the time of the May 1 drawdown. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. That is correct.

Ms. ESCOBAR. General Milley, how many of those conditions had been met when former President Trump then announced he wanted to speed up the withdrawal from May 1 to January 15, 2020?

General MILLEY. There was only one condition that was met. That was the condition that asked—or that the Taliban committed to not striking against U.S. forces and/or coalition forces, which they did not do.

Ms. ESCOBAR. And when then-President Trump announced the expedited drawdown, was he aware that four of the five conditions had not been met?

General MILLEY. I believe yes.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Do you know the significance, if there is any, of the January 15 expedited drawdown date?

General MILLEY. I don't. I was handed a piece of paper and went over and talked to folks in the White House, and it was rescinded. I don't know why that particular date was picked.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Okay.

Have we learned or do we know whether those announcements of expedited withdrawal added to or exacerbated the demoralized nature of the Afghan Army?

General MILLEY. Well, the 11 November order was not announced, but the drawdown to 2,500 was. We have detailed reporting, but I think, I believe—and we will do this in the AARs [after action reviews]—I think that was one of many contributing factors, not the only one, but one of many contributing factors to the decline of the morale of the Afghan security forces.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Thank you, General Milley.

You have also described the outcome of this withdrawal as a strategic failure. Can you share with us what would have been considered success for the administration, the service members, and military experts who have been involved in this conflict for over two decades and what it would have taken for us to get to success?

General MILLEY. I think and my opinion was that success would have been a negotiated solution between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban for a shared power-sharing arrangement in their government and an end to the, you know, civil war in that manner. I also assessed that the probability of that actually hap-



pening was low, but I did think that there was a possibility and it wasn't zero.

So a negotiated solution, I think, was probably the best way to describe a proper end to this war.

I don't think that there was a military solution by us to destroy or defeat the Taliban. I think that was not in the cards. And I didn't think at the time that if we sustained a level of effort in Afghanistan with our military, 2,500 or 3,500, in those ranges, I didn't think the Taliban could defeat the Afghan security forces.

That was my assessment at the time. And I thought success meant a negotiated settlement between the government and the Taliban and to have a power-sharing arrangement to end the war.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Thank you, General Milley.

I have about 15 seconds. Secretary Austin, has the U.S. military and Department of Defense begun to reimagine any of our existing involvements abroad to better assess risk of a fallout such as this one?

Secretary AUSTIN. We continue to take a look at ourselves across the board and how we are——

The CHAIRMAN. And the gentlelady's time has expired, so that will have to be taken for the record.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 146.]

Ms. ESCOBAR. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Johnson is recognized.

Mr. JOHNSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

There has been a dispute here today about the actual words that were shared in the ABC News George Stephanopoulos interview with the President. We took the liberty of getting the full transcript. I am going to read you the relevant excerpt and ask you a question.

And, Mr. Chairman, I would ask unanimous consent to enter the transcript into the record.

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection, so ordered.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 132.]

Mr. JOHNSON. So Stephanopoulos asked this. Quote, "But your military advisors warned against withdrawing on this timeline. They wanted you to keep about 2,500 troops."

Biden: "No, they didn't. It was split. That—that wasn't true. That wasn't true."

Stephanopoulos: "They didn't tell you that they wanted troops to stay?"

Biden: "No, not at—not in terms of whether we were going to get out in a timeframe all troops. They didn't argue against that."

Stephanopoulos: "So no one told—your military advisors did not tell you, 'No, we should just keep 2,500 troops, it has been a stable situation for the last several years, we can do that, we can continue to do that?'"

Biden: "No. No one said that to me that I can recall."

So, gentlemen, with all due respect, the American people deserve to know the truth in all this. They are asking us to get the truth.

So here is the thing. There are only three possibilities here. Either the President lied to the American people, or he legitimately

cannot remember the counsel of his top military advisors in winding down the longest war in American history, or you have not been fully accurate under oath.

General McKenzie, I will ask you: Which is it?

General MCKENZIE. I want to be very direct. I cannot share advice I give the President, and I will not do that.

I will also tell you, though, that it has been my consistent position throughout this hearing and the hearing yesterday that I believe the appropriate level of our forces in Afghanistan should have been 2,500.

Mr. JOHNSON. I think we can take that to mean that you gave him that advice.

Let me ask—

General MCKENZIE. Sir, I would not take it to mean anything other than the words I gave you, please.

Mr. JOHNSON. Fair enough.

Secretary Austin, what is it? What are we to believe by seeing all this?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, first of all, you heard me say earlier, Congressman, that I support the President's decision.

You also heard me say that I don't view this choice as a no-cost, no-risk choice. I do believe that, if we left 2,500 people there for an extended period of time, you would eventually have to reinforce those people, because the Taliban was going to—was committed to attacking us.

Mr. JOHNSON. Mr. Secretary, I understand all that. What we are trying to get to is, what did the President know? Did he forget what was told to him, or is he not being truthful? Which is it?

Secretary AUSTIN. I would view that as an inappropriate question, and I won't—

Mr. JOHNSON. Well, you may, but the American people don't.

Secretary AUSTIN. Okay.

Mr. JOHNSON. And the American people want and deserve accountability. And we even have service members like Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller being thrown in the brig for suggesting that.

The public's faith in our institutions continues to erode precisely because everyone in the DC bubble appears to have some sort of immunity from the basic standards the rest of America is expected to live by.

This is quite clearly one of the biggest military and foreign policy blunders since our withdrawal from Vietnam. So my question for all of you is very simple: Where does the blame lie?

Mr. Austin—Secretary Austin.

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, first of all, you know, I am responsible for everything that happens that DOD does, and it does a lot. I remain focused on defending this country, and that is going to be my focus for the foreseeable future.

Secondly, you know, I would remind you that we just evacuated 124,000 people—

Mr. JOHNSON. I appreciate—

Secretary AUSTIN [continuing]. In 17 days—

Mr. JOHNSON. I appreciate that you think that that was a big success, evacuation. But the blame for the disastrous withdrawal that everyone agrees was a disaster, who is to blame for that?

I will let the silence speak for itself.

General Milley, you said earlier this month that it is possible that we would work with the Taliban to conduct strikes against ISIS-K in Afghanistan, presumably referencing our over-the-horizon capabilities, but today you testified—you said, quote, “the Taliban remains a terrorist organization with ties to al-Qaida.”

So are you now suggesting that the United States form some sort of strategic partnership with a terrorist organization?

General MILLEY. No, absolutely not. I am not suggesting that at all.

Could I go to your first question, though?

Mr. JOHNSON. Please.

General MILLEY. Like Frank McKenzie—like General McKenzie, it is not our purview to share specific discussions with the President in terms of national security decision-making. But it was our opinion at the time, and it has been very consistent.

And I would also tell you that this administration did—and I was part of it, along with the Joint Chiefs—a very rigorous process. And this President—it was one of the most informed decisions that you can imagine, in terms of all sides of the argument.

We in the military, in the uniformed military, we look at the costs, the risk to force, the benefit, et cetera, in a narrow-focused view. Other decisionmakers have a much wider angle.

Mr. JOHNSON. I appreciate that. But what we are left with, in the 9 seconds I have left, is that we are supposed to believe that the President was either not informed by you of these very important factors or he forgot it. Either one is alarming.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. The gentleman’s time has expired.

And, since the transcript was submitted for the record, we read through this kind of quick, but Mr. Stephanopoulos says, “Your top military advisors warned against withdrawing in this timeline. They wanted you to keep about 2,500 troops.”

“No, they didn’t. It was split.”

That is what the President said. He didn’t say, “No, nobody advised me.” “It was split.”

Mr. JOHNSON. Mr. Chairman, read down two more lines.

The CHAIRMAN. I will be done in just a second, and then I will yield it back to you.

And then Stephanopoulos says: “No, no one said, ‘We should just keep 2,500 troops, it has been a stable situation for the last several years, we can do that, we can continue to do that?’”

“No. No one said that to me that I can recall. No one said, it has been a stable situation for the last several years, we can do that, we could continue to do that.”

Those are the words on the transcript that was just submitted. I will leave it to other people to interpret that, but those are the actual words.

And, yes, I will yield, Mr. Johnson, if you can do it quickly. Sorry. I want to get to some other people, but I should give you the chance. Go ahead.

Mr. JOHNSON. I will do it very quickly, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate that.

I mean, you just read it at face value.

Stephanopoulos says: "So no one told you—your military advisors did not tell you, "No, we should just keep 2,500 troops, it has been a stable situation for the last several years, we can do that, we can continue to do that?"

Biden says: "No, no one said that to me that I can recall."

The CHAIRMAN. You read quickly through the "it has been a stable situation" part, but that is kind of the important part. Okay.

Mr. JOHNSON. Well, look, it is open to—

The CHAIRMAN. I think we have—

Mr. JOHNSON [continuing]. Individual interpretation.

The CHAIRMAN. I think we have both made our point.

Mr. JOHNSON. All right. But I think—

The CHAIRMAN. I will move on to Mrs.—

Mr. JOHNSON [continuing]. The American people can use common sense, and it is—

The CHAIRMAN. Okay.

Mr. JOHNSON [continuing]. Alarming, whatever it is.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mrs. Luria, you are recognized.

Mrs. LURIA. Well, thank you.

And I would like to start, General Milley, by associating myself with the remarks that Ms. Cheney made at the beginning of her questions and focus on the timeframe immediately following the 2020 election.

On November 9, 2020, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper was replaced by Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller. And, additionally, other key leadership positions at DOD were abruptly filled with new people.

General Milley, did this rapid replacement of top senior officials at the Department of Defense in the final days of the administration give you concern regarding the transition of the administration?

General MILLEY. We in the military are trained for leadership replacement from the time we are a second lieutenant, follow one drills sort of thing. And it is clearly in the prerogative of any President to replace any Cabinet member or any appointee at all at any point in time.

So that is how I would answer that. We are prepared to execute at a moment's notice if someone is relieved.

Mrs. LURIA. And, General Milley, did you have any concerns at the time that involved the potential misuse of the military for political reasons?

General MILLEY. I was determined to make sure that the U.S. military is properly employed, and I would render my advice to ensure that the U.S. military is employed not for political use.

Mrs. LURIA. Well, thank you.

And it has been referenced a few times during the hearing today that you did cooperate with several authors for specific books. And it seems as though your choice to do that was that you wanted to get the story straight, the facts out there about different things that transpired during this timeframe. And you acknowledged

today that you frequently speak to reporters and also yesterday in comments to Senators that you sometimes do that anonymously.

I think that we would all like full transparency and full understanding of the facts surrounding this timeframe. And, as you know, I am a member of the select committee to investigate the events surrounding January 6. So I can speak for the committee to say that we will be very interested to have, you know, the same level of information and be able to speak to you in the future about those topics.

And I will shift now to another topic of discussion. And if I could ask my colleagues to please respect my time.

So, General Milley, you have spent half of your career fighting a war in Afghanistan, roughly. And when did you personally know that the war was lost?

General MILLEY. Well, I think if you go back to 5, 6 years ago, I knew it was stalemated. "Lost" is a different word, but I believed it was stalemated. And I believed 5 or 6 years ago that it was unwinnable through U.S. military means, for several reasons.

There is a sanctuary in Pakistan that was not going to be destroyed or defeated, and that insurgencies are highly political wars to begin with, and what was important to win is to have an indigenous government that was seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people, along with a military, their police and army, that could adequately deal with that situation.

But I knew years ago that it was stalemated, said that repeatedly, internal and external, and that winning would be defined as a negotiated solution, as most insurgencies are historically. They result in a negotiated solution between the insurgent and the regime. And I thought that was the best way that this could be handled. I didn't think there was a military solution.

Mrs. LURIA. So it is interesting to me that you used the word "winning." Did you think that winning was possible, or did you think that a stalemate or a status quo was really the only ultimate outcome that we could hope for in this situation?

General MILLEY. I think, as I recall, President Bush, at the very beginning of this thing 20 years ago, said winning would look a lot different in this war, or words to that effect. And I think he was right then. And I think that a negotiated solution was the best way of approaching a, quote/unquote, "win."

I think that would have been in the best interests of the United States and it would have been the best interests of the region and the Afghan people, was a negotiated solution between the Taliban, the insurgents, and the government.

Mrs. LURIA. Well, thank you.

And I saw Secretary Austin nodding. I know there is very little time left. Did you want to add something briefly?

Secretary AUSTIN. You heard me say at the very top that, you know, my hope was that we could reach a negotiated settlement. A stalemate would actually provide the opportunity to do that, for both sides to negotiate in earnest if neither thought that they were going to win.

And, again, we just never reached that point, because the Taliban had advantages coming into this, because we weren't striking them, we released prisoners—

The CHAIRMAN. The gentlelady's time has expired. Appreciate it. A couple of quick announcements. So there is a vote on. We have a hard stop at 2:00. We are going to stop at 2:00. I am going to go vote.

Mrs. Luria, if you could take the chair for just a moment, I will come back as quickly as I can and then free you of that obligation.

But it is my intention to roll through that. So, members, you know, vote accordingly, be here. I think we have Ms. Jacobs who is up next on our side, so we have a couple people that will get us through that. But that is what we are going to do.

And Mrs. Bice is recognized for 5 minutes, and I will be right back.

Mrs. BICE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I want to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

Over the last few weeks, I have heard an outpouring of concern and frustration from my constituents, veterans and military families chief among them, who have expressed their outrage at the disastrous withdrawal and the abandonment of our Afghan allies and even American citizens.

I, too, am deeply outraged and have been equally stunned by the lack of leadership shown by President Biden throughout all of this. The American people deserve to have a full accounting of the President's decision-making processes and what ultimately led to a disastrous outcome.

Gentlemen, this is not about whether or not we should have left or not. This is about how we left. We may not get all the answers, but the public deserves in today's hearing to know the facts surrounding this.

My first question, two part, regarding Bagram Air Base. During the Senate testimony yesterday, General Austin, you said the choice to abandon Bagram was made carefully based on the mission to protect the Embassy.

What aspect of security at HKIA made it more secure than Bagram? And, following that, you mentioned in your opening statement Bagram had little strategic value. If you could elaborate on both of those, please.

Secretary AUSTIN. I certainly didn't say Bagram has little strategic value in my opening statement. We can certainly—we can break it out and go through it line by line if you would like.

I would point out to you that I commanded Bagram at one point in time, so—there may be other people in the room who have done that, but probably not. So I know a lot about Bagram and what it offers.

The key point here is that the Embassy was in Kabul. And our mission at transition was to provide security, additional security, for the Embassy. And, in the event of an evacuation, we would have to start with evacuating the Embassy first. And so Kabul makes all—I mean, it provides everything that you need to be able to do that—capacity, the proximity. And so I think it was the right choice.

Mrs. BICE. But isn't it accurate that HKIA has one runway whereas Bagram had multiple runways, which would have made it easier for the evacuation of individuals from—

Secretary AUSTIN. And that is a great point. I would have to secure it. The reason we could stay there with 2,500 people earlier was because we had the Afghan Security Forces securing the outer perimeter of Bagram.

If you no longer have that, then you have to commit 5 or 6,000 troops to do that and then secure it, defend it, and then run the air ops. So that is a substantial additional commitment of resources.

Mrs. BICE. General Milley or General McKenzie, anything you would like to add?

General MCKENZIE. I would just like to briefly talk about Bagram. It has two runways, but that is actually not what you want to examine when you look at an airfield. It is an arcane thing called the MOG [maximum-on-ground]. It is the ability to load aircraft and move aircraft around the runway. And HKIA had better facilities than Bagram for that.

Additionally, as the Secretary noted, the simple distance from where the people are had to be a planning factor. And last, of course, we were under direction to go to zero, 650 to secure the Embassy. So Bagram was not an option under those circumstances.

Mrs. BICE. Thank you.

General MILLEY. I would add, if I could, if you have the assumption that there is no Afghan Army, the, 73 towers at Bagram, as a minimum, there is 3 big gates. You have to have a quick reaction force, you're going to have to patrol out to rocket range, and then you're going to have to secure the 30 miles of road between Kabul and Bagram. We would have never been able to get 124,000 people out of Bagram. It just wouldn't have happened.

The center of gravity of a NEO was always going to be HKIA. The security issues clearly are different at HKIA than they are at Bagram, but Bagram was really not a feasible option given numbers of troops, distance, and the security requirements.

Mrs. BICE. Thank you, General Milley. Follow-up question, you mentioned having to evacuate so quickly. Do you trust the information that you are receiving from our intelligence community, General Austin?

Secretary AUSTIN. I have confidence in the information that we get from the intel community, yes. That doesn't say that they will be 100 percent right all the time.

Mrs. BICE. Given the fact that it seems as though they did not at all plan for a complete surrender of the Afghan forces upon the withdrawal of U.S. troops?

Secretary AUSTIN. They predicted that outcome, but a different timeline as we have—you have heard us say before so—

Mrs. BICE. In addition to the botched over-the-horizon activity that killed 10 Afghans, still believe that the intelligence community can be trusted and is effective?

Secretary AUSTIN. Again, I have confidence in the intel community. In terms of—

Mrs. LURIA [presiding]. The gentlelady's time has expired.

I will now recognize Ms. Jacobs for 5 minutes.

Ms. JACOBS. Thank you, Madam Chair. And thank you all for being here. I would like to follow up on the questions regarding the August 29th drone strike that killed Zemari Ahmadi, a worker for

a Southern California-based aid group and nine of his family members, including seven children. And General McKenzie, you called the strike a tragic mistake and I think we can all agree with that characterization.

This is an open hearing so I am not going to ask about the specific intelligence that led to the strike, but General Milley, you said even after the truth was revealed that there was a reasonable certainty that the target was valid.

So I would like to know, do you have that same level of confidence in the intelligence that you have had for similar strikes carried out under DOD's authority.

General MILLEY. Yes, I do. I mean, intelligence is not perfect. Intel as Representative Johnson just said or Bice just said, it is never perfect. We are not going to get perfection in the world of intelligence. They speak in terms of probabilistic language, what is more likely than not. And I believe that we have good reason to have confidence in our intelligence systems.

They are not perfect, but we have good reason to have confidence in them and I think that has been expressed over time in the accuracy and precision of these strikes.

Ms. JACOBS. I understand.

General MILLEY. This one strike was bad. It was tragic. It was horrible. But that is not to say that the intelligence system as a whole is wrong.

Ms. JACOBS. Okay. But given that we have actually had multiple of these mistakes that we already know about, including the AC-130 gunship attack in 2015 that destroyed an MSF [Médecins Sans Frontières] hospital and killed 42 civilians, what assurances can you give us and the American people that our drone program has adequate safeguards?

And Secretary Austin, you said that the Department has endeavored to learn from this latest mistake; what have you learned?

Secretary AUSTIN. Thanks. Again, I would just remind you that I have directed a review of this operation and so I won't make any comments on specifics here because that review is ongoing, but in terms of our commitment to learning from all of our operations, we remain committed to doing that and we are specifically concerned whenever there is an inadvertent loss of life and an injury to civilians, and so we take that very seriously and we hold ourselves accountable for that so.

Ms. JACOBS. Great. And we, in this committee, will be looking forward to seeing the results of that review and also having accountability.

General McKenzie, yesterday when asked by Senator Mark Kelly about the over-the-horizon counterterrorism, you said, and I quote: As we go forward in our ability to create the ecosystem that allows you to see on the ground and put it together, it is going to be harder in places like Afghanistan, end quote.

I know many of my colleagues have already asked about what this means for our ability to counter groups like ISIS-K. I have a different question. What does that mean for our ability to prevent civilian casualties so that we don't see another drone strike like the one that took place in Kabul?



And if the ability to prevent civilian casualties becomes harder, will you and CENTCOM take extra precautions in selecting target packages or how are you planning to deal with this extra uncertainty.

General MCKENZIE. Thank you for the question. The strike that was undertaken in Kabul on the 29th was a self-defense strike. It was taken because we believe there was an imminent attack developing against our forces at HKIA. So that is very different than the type of strike we would undertake in an over-the-horizon scenario. The principal differences would be this: We would not be under the acute pressure of time because we thought the attack was imminent, because if we are striking a target in Afghanistan, there is actually no immanency to that attack. We are talking weeks and maybe months, rather than hours or minutes.

So you have opportunity to develop pattern life. You have the opportunity to apply all the other disciplines of intelligence that can help us whether that is signal, image, human intelligence, and we would work hard to try to reconstitute that to a degree. And I will talk more about that in a future classified session with you.

But it would be wrong to believe that the strike in Kabul, which I have acknowledged went badly wrong, is the prototype that we would employ for past or future over-the-horizon strikes.

Ms. JACOBS. Well, thank you. I will look forward to working with you all to make sure that we do that well, and I will note your comments on imminence next time we have questions about war powers with some of these strikes.

But with that, I will yield back.

Mrs. LURIA. Thank you.

And Mr. Jackson is recognized for 5 minutes.

Dr. JACKSON. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Secretary Austin, General McKenzie, General Milley for being here today. It is a very important hearing that we are having here. I appreciate the committee's urgency in making this happen. While there was bipartisan support for withdrawal from Afghanistan, there were differences in opinion on how that should have been conducted.

Something we should all be able to agree on is that the withdrawal should have been conditions-based and there should not have been any political motivation involved in this decision, which I don't think was the actual case.

But, gentlemen, I would like to ask you, how often were you in contact with your Chinese counterpart in discussing our evacuation efforts in Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. Zero. And I agree with you, conditions-based.

Dr. JACKSON. General Milley, on August 18th you were quoted as saying: The timeframe of a rapid collapse was widely estimated in range from weeks to months and even years following our departure. There was nothing that I or anyone else saw that indicated a collapse of this Army and this government in 11 days.

Between the 18th and the 21st of June, in just 4 days, 21 districts and 9 provinces fell to the Taliban and the Afghan security forces quickly surrendered and abandoned their post. This was an obvious beginning to the end of the Afghan Army and to the Taliban takeover.

General Milley, what were you doing during this timeframe? Before you answer that question, let me tell you. You were 2 days—just 2 days prior to when these provinces fell, you were here in our committee on June 23rd. You sat before this committee and you listed some of your concerns that we talked in depth about. One was defending critical race theory in the military, telling us you want to understand White rage, telling us how offended you were to be labeled as woke, and worrying about what caused American civilians to enter the Capitol on January 6th.

I submit to you that perhaps we would not have had 13 service members and hundreds of Afghans killed, 18 service members wounded, and countless U.S. citizens abandoned and left as Taliban hostages if you had been more focused on your duty to this country instead of defending and pandering to the Biden administration's woke social experiment with the United States military, doing book interviews, and colluding with Chinese military officials.

Yesterday Senator Cotton asked you why you haven't resigned and you said you were not going to resign just because the President didn't take your advice. Well, I submit to you, sir, that you should resign because of your dereliction of duty to this country and your inability to do your job and protect this country. It has become abundantly clear that the American people have completely lost confidence in your ability to do your job.

General Milley, will you now resign?

General MILLEY. I serve at the pleasure of the President, Mr. Jackson.

Dr. JACKSON. I yield back my time.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Thank you. And just for the record, on that date in question, what Chairman Milley was doing is he was appearing before this committee at our request and answering the questions that we asked him. And I appreciate his willingness and the willingness of all the leadership to appear before us. That is an incredibly important part of their job and I don't want to leave any of you with the impression that we don't want you to do it just because of questions like that.

Mr. Kahele is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. KAHELE. Mahalo, Mr. Chairman. Aloha, Secretary Austin, Chairman Milley, General McKenzie. Mahalo for all of your testimony and taking the time to be here today. As someone who has also worn a uniform, still wears a uniform, I am very appreciative of your service and having first deployed through Operation Enduring Freedom in 2005, I am glad the U.S. involvement in the war is over. I support the President's decision, however, I am concerned that the accelerated withdrawal, the strategic failure and fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban has damaged U.S. credibility with our allies and partners.

As a former C-17 mission commander, I will never forget those images that I saw early in the morning of 15 August from Kabul with total chaos at HKIA and Afghans falling out of the sky desperate to flee the country. So I think my questions will focus on Secretary Austin's testimony and it is really on the NEO operation that my colleagues Rep. Crow and had referred to.

And so, Secretary Austin, in your testimony you stated that military planners had crafted a number of evacuation scenarios. In mid-May, you had ordered CENTCOM to make preparations for a potential NEO and that on the 10th of August, there was another NEO tabletop. When did the State Department actually call for the NEO?

Secretary AUSTIN. I believe it was on the 14th, Congressman, 14th of August.

Mr. KAHELE. On the 14th of August the State Department called for the NEO. So you stated in your testimony that the NEO remains among the most challenging military operations even in the best of circumstances and the circumstances in August were anything but ideal—extreme heat, a landlocked country, no government, a highly dynamic situation on the ground, and an active, credible, and lethal terrorist threat. And that also in your testimony that you had offered input to the State Department that although, mindful of their concerns that moving too soon would actually cause a very collapse of the Afghan Government that we all wanted to avoid, but that moving too late would put our people and our operations at greater risk.

And so what I am trying to figure out is, you know, despite the President's decision to order the withdrawal on April 14th and that the troop presence will go to zero. On May 1st, a withdrawal began. You know, by May and June of 2021, the Taliban had captured a quarter of the country. Representative Crow identified on June 11, there was a NEO tabletop that was done.

On August 6, the Taliban captured the first capital. On August 10th, we did a tabletop. Why were we doing a tabletop on August 10th when the Taliban was rapidly advancing to Kabul? On August 14th, Jalalabad and Mazar-i-Sharif fell and by August 15th, the Taliban had entered Kabul. That is what I am trying to figure out, Secretary Austin, is why did we wait—I know we had to wait for the State Department to call for the NEO, but why did we wait so long to do that, even though we had prepositioned forces, as you had mentioned, in Afghanistan. We had the 24th MEU there, 82nd Airborne was coming in, but the airfield was still in total chaos on August 15th.

Secretary AUSTIN. So I think what changed the equation here—we anticipated that just based upon the disposition of forces that were kind of centered around the population center that the Afghans would, in fact, put up, you know, more significant resistance.

And so we anticipated that that fighting would be a bit more intense. As they approached Ghazni, we didn't see the fight that we thought we would see. And that was a trigger for us to begin to move some things very quickly.

And then, even as they moved north of Ghazni, we expected that as they approached Kabul that, again, those forces that were there would fight more. And we had—there was a government in place still at the time, but with the government collapsing and leaving and that precipitated the evaporation of the security forces and that really panicked the people. And so what you saw on that first day was a result of that panic.

Mr. KAHELE. Should the NEO operation have commenced sooner than April 14th?

Secretary AUSTIN. I certainly think it could have, yeah. Again, we had the elements to begin to operate a bit sooner. But again, that is a State Department call and——

Mr. KAHELE. Totally understand.

Secretary AUSTIN [continuing]. We provide our input and it is based upon a lot of things. And this is not throwing my State Department colleagues under the bus; it is a very dynamic and challenging situation.

Mr. KAHELE. General McKenzie, you stated that primarily our NEO plan included AMCITs [American citizens] and Embassy personnel. When did the NEO planning begin to include Afghans and SIVs?

General MCKENZIE. Late in spring, early in the summer. We began to broaden that plan.

Mr. KAHELE. Thank you for your questions.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Franklin is recognized.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you, gentlemen, for your patience and persistence these last 2 days. I understand that it is a lot of hours to be sitting before all of us and then when you are tiling Charlie like I am in this batting order, most of the ground has been broken, but I do have a couple things.

But, first, I was kind of puzzled hearing General McKenzie's characterization of our departure now out of Afghanistan as being something other than a surrender. You know, it doesn't feel that way to me. It certainly doesn't feel that way to the American public and 20 years ago exactly I was sitting in Bahrain, we were planning the initial strikes into Afghanistan, and at that time our marching orders were to defeat al-Qaida and to ensure that the Afghanistan would no longer be a safe haven for terrorists.

And now fast-forward 20 years, those conditions while, you know, General Milley, you said within maybe to 6 to 36 months the country will be ripe, again, potentially to be launching strikes like that or targeting against us, it doesn't feel like it is anything other than a surrender.

But General McKenzie, you had mentioned that holding Bagram was untenable under the circumstances and that the Bagram option went away when you were given an end strength of 650.

I understand that. I assume that you mean that it was untenable because of the troop limitation. But if you had not been limited, would your professional military advice been to relinquish Bagram?

General MCKENZIE. So, at a troop level of 2,500, we would have held Bagram and that would have been my recommendation. That was my position.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Okay. So you had also mentioned that there was no tactical reason to hold Bagram. Would you elaborate? I assume that would mean—I don't want to put words in your mouth, but strategically would you see a value to us still being——

General MCKENZIE. When I said there was no tactical reason to hold Bagram, I was specifically talking about the NEO operation. So once we went down to 650 and then we were given the orders to conduct a NEO. For the reasons the Secretary and the Chairman have already outlined, the center of gravity of that was actually

HKIA. It is where the people are. You got the MOG operating capacity there to move airplanes in and out.

I will tell you this, though, Representative, we had a branch plan to seize Bagram Airfield should HKIA have become untenable, but that would have required as has already been noted, significant investment in combat power. And HKIA never became untenable.

So we did not have to consider that plan, although we had a highly detailed plan to be able to do it. It simply was not necessary because we were able to maintain the throughput at HKIA.

And, again, had we gone into Bagram, we would have introduced significant additional U.S. combat forces into the country and probably would have provoked another conflict with the Taliban, which would have been a political decision, not a military decision.

Mr. FRANKLIN. I understand. Political decision. But, you know, here it is since 1898 we have maintained Guantanamo Bay. So we do have a history of keeping territory even in lands where we don't have friendly forces there at our side, but I do know seeing already the challenge with over the horizon—conducting our strikes over the horizon it sure would be nice to have that field now.

Secretary Austin, I just want to wholeheartedly agree with Chairman Smith's comment earlier that we make the decisions in the world that we live in and we don't have the luxury of having a magic wand. I get that and that is the world you all face every day. You told us that you would like to have seen this conflict end with a negotiated settlement.

General Milley, you did as well. I know there has been a lot of talk about whether President Trump should have been negotiating with the Taliban or not. But that is a different conversation for another day, but those terms that were agreed to were not really complied with by the Taliban, and here it is—we know that, General Milley, in your testimony, seven of the eight conditions that were given to the Taliban were broken.

In light of that failure, Secretary Austin, do you think it was wise for us to continue with the timeline or do we feel compelled because I constantly hear the administration pushing back saying we had no choice. Our hands were tied. The Trump administration tied our hands to this timeline, but the Taliban didn't comply with their end of the deal and now we are kind of stuck in a bad situation. Do you feel that we should have pushed a timeline not necessarily to stay in Afghanistan. I get it. I think there is a time for us to start negotiating an exit there, but in light of how disastrous the hasty withdrawal turned out to be, we could have used more time to get those folks out.

Secretary AUSTIN. Quite frankly, because of the fact that, you know, for a year we weren't striking the Taliban, they were increasing in combat power. We released 5,000 prisoners which kind of regenerated combat power for them. They were able to make advances against the Afghan Security Forces because, you know, we weren't doing things to fully support—

The CHAIRMAN. Again, I apologize. The gentleman's time has expired. That will have to suffice.

Mr. Panetta is recognized.

Mr. PANETTA. Thank you. I appreciate this hearing, Mr. Chair. And good afternoon and thank you, gentlemen. Thank you for being

here. Thank you for your service, not just in Operation Enduring Freedom [OEF], but throughout your career service to our great Nation.

As an American, as a veteran of OEF, I want to thank you for continuing to remind the American public not to reduce the service of 800,000 men and women who served in Afghanistan down to a 2-week chaotic withdrawal, not to reduce the sacrifice of the 2,461 men and women down to a single photo of a C-17 on the Kabul tarmac.

But as you know and as an American and as a veteran and as a Representative, it is my duty to ask questions. And let me tell you, my constituents are asking a lot of questions. And I think the problem with the withdrawal is that it has left more questions than answers.

With the withdrawal, we ended our involvement with the war in Afghanistan, but we still have the war on terror. We withdrew our troops, but will we have to go in? Yes, we evacuated 122,000 and you should be proud of that, but what about the others who remain?

And on that note, I just want you to think about the definition of success shouldn't be based on how many people you got out, but how many people we left behind. And so what I am hearing is a lot of frustration from my constituents who have family members there in Afghanistan who literally have nobody to turn to to get out when it comes to on the ground. They are devastated by the deaths of the 12 Marines and the 1 sailor and, yes, I got to be frank, they are a little humiliated seeing the Taliban drive around, screw around with American equipment.

And this is hyperbole, but I do think it sums it up pretty good that I heard this quote about this frustration, and it says: Something is not right when the Taliban can get American-made ammunition easier than Americans can. And four, I do believe that we are dumbfounded. Dumbfounded that this government, the Afghan Government, absolutely disappeared and hundreds of thousands of well-equipped Afghan troops shed their uniforms, dropped their weapons, and ran.

I do believe, though, that the underlying foundation for the reason for why this government crumbled and why those troops fled is corruption. We basically supported a Potemkin village and when we left, it fell. It basically set up a system as we saw throughout the 20 years there from birth certificates to death certificates, it was all about bribes.

And what we were left with when we were about to leave was a state that had grown so corrupt that governors were cutting deals with jihadists to switch sides. Inflation was rampant because of the money we handed out and it left ghost soldiers, basically absentees listed on the payroll so commanders could steal the salaries. Very similar to what happened in Vietnam and you are seeing a lot of similarities presented to that case.

And there are a lot of studies obviously after Vietnam where it said corruption was the fundamental ill that was largely responsible for the ultimate collapse. So my question to you is, do you believe that corruption was the fundamental ill that was largely responsible for the collapse of the Afghan Government? If so, elabo-

rate. If not, what would you consider the fundamental ill for the quick collapse of that government?

Secretary AUSTIN. Thank you. I certainly agree that corruption played a major role in the collapse of the government and the security forces. I also believe that weak leadership added to that and the fact that President Ghani frequently, without any apparent reason, changed out his commanders which degraded the confidence of the troops in their leadership.

So I think—and I believe also that the Doha Agreement had a significant negative affect on the morale of the military. And so I think there is, you know, a combination of a number of things that came together to create these effects, but I certainly agree that corruption was central to this issue.

Mr. PANETTA. General.

General MILLEY. Absolutely. And I would even take it one level higher. I think it is about the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the people and the eyes of its military, and I think that corruption is one of the contributing factors to delegitimize.

It is my observation—again, have to gather all the facts, but I think at the village level, the Government of Afghanistan was looked at as parasitic as opposed to supportive with the exception possibly of the Afghan Army itself. But the government, the local officials, the police forces, et cetera, were clearly delegitimized in the eyes of the people.

And that, I think was a major contributing factor to the dissolution of the government and the army and the collapse of the whole thing in a very, very rapid period of time.

Mr. PANETTA. Thank you, again.

I yield back my time. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Okay. We have got quickly Mr. Fallon and then Mr. Horsford and we are going to be done. Mr. Fallon, you are recognized.

Mr. FALLON. Thank you, Mr. Chair. During this hearing, the virtue of courage was used to describe the current President and I think that is misplaced. I think the virtue of courage should be attributed to the 2,461 troops that we lost, that gave everything; the 20,698 that were maimed and injured and wounded; and the 800,000 that served. I am a little perplexed and thank you for being here. I wanted to clear something up.

During the testimony, General McKenzie, you were asked when you knew that the drone strike on August 29th had gone tragically wrong and correct me, just yes or no, you said about 5 or 6 hours later you learned that. Is that correct?

General MCKENZIE. That is when we learned that civilians had been killed.

Mr. FALLON. So it went wrong?

General MCKENZIE. No. I did not say that.

Mr. FALLON. Okay.

General MCKENZIE. I said that is when we learned that civilians had been killed—

Mr. FALLON. Would you have considered 5 or 6 hours later a righteous strike?

General MCKENZIE. We took that strike based on the belief that the vehicle was going to be used in an attack against us.

Mr. FALLON. So we knew that people that shouldn't have been killed were killed 5 or 6 hours after, yes?

General MCKENZIE. We knew that probably people that were not involved [inaudible] took us a little longer to learn the rest of the story.

Mr. FALLON. Agreed. Secretary Austin, same? You learned about 5 or 6 hours after that people that should not have been killed were killed?

Secretary AUSTIN. I learned from General McKenzie's reporting that there was collateral damage. And whenever that happens, we investigate.

Mr. FALLON. Okay. Thank you. Okay. And then, General Milley, on September 1st, 3 days later, you described it as "a righteous strike." People that were not supposed to be killed were killed and you described it as "a righteous strike."

General MILLEY. You have to go back and look at the full quote. What I said was, we followed the procedures, I had every reason to believe that we followed our procedures at that point in time. We knew that there were civilians killed. We knew they were non-combatants and there was collateral damage.

Mr. FALLON. Yes. You said were others killed? Yes. Who were they, we don't know. We are trying to sort through all that.

General MILLEY. That is right. Because I believed, I believed that the target that we were aiming—

Mr. FALLON. Sir—

General MILLEY. I believe the target we were aiming at—

Mr. FALLON. Okay. I have 3 more minutes. Now General Milley, you served under both President Trump and Biden?

General MILLEY. Correct.

Mr. FALLON. Okay. I have spoken with former Secretary of State Pompeo, had a very extensive conversation with director—former National Director of Intelligence John Ratcliffe, and what was the general sentiment of senior advisers if conditions weren't met, what would happen in Afghanistan?

How long the Afghan Army and government would last? Do you recall that? I would imagine you were sitting in on those meetings.

General MILLEY. I am not sure I am understanding the question. If conditions are not met—

Mr. FALLON. If conditions aren't met and we withdraw, how long is the Afghan Government going to last—back then?

General MILLEY. I am not going to speak for them; I will speak for myself—

Mr. FALLON. Please do.

General MILLEY. I am on record having said that if we go to zero that there is a high probability of the government and the Afghan Army collapsing. In terms of time, I put that at between 1 and 3 years at the time I wrote this stuff back in a year ago in the fall of 2020.

Mr. FALLON. Okay. That is interesting when you say that because when I talked to both Mr. Pompeo and Mr. Ratcliffe, they told me that there was unanimity, even President Trump said, if conditions are not met that the Afghan Army and the government would collapse within weeks and the longest they heard maybe a month or two. That's what they gave me. Because I was just sur-



prised that because Secretary Austin said in his remarks today that the fact that the Afghan Army—we and our partners trained simply melted away in many cases was a shock.

John Ratcliffe told me he told his successor that they were going to collapse instantaneously if those conditions weren't met; they were going to evaporate. And now [inaudible] but I think—General Milley, with all due respect—

General MILLEY. Sure.

Mr. FALLON [continuing]. What I think it is, it was not a failure of intelligence; it seems to me—I didn't know this stuff. I wasn't in the room, you were, that it was a failure to heed that intelligence and act accordingly.

General MILLEY. I can show you the intelligence reports that were produced under Mr. Ratcliffe—

Mr. FALLON. I appreciate that. I have 50 seconds left. Thank you.

General MILLEY. Sure.

Mr. FALLON. All right. So we got 5,000 bad guys in Bagram, in jail at Bagram, right? Am I right, General McKenzie? And then we go down to 650, we can't hold it so we split around July 1st I think we left.

General MCKENZIE. 12th.

Mr. FALLON. July 12th and it fell August 15th, correct? And they got out then? August 16th? And then we have an attack on our troops couple weeks later. Can any of you guarantee the American people that out of those 5,000 bad guy scumbags none of them were directly responsible for killing our troops?

General MCKENZIE. No. I cannot guarantee that.

General MILLEY. I cannot guarantee that, no.

Mr. FALLON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I yield back my time.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Mr. Horsford is recognized.

Mr. HORSFORD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. And to the generals I will be brief. I have several questions and appreciate your concise response.

General McKenzie, on August 30th, you told the media that while you maintained the ability to bring American citizens and civilians out until immediately before the departure of the final flight, no civilians were on those aircraft and that mission ended approximately 12 hours before the exit.

So to clarify, when did the last American citizen successfully pass through Taliban perimeter into HKIA gate.

General MCKENZIE. That is a very specific question. I will have to come back to you on the record, but I will come back to you.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 164.]

Mr. HORSFORD. Thank you. And when did the last Afghan civilian successfully pass through the gate?

General MCKENZIE. Same thing. It was some hours before, but I will come back to you with an exact time on that.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 164.]

Mr. HORSFORD. And how many individuals successfully passed through the Taliban perimeter in the 72 hours proceeding the departure of the final flight?

General MCKENZIE. Probably in the low hundreds, but I will come back to you with an exact number.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 164.]

Mr. HORSFORD. Thank you. I understand that on August 19th ground commanders authorized the use of helicopters to rescue 169 Americans from the Baron Hotel after the initial plan for them to proceed on foot became too dangerous. At what time were rotary wing aviation assets no longer operation at HKIA?

General MCKENZIE. So, first of all, you are right. The Baron Hotel, we should note, is about 200 meters off the HKIA compound. So it is not a long distance, but we did use helicopters for that. We kept helicopters up until the very end. In fact, one of the final things we did before actually extracting from the C-17s was breaking down some helicopters and loading them.

Mr. HORSFORD. And what were the specific contingency plans to continue the evacuation if the Taliban closed checkpoints surrounding the airport?

Mr. MCKENZIE. So at all times we were prepared to accept American citizens that were able to make it to the gate. There was an external Taliban cordon. We've talked about that. The external Taliban cordon was actually part of the force protection scheme for the base. Commanders on the ground had to balance their force protection against the need to allow Americans, SIVs, and others to enter. So we tried to work closely when we could with the Taliban to ensure free passage for Americans.

Mr. HORSFORD. So why then were the plans not implemented once it became clear that no additional American citizens were going to be allowed to pass through the Taliban checkpoints?

General MCKENZIE. We attempted with the Taliban to allow Americans to be able to get to the gate up until the very end. I do not have facts on why that did not happen. Our presence on the ground then, we should remember, was very small and we were beginning to turn inward as we prepared to extract.

Mr. HORSFORD. General Milley, in 2017, the GAO [Government Accountability Office] released a report on recommendations to enhance the readiness of the Global Response Force to support contingency operations. In June of 2021, GAO assessed that the Department had not implemented any of their three recommendations to improve readiness due to the ongoing development of the dynamic force employment concept.

So I am curious, what percentage of the total Immediate Response Force [IRF] and existing prepositioned forces deployed in support of Operation Spartan Shield were deployed to HKIA to assist in the NEO? And how many additional battalions intended to be— IRF follow-on force were available for short notice deployment but not deployed?

General MILLEY. We had and I will—Frank, can correct me 100 percent here in a minute, but we had two battalions, the MEU [Marine Expeditionary Unit], and another Marine battalion prepositioned in the Middle East, along with an Army infantry battalion prepositioned in the Middle East, and there was a battalion already on the ground.

So that is four, plus we alerted on the Secretary's order marshaled and deployed the IRF—and the GRF [Global Response Force], which is a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division, very, very rapidly and we had 6,000 troops at HKIA very, very rapidly. I think we far exceeded any of the standards that are published for the GRF or the RF [Response-Force]. In addition to that, we had a variety of high end special operations forces that alerted, marshaled, and deployed extraordinarily rapidly. So we easily met any kind of rapid deployment standards and we exceeded them.

Mr. HORSFORD. Thank you, gentlemen, for your service to our military men and women and to our veterans who served over the 20 years during this longest war in U.S. history. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. And thank you, gentlemen, for your testimony today and I know certainly it was a contentious hearing, but it is enormously important that we have the opportunity to have these conversations. I do not in any way support some of the comments that some of my colleagues made or the way they chose to conduct themselves, but that is a small price to pay for the transparency that we need to allow the committee to do its job.

I appreciate you being willing to do that in giving us the opportunity to have this discussion and we will certainly continue to discuss the situation in South Asia as we go forward. Appreciate your testimony.

Mr. Rogers, anything for the good of the order?

Mr. ROGERS. Mr. Chairman, the one thing I would like to ask is that as soon as practical that we do have the classified hearing on the over-the-horizon capabilities because as I have spoken individually with all three of these gentlemen, I am very concerned about our counterterrorism capabilities and how we are going to address that.

The CHAIRMAN. We will have multiple classified hearings on that subject. That is going to be an ongoing topic, but yes, it is something we need to do soon.

Thank you.

Again, we are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 2:04 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]



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# **A P P E N D I X**

SEPTEMBER 29, 2021

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**PREPARED STATEMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD**

SEPTEMBER 29, 2021

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**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD J. AUSTIN III**  
**PREPARED REMARKS BEFORE THE**  
**HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**  
**SEPTEMBER 29, 2021**

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Rogers, members of the committee: thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss our recent drawdown and evacuation operations in Afghanistan.

I am pleased to be joined by Generals Milley and McKenzie, who I know will be able to provide you with additional context.

I am incredibly proud of the men and women of the U.S. armed forces, who conducted themselves with tremendous skill and professionalism throughout the war, the drawdown, and the evacuation.

Over the course of our nation's longest war, 2,461 of our fellow Americans made the ultimate sacrifice, along with more than 20,000 who still bear the wounds of war, some of which cannot be seen on the outside.

We can discuss and debate the decisions, the policies, and the turning points since April of this year, when the President made clear his intent to end American involvement in this war. We can debate the decisions over 20 years that led us to this point.

But one thing not open to debate is the courage and compassion of our service members, who – along with their families – served and sacrificed to ensure that our homeland would never again be attacked the way it was on September 11, 2001.

I had the chance to speak with many of them during my trip to the Gulf region a few weeks ago, including the Marines who lost 11 of their teammates at the Abbey Gate in Kabul on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August. I have never been more humbled and inspired. They are rightfully proud of what they accomplished, and the lives they saved, in such a short span of time.

The reason that our troops were able to get there so quickly is because we planned for just such a contingency. We began thinking about the possibilities for a non-combatant evacuation as far back as this spring.

By late April, two weeks after the President's decision, military planners had crafted a number of evacuation scenarios. In mid-May, I ordered Central Command to make preparations for a potential non-combatant evacuation operation. Two weeks later, I began pre-positioning forces in the region, to include three infantry battalions. On the 10th of August, we ran another table-top exercise around a non-combatant evacuation scenario. We wanted to be ready. And we were.

By the time that the State Department called for the NEO, significant numbers of additional forces had already arrived in Afghanistan, including leading elements of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, who were already on the ground in Kabul. Before that weekend was out, another 3,000 or so ground troops had arrived, including elements of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne.

To be clear, those first two days were difficult. We all watched with alarm the images of Afghans rushing the runway and our aircraft. We all remember the scenes of confusion outside the airport. But within 48 hours, our troops restored order, and process began to take hold.

Our soldiers, airmen, and Marines – in partnership with our allies, our partners, and our State Department colleagues – secured the gates, took control of airport operations, and set up a processing system for the tens of thousands of people they would be manifesting onto airplanes. They and our commanders exceeded all expectations.

We planned to evacuate between 70,000-80,000 people. They evacuated more than 124,000.

We planned to move between 5,000-9,000 people per day. On average, they moved slightly more than 7,000 per day.

On military aircraft alone, we flew more than 387 sorties, averaging nearly 23 per day. At the height of this operation, an aircraft was taking off every 45 minutes. And not a single sortie was missed for maintenance, fuel, or logistical problems.

It was the largest airlift conducted in U.S. history, and it was executed in just 17 days. Was it perfect? Of course not. We moved so many people so quickly out of Kabul that we ran into capacity and screening problems at intermediate staging bases outside of Afghanistan.

We are still working to get Americans out who wish to leave. We did not get out all of our Afghan allies enrolled in the Special Immigrant Visa program. We take that very seriously. That is why we are working across the interagency to continue facilitating their departure. Even with no military presence on the ground, that part of our mission is not over.

Tragically, lives were also lost: several Afghans killed climbing aboard an aircraft on that first day; 13 brave U.S. service members and dozens of Afghan civilians killed in a terrorist attack on the 26<sup>th</sup>; and we took as many as 10 innocent lives in a drone strike on the 29<sup>th</sup>.

Non-combatant evacuations remain among the most challenging military operations, even in the best of circumstances. And the circumstances in August were anything but ideal. Extreme heat. A land-locked country. No government. A highly dynamic situation on the ground. And an active, credible, and lethal terrorist threat.

In the span of just two days – from August 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> – we went from working alongside a democratically elected, long-time partner government to coordinating warily with a long-time enemy. We operated in a deeply dangerous environment. It proved a lesson in pragmatism and professionalism.

We learned a lot of other lessons, too – about how to turn an Air Force base in Qatar into an international airport overnight, and about how to rapidly screen, process, and manifest large numbers of people. Nothing like this has ever been done before, and no other military in the world could have pulled it off. I think that is crucial.

I know that members of this committee will have questions on many things, such as why we turned over Bagram Airfield, how real is our over-the-horizon capability, why we didn't start evacuations sooner, and why we did not stay longer to get more people out. Let me take each in turn.

Retaining Bagram would have required putting as many as five thousand U.S. troops in harm's way, just to operate and defend it. And it would have contributed little to the mission that we had been assigned: to protect and defend our embassy some 30 miles away. That distance from Kabul also rendered Bagram of little value in the evacuation. Staying at Bagram – even for counter-terrorism purposes – meant staying at war in Afghanistan, something that the President made clear he would not do.

As for over-the-horizon operations: when we use that term, we refer to assets and target analysis that come from outside the country in which the operation occurs. These are effective, and fairly common, operations. Just days ago, we conducted one such strike in Syria, eliminating a senior Al Qaeda figure. Over-the-horizon operations are difficult but absolutely possible. And the intelligence that supports them comes from a variety of sources, not just U.S. boots on the ground.

As for when we started evacuations: we offered input to the State Department's decision, mindful of their concerns that moving too soon might actually cause the very collapse of the Afghan government that we all wanted to avoid, and that moving too late would put our people and our operations at greater risk. As I said, the fact that our troops were on the ground so quickly is due in large part to our planning and pre-positioning of forces.

As for the mission's end: my judgment remains that extending beyond the end of August would have greatly imperiled our people and our mission. The Taliban made clear that their cooperation would end on the first of September, and as you know, we faced grave and growing threats from ISIS-K. Staying longer than we did would have made it even more dangerous for our people and would not have significantly changed the number of evacuees who we could get out.

As we consider these tactical issues today, we must also ask ourselves some equally tough questions about the wider war itself, and pause to think about the lessons that we have learned over the past 20 years. Did we have the right strategy? Did we have too many strategies? Did we put too much faith in our ability to build effective Afghan institutions – an army, an air force, a police force, and government ministries?

We helped build a state, but we could not forge a nation. The fact that the Afghan army we and our partners trained simply melted away – in many cases without firing a shot – took us all by surprise. It would be dishonest to claim otherwise.

We need to consider some uncomfortable truths: that we did not fully comprehend the depth of corruption and poor leadership in their senior ranks, that we did not grasp the damaging effect of frequent and unexplained rotations by President Ghani of his commanders, that we did not anticipate the snowball effect caused by the deals that Taliban commanders struck with local

leaders in the wake of the Doha agreement, that the Doha agreement itself had a demoralizing effect on Afghan soldiers, and that we failed to fully grasp that there was only so much for which – and for whom – many of the Afghan forces would fight.

We provided the Afghan military with equipment and aircraft and the skills to use them. Over the years, they often fought bravely. Tens of thousands of Afghan soldiers and police officers died. But in the end, we couldn't provide them with the will to win. At least not all of them.

As a veteran of that war, I am personally reckoning with all of that. But I hope, as I said at the outset, that we do not allow a debate about how this war ended to cloud our pride in the way that our people fought it. They prevented another 9/11, they showed extraordinary courage and compassion in the war's last days, and they made lasting progress in Afghanistan that the Taliban will find difficult to reverse and that the international community should work hard to preserve.

Now, our service members and civilians face a new mission: helping these Afghan evacuees move on to new lives in new places. They are performing that one magnificently, as well. I spent time with some of them up at Joint Base Maguire-Dix-Lakehurst, this past Monday. I know that you share my profound gratitude and respect for their service, courage, and professionalism.

And I appreciate the support that this committee continues to provide them and their families.

Thank you.

**Lloyd J. Austin III**  
**Secretary of Defense**

Lloyd James Austin III was sworn in as the 28th Secretary of Defense on January 22, 2021. Mr. Austin is the principal assistant to the President in all matters relating to the Department of Defense and serves on the National Security Council.

Mr. Austin was born in Mobile, Alabama, and raised in Thomasville, Georgia. He graduated from the United States Military Academy with a Bachelor of Science degree and a commission in the Infantry. He holds a Master of Arts degree in counselor education from Auburn University, and a Master of Business Management from Webster University. He is a graduate of the Infantry Officer Basic and Advanced courses, the Army Command and General Staff College, and the Army War College.

His 41-year career in the Army included command at the corps, division, battalion, and brigade levels. Mr. Austin was awarded the Silver Star for his leadership of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Seven years later, he would assume the duties of Commanding General of United States Forces – Iraq, overseeing all combat operations in the country.

After a tour as the Army's Vice Chief of Staff, Mr. Austin concluded his uniformed service as the Commander of U.S. Central Command, responsible for all military operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan. In this assignment, he led U.S. and coalition efforts to battle ISIS in Iraq and Syria. He retired from the Army in April, 2016.

Since his retirement from military service, Mr. Austin served on the Boards of Directors for Raytheon Technologies, Nucor, and Tenet Healthcare.

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

STATEMENT OF  
GENERAL MARK A. MILLEY, USA  
20<sup>TH</sup> CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF  
ENDING THE U.S. MILITARY MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN  
SEPTEMBER 29, 2021



Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Rogers, thank you for the opportunity to be here with Secretary Austin and GEN McKenzie to discuss Afghanistan.

During the past 20 years, the men and women of the U.S. military along with our allies and partners fought the Taliban, brought Osama Bin Laden to justice, denied al Qaeda sanctuary, and protected our homeland for two consecutive decades. Over 800,000 of us in uniform served in Afghanistan.

Most importantly, 2,461 U.S. Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines were killed in action. 20,698 were wounded in action and countless others suffer the invisible wounds of war.

There is no doubt in my mind that our efforts prevented an attack on the homeland from Afghanistan, which was our core mission. And everyone who served in that war should be proud. Your service mattered.

Beginning in 2011, we steadily drew down our troop numbers, consolidated and closed bases, and retrograded equipment from Afghanistan. At the peak in 2011, we had 97,000 US and 41,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan.

10 years later when Ambassador Khalilzad signed the Doha Agreement with Mullah Berader on 29 February 2020, the US had 12,600 US troops, 8,000 NATO and 10,500 contractors in Afghanistan.

This has been a 10-year multi-administration drawdown, not a 19-month or a 19-day withdrawal.

Under the Doha Agreement, the US would begin to withdraw its forces contingent upon the Taliban meeting certain conditions, which would lead to a political agreement between the Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan.

There were 7 conditions applicable to the Taliban and 8 to the U.S. While the Taliban did not attack U.S. forces, which was one of the conditions, it failed to fully honor any other commitments under the Doha Agreement. Perhaps most importantly for US national security, the Taliban has never renounced Al Qaeda or broke its affiliation with them.

In the 8 months from February to October of 2020, in accordance with the provisions of the Doha Agreement, we reduced US military forces from 12,600 to 6,800, NATO forces from 8,000 to 5,400 and U.S. contractors from 9,700 to 7,900 in the process of systematically retrograding from Afghanistan.

One of the conditions of Doha was a reduction of violence by the Taliban leading to a nationwide cease fire. For the entirety of the 2020 fighting season, the Taliban maintained a consistently higher than average level of violence throughout the country.

My job is to advise the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council of various military options and associated costs, benefits, risk to force, and risk to mission.



In the fall of 2020, my analysis was that an accelerated withdrawal without meeting necessary conditions risks losing the substantial gains made in Afghanistan, damaging U.S. credibility, or a general collapse of the ANDSF and the Afghan government resulting in a complete Taliban takeover or a general civil war.

Additionally, we estimated an accelerated withdrawal would increase risks of regional instability, the security of Pakistan and its nuclear arsenals, a global rise in violent extremist organizations, our global credibility with allies and partners would suffer, and a narrative of abandoning the Afghans would become widespread.

We further assessed the increased potential for a humanitarian catastrophe including significant numbers of refugees, a degradation in health, schools, women's rights, and revenge killings.

In 2020, Taliban violence against women, human rights defenders, journalists, and government officials continued, with almost 1,000 targeted killings attributed to the Taliban, up from 780 in 2019.

The Taliban strengthened its positions around several provincial capitals in anticipation of the departure of foreign forces and, over this time period, enemy-initiated attacks increased by over 50% and were above previous seasonal norms.

Based on my advice and the advice of the commanders, Secretary Esper submitted a memorandum on 9 November recommending to maintain U.S. forces in Afghanistan until conditions were met for further reductions.

Two days later on 11 November, I received an unclassified signed order directing the U.S. military to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan by 15 January 2021.

After further discussions regarding the risks associated with such a withdrawal, the order was rescinded. On 17 November we received an order to reduce troop levels to 2,500 plus enabling forces no later than 15 January.

When President Biden was inaugurated, there were approximately 3,500 US troops, 5,400 NATO, and 6,300 contractors in Afghanistan tasked to train, advise, and assist with a small contingent of counter terrorism forces. The strategic situation was stalemate.

The Biden Administration, through the National Security Council process, conducted a rigorous interagency review of the situation in Afghanistan in February, March, and April.

During this process, the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CENTCOM Commander Gen McKenzie, USFOR-A Commander GEN Miller, and myself were all given serious consideration by the Administration.

We provided a broad range of options and our assessment of their potential outcomes. The cost, benefit, risk to force and risk to mission were evaluated against the national security objectives of the United States.

On 14 April, the President announced his decision and the U.S. military received a change of mission to retrograde all U.S. military forces, maintain a small contingency force of 600-700 to protect the embassy in Kabul until the Department of State could coordinate contractor security support, assist Turkey to maintain the Hamid Karzai International Airport, and transition the U.S. mission to “over the horizon” counter terrorism support and security force assistance.

There are 6 issues I would like to further discuss: planning, Bagram airbase, Intelligence, NEO execution, 31 August, and the Way Ahead.

First, there were detailed tactical and operational plans developed by USFOR-A Commander GEN Miller and CENTCOM Commander Gen McKenzie. These plans were reviewed by the interagency and approved at the highest level. At the strategic level there were extensive coordination meetings as well as daily action officer level coordination meetings.

Along with the extensive interagency coordination, there were 4 key synchronizing events; a 28 April Afghanistan Retrograde Rehearsal, an 8 May senior official rehearsal of concept (ROC Drill), an 11 June working level interagency table top exercise on NEO, and a 6 August senior official interagency Non-Combatant evacuation table top exercise.

The 28 April Afghanistan Retrograde Rehearsal was attended by leaders from across the DOD, to include the SECDEF, DEPSECDEF, OSD/P, The Joint Chiefs as well as the USFOR-A Commander GEN Miller, the Commander of CENTCOM Gen McKenzie, the Commander of TRANSCOM Gen Lyons, the SACEUR Commander Gen Wolters, the Commander SOCOM Gen Clarke, and the Commander of CYBERCOM Gen Nakasone. The main purpose of this rehearsal was to ensure shared understanding of President Biden’s decision to leave Afghanistan and coordinate and synchronize the efforts of DoD, our allies, and partners.

The 8 May senior officials level interagency table top exercise had all relevant cabinet members to include but not limited to the Secretary of Defense Austin, DEPSECDEF Kathleen Hicks, select Combatant Commanders, to include CENTCOM, EUCOM, TRANSCOM, CYBERCOM, SOCOM, and other interagency officials. This event covered a rehearsal of concept for the complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and covered various branch plans and sequels. It was to ensure that the US Government, Interagency, and partners and allies had a shared vision of our withdrawal timeline, the plan itself, and to ensure it was synchronized.

On 11 June, the Joint Staff hosted a NEO interagency table top exercise. It included senior officials from across the interagency. These officials generated a myriad of key milestones to include prioritization and sequencing of key personnel, contingency for embassy closure, intermediate staging base locations, sorting and screening of evacuees and triggers for calling the NEO.

On 6 August another senior interagency Non-Combatant Evacuation table top exercise, focused on two scenarios; a semi-permissive NEO and a non-permissive NEO with a rapidly deteriorating security situation.

Second, the Bagram decision. In order to execute the NEO, Gen McKenzie and Gen Miller assessed two potential departure airfields. With the mission changing from direct military support to the ANDSF to security of the Embassy and other key facilities at HKIA, the U.S. military could not secure both Bagram airfield and HKIA with the troops available.

All together securing Bagram would have required approximately 5-6,000 additional troops assuming no indigenous partner force was available. These forces are in addition to those that would be required to secure Kabul and HKIA in the event of a NEO.

As GEN Miller has previously testified, HKIA would always be the center of gravity of any NEO due to the population that would need to be evacuated was mostly in Kabul.

In extremis we developed contingency plans to re-seize BAGRAM, but the conditions to do so never materialized. In short, USFOR-A and CENTCOM plans estimated that in order to conduct the NEO, HKIA was the most logical choice given the mission, enemy, purpose, constraints, and restraints. Maintaining both BAGRAM and HKIA was not feasible given the mission and troops available. Their analysis was briefed, reviewed and approved at the most senior levels of our government.

Third, the Intelligence Community provided consistent strategic-level warning regarding the Taliban's increased activity as evidenced by events on the ground. There are 419 districts in Afghanistan. The Taliban controlled approximately 78 districts in February of 2021. This rose to over 100 in mid-June and surpassed 200 by mid-July, with fighting occurring on the outskirts of 15 provincial capitals.

By late July it was evident that the security situation was deteriorating rapidly. The IC consistently estimated that the ANSDF was at risk of fracture and the government could collapse after the departure of US forces at the end of the summer with opinions ranging from weeks, months, or in some cases years after our departure depending on when the intelligence report was written.

The consensus intelligence view estimated an ANDSF fracture and provincial capitals captured with the exception of Kabul by early to late fall or at the latest December, assuming the last U.S. troops were out by 31 August.

There were no estimates that I am aware of that predicted the collapse of the Afghan Army and the government in 11 days in August prior to the final departure of US forces.

The speed, scale and scope of the collapse was a surprise.

Fourth, there were two distinct missions that get conflated. One was the retrograde of military forces, which was largely completed by early to mid-July. The other was the execution of a non-combatant evacuation.

The first provincial capital fell on 6 August. On 14 August, Ambassador Wilson declared a NEO and the Secretary of Defense ordered the commander of CENTCOM to execute the NEO contingency plan, which was developed months earlier. We began to alert, marshal,

and deploy prepositioned forces from the Middle East and pre-alerted forces from CONUS in accordance with CENTCOM's plan.

The Joint Force executed the NEO in a highly dynamic, dangerous operating environment from a war-torn country, eventually evacuating over 120,000 people entirely by air on 387 US military sorties and 391 non US military sorties.

Evacuees included 6,000 American citizens, over 3,000 3<sup>rd</sup> country nationals and the remainder were Afghans designated by the Department of State. This NEO was executed by the Joint Force deploying 6,000 troops in 2 days. We established 26 temporary safe havens stretching from the middle east across Europe and here in the United States.

The fifth point is the 31 August decision. On 25 August during the conduct of the NEO, I was asked for my best military advice on whether the United States should maintain military forces in Afghanistan beyond 31 August.

I and the Joint Chiefs of Staff along with the commander of CENTCOM, USFOR-A now ADM Vasley, and the Commander of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division MG Donahue reviewed four courses of action.

We assessed the cost, benefit, risk to force, risk to mission and risk to remaining Americans in each of these COAs. We determined that any extension would increase risk to force, mission and remaining Americans to very high levels.

All the commanders and all the Joint Chiefs recommended that all U.S. forces should depart by 31 August. Every one of us understood these were independent recommendations and there was no requirement or expectation to achieve consensus.

Remaining at HKIA beyond 31 August or attempting to re-seize Bagram Air Base and clearing Kabul of Taliban would have required a much larger commitment of forces in the range of 15-20,000 or more troops, and a resumption of the war against the Taliban while fighting with ISIS.

We had evacuated over 5,000 American citizens at that point. We did not have clarity on precise number or location of the remaining American citizens.

While it was militarily feasible, we assessed the cost to be extraordinarily high. In addition to US casualties, we assessed the risk to remaining US citizens would increase significantly. And finally we assessed there was no guarantee of getting out the remaining American citizens safely, nor was there a reasonable prospect of an end state in an achievable amount of time.

Therefore, we unanimously recommended that the military mission be transitioned on 31 August to a diplomatic mission in order to get out the remaining American citizens. That mission is still ongoing.

This NEO was unprecedented and is the largest air evacuation in US history.

Although the mission evacuated 120,000 people it came at an incredible cost of 11 Marines, 1 Soldier, and a Navy Corpsman. These 13 gave their lives so that people they never met would have an opportunity to live in freedom.

For the last point, the Taliban was and remains a terrorist organization and they still have not broken ties with Al Qaeda. I have no illusions who we are dealing with. It remains to be seen whether or not the Taliban can consolidate power or if the country will fracture into further civil war.

We now must continue to protect the American people from terrorist attacks emanating from Afghanistan. A reconstituted Al Qaeda or ISIS with aspirations to attack the United States is a very real possibility and those conditions to include activities in ungoverned spaces could present themselves in the next 12 to 36 months. That mission will be much harder now, but not impossible, and we will continue to protect the American people.

Strategic decisions have strategic consequences, over the course of four Presidents, 12 Secretaries of Defense, seven Chairmen, ten CENTCOM Commanders, 20 Commanders in Afghanistan, hundreds of Congressional Delegation visits, and 20 years of congressional oversight, there are many lessons to be learned.

Some of the key ones that require thoughtful examination are the decisions to reduce forces in Afghanistan in order to invade Iraq. We need to fully examine the role of Pakistan sanctuary. We need to completely understand the degree to which corruption contributed to the collapse of the Afghan government. We need to fully understand the mission creep where we transitioned from a Counter Terrorism mission to nation building. And on the military side we need to understand how we developed, trained, and equipped the ANDSF and why they collapsed in only 11 days. Each of these and many more are complex issues that will require thorough examination in the months and years ahead.

On the military side we need – and I am committed – to understand how we developed, trained, and equipped the ANDSF and why they collapsed in only 11 days and how our intel systems missed the speed of that collapse. Each of these and many more are complex issues that will require thorough examination in the months and years ahead.

It is clear that the war in Afghanistan did not end on the terms that we wanted with the Taliban in power in Kabul. However, one lesson must never be forgotten, every Soldier, Sailor, Airman and Marine who served there for the past 20 years protected our country from attack by terrorists and for that they should be forever proud and we should be forever grateful.

I want to take a moment to address the recent media reporting surrounding the conduct of my duties during the final months of the Trump Administration.

I have served this Nation for 42 years. I've spent years in combat and buried a lot of my troops who died while defending this country. My loyalty to this Nation, its people, and the Constitution hasn't changed and will never change as long as I have a breath to give. My loyalty is absolute.

From October through January, I received and made hundreds of calls of assurance to allied and partner counterparts around the world as well as adversary counterparts. I also fielded many calls from you, members of Congress, both Republican and Democrat.

In frequent meetings with the Joint Chiefs, Combatant Commanders and daily meetings with my own staff, my message was consistent: that we are steady, the United States military has no role in politics, we will obey the lawful orders of the civilians appointed over us, and we will remain loyal to the Constitution.

With respect to the Chinese calls, I routinely communicated with my counterpart, General Li, with the knowledge and coordination of civilian oversight. I am specifically directed to communicate with the Chinese by Department of Defense Guidance, Policy Dialogue System. These military to military communications at the highest levels are critical to the security of the United States in order to deconflict military actions, manage crisis, and prevent war between great powers armed with nuclear weapons.

The CY2019 and CY2020 Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the PRC directed the DOD to routinize and prioritize DoD contacts and exchanges with the PLA to enhance predictability, stability, and prevent an incident between U.S. and PRC operational forces from inadvertently escalating to crisis.

The calls on 30 October and 8 January were coordinated before and after with Secretary Esper and Acting Secretary Miller's staffs and the interagency. The specific purpose of the October and January calls was generated by concerning intelligence which caused us to believe the Chinese were worried about an imminent attack by the U.S.

I know, I am certain, President Trump did not intend on attacking the Chinese and it is my directed responsibility – to convey presidential orders and intent. My job at that time was to de-escalate. My message again was consistent: calm, steady, deescalate. We are not going to attack you.

At Secretary of Defense Esper's direction, I made a call to General Li on 30 October. Eight people sat in the call with me, and I read out the call within about 30 minutes of the call ending.

On 31 December, the Chinese requested a call with me. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia Pacific Policy helped coordinate my call which was scheduled for 8 January. 11 people attended the call with me. Read-outs of this call were distributed to the interagency that same day.

Shortly after my call ended with General Li, I informed both Secretary of State Pompeo and White House Chief of Staff Meadows about the call among other topics. Soon after that, I attended a meeting with Acting Secretary Miller where I briefed him on the call.

Later that same day, 8 January, Speaker Pelosi called me to inquire about the President's ability to launch nuclear weapons. I sought to assure her that nuclear launch is governed by a very specific and deliberate process.

She was concerned and made various personal references characterizing the President. I explained that the President is the sole nuclear launch authority but he doesn't launch them alone.

There are processes, protocols, and procedures in place and I repeatedly assured her there is no chance of an illegal, unauthorized, or accidental launch.

These procedures are outlined in an Executive Order, a Presidential Policy Directive, National Security Presidential Memorandum, Department of Defense Directives, Department of the Defense Nuclear Plan, Posture Guidance, and finally Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Emergency Procedure volumes I – X, all of which are classified.

By Presidential Directive and SecDef Directives, the Chairman is part of this process to ensure the President is fully informed when determining the use of the world's deadliest weapons. By law, I am not in the chain of command. However, by Presidential Directive and DoD Instruction, I am in the chain of communication to fulfill my statutory role as the President's primary military advisor.

After the Speaker Pelosi call, I convened a short meeting in my office with the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, my NMCC watch officer, J-2, J-3, and Director of the Joint Staff among others to refresh on these procedures, which we practice daily at the action officer level. Additionally, I immediately informed Acting Secretary of Defense Miller of her call.

At no time was I attempting to change or influence the process, usurp authority, or insert myself into the chain of command, but I am expected to give my advice and ensure that the President is fully informed.

I am submitting for the record, a more detailed unclassified memorandum of my actions surrounding these events.

I welcome a thorough walk-through of all these events, and I would be happy in a classified session to talk in detail about the intel that motivated these actions and the specific timeline. I am also happy to make available all emails, phone logs, memoranda, witnesses or anything else you need to better understand these events.

My oath is to support the Constitution of the United States of America, against all enemies, foreign and domestic, regardless of cost to myself, and I will never turn my back on the oath. I firmly believe in civilian control of the military as a bedrock principle essential to this Republic and I am committed to ensuring the military stays clear of domestic politics.

**General Mark A. Milley**  
**Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff**

General Mark A. Milley is the 20th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the nation's highest-ranking military officer, and the principal military advisor to the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council.

Prior to becoming Chairman on October 1, 2019, General Milley served as the 39th Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army.

A native of Massachusetts, General Milley graduated from Princeton University in 1980, where he received his commission from Army ROTC.

General Milley has had multiple command and staff positions in eight divisions and Special Forces throughout the last 39 years to include command of the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division; the 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division; Deputy Commanding General, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault); Commanding General, 10th Mountain Division; Commanding General, III Corps; and Commanding General, U.S. Army Forces Command.

While serving as the Commanding General, III Corps, General Milley deployed as the Commanding General, International Security Assistance Force Joint Command and Deputy Commanding General, U.S. Forces Afghanistan. General Milley's joint assignments also include the Joint Staff operations directorate and as a Military Assistant to the Secretary of Defense.

General Milley's operational deployments include the Multi-National Force and Observers, Sinai, Egypt; Operation Just Cause, Panama; Operation Uphold Democracy, Haiti; Operation Joint Endeavor, Bosnia-Herzegovina; Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iraq; and three tours during Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan. He also deployed to Somalia and Colombia.

In addition to his bachelor's degree in political science from Princeton University, General Milley has a master's degree in international relations from Columbia University and one from the U.S. Naval War College in national security and strategic studies. He is also a graduate of the MIT Seminar XXI National Security Studies Program.

General Milley and his wife, Hollyanne, have been married for more than 34 years and have two children.



**General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.**  
**Commander, United States Central Command**

General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. is the Commander, United States Central Command.

A native of Birmingham, Alabama, upon graduation from The Citadel in 1979, Gen McKenzie was commissioned into the Marine Corps and trained as an infantry officer.

He has commanded at the platoon, company, battalion, Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), and component levels. As a LtCol, he commanded First Battalion, Sixth Marines. As the Commanding Officer of the 22d MEU (SOC), he led the MEU on combat deployments to Afghanistan in 2004 and Iraq in 2005-06. In 2006-07 he served as the Military Secretary to the 33rd and 34th Commandants of the Marine Corps.

In July 2007, upon promotion to BGen, he served on the Joint Staff as a Deputy Director of Operations within the National Military Command Center. In June 2008, he was selected by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to be the Director of the Chairman's New Administration Transition Team (CNATT). In this capacity, he coordinated the efforts of the Joint Staff and the combatant commands in preparing for and executing a wartime transition of administrations.

In June 2009, he reported to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul, Afghanistan to serve as the Deputy to the Deputy Chief of Staff (DCOS) for Stability. Upon his return from Afghanistan, in July 2010 he was assigned as the Director, Strategy, Plans, and Policy (J-5) for the U.S. Central Command. In August 2012, he reported to Headquarters Marine Corps to serve as the Marine Corps Representative to the Quadrennial Defense Review. In June 2014, he was promoted to LtGen and assumed command of U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Central Command. In October 2015, he was assigned to the Joint Staff to serve as the Director, J-5, Strategic Plans and Policy, Joint Staff. In July 2017, he was named the Director, Joint Staff.

Gen McKenzie was promoted to his current rank and assumed command of U.S. Central Command in March 2019.

Gen McKenzie is an honors graduate of the Armor Officer Advanced Course, Marine Corps Command and Staff College, and the School of Advanced Warfighting. He was selected as a CMC Fellow in 1999, and served as a Senior Military Fellow within the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. He has a Masters in Teaching with a concentration in History.



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**DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD**

SEPTEMBER 29, 2021

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CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20318-9999

*Milley 27 Sep 2021*

MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

SUBJECT: General Milley's 8 January phone call with Speaker Pelosi

In order to clearly establish the facts related to my January 8, 2021 phone call with Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, I am submitting to this committee supporting information to address the concerns and requests for information from multiple Members of both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives.

This information is provided in the context of my role as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the policies and procedures that govern the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal.

This Memorandum for Record provides specific details on:

- My phone conversation with Speaker Pelosi.
- My post-phone call meeting with the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and select staff officers from the Joint Staff.
- Associated statutory directives and guiding documents processes.
- Roles and responsibilities of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

**January 8, 2021 Phone Call with Speaker of the House Pelosi**

On the morning of January 8, 2021, I was notified by my Executive Officer and Special Assistant for Legislative Affairs that Speaker Pelosi was requesting an immediate phone call to discuss undefined "urgent matters."

In my office with me were my Executive Officer, my Special Assistant for Legislative Affairs, and other select staff officers. It was unknown to me who from Speaker Pelosi's staff was on the call with her.

Speaker Pelosi called me to inquire about the President's ability to launch nuclear weapons. I sought to assure her that nuclear launch is governed by a very specific and deliberate process. She was concerned and made various personal references characterizing the President. I explained that the President is the sole nuclear launch authority but he doesn't launch them alone. There are processes, protocols, and procedures in place, and I repeatedly assured her there is no chance of an illegal, unauthorized or accidental launch. I was on an unclassified government line, so my description remained at that level of detail.

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These procedures are outlined in an Executive Order, a Presidential Policy Directive, a National Security Presidential Memorandum, Department of Defense Directives, the DoD Nuclear Plan, Posture Guidance, and finally Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Emergency Procedure Volumes I–X, all of which are classified.

By Presidential Directive and SecDef Directives, the Chairman is part of this process to ensure the President is fully informed when determining the use of the world's deadliest weapons. By law, I am not in the chain of command. However, by Presidential Directive and DoD Instruction, I am in the chain of communication to fulfill my statutory role as the President's primary military advisor.

**January 8, 2021 Post-Phone Call Meeting with Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Joint Staff**

After the Speaker Pelosi's call, I convened a short meeting in my office with the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, my National Military Command Center watch officer, Joint Staff, J-2, J-3, and Director of the Joint Staff, among others, to refresh on these procedures, which we practice daily at the action officer level. Additionally, I immediately informed Acting Secretary of Defense Miller of her call.

At no time was I attempting to change or influence the process, usurp authority, or insert myself into the chain of command, but I am expected to give my advice and ensure that the President is fully informed.

**Statutory Directive and Guiding Documents**

Nuclear launch activity is governed by a very specific and deliberate process, as outlined in the following directives and documents:

- Executive Order 13618
- Presidential Policy Directive 35
- National Security Presidential Memorandum 19
- Department of Defense Directives S-3710.01 & S-5210.81
- Department of Defense Nuclear Plan
- Nuclear Posture Guidance
- Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Emergency Action Procedures, Volumes 1–10.

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The President is the sole authority for the employment of U.S. nuclear weapons. U.S. nuclear forces operate under strict civilian control. Only the President of the United States can authorize the use of U.S. nuclear weapons, and the President's ability to exercise that authority and direction is ensured by people, procedures, facilities, equipment, and communications capabilities that comprise the Nuclear Command and Control System. This system is designed to enable the authorized use of nuclear weapons while also preventing their unauthorized, accidental, or inadvertent use. Operations and activities involving U.S. nuclear weapons are surrounded by layers of safeguards.

**Roles and Responsibilities of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff**

Title 10, U.S. Code, section 151 designates the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense.

In accordance with the Unified Campaign Plan signed by President Trump, communications between the President or the Secretary (or their duly deputized alternates or successors) and the Combatant Commanders will be transmitted through the Chairman unless otherwise directed.

In accordance with DoDD 3710.01, "National Leadership Command Capability," and DoDD 5210.81, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Command and Control, Safety and Security," the Chairman creates, supports, and operates a command and control system that ensures connectivity between the President and the National Military Command System, which is responsible for nuclear execution.

In this role, the Chairman operates the National Military Command System, to meet the needs of the President, Secretary of Defense which includes defining its required components and procedures. The Chairman fulfills this responsibility in a series of publications referred to as the Chairman's Emergency Action Procedures.

As part of the nuclear command and control procedures, a decision conference is required for authentication and to verify presidential orders. Primary participants are the Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Legal Counsel, and others. The purpose is to ensure the President is fully informed and to discuss legality and proportionality.

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CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20318-9999



MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

SUBJECT: General Milley's Engagements with the People's Liberation Army Leaders

1. In order to clearly establish the facts related to my 30 October 2020 and 8 January 2021 phone calls with my People's Republic of China (PRC) counterpart, General Li Zuocheng, I am submitting for the record supporting information to address requests for information from multiple members of both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives.

2. This information is provided in the context of my role as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) in the execution of policy and procedure of the "Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the PRC for Calendar Year 2020" and Calendar Year 2021 as published by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD).

3. This memorandum for record provides specific details on:

- The roles and responsibilities of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS)
- The requirements and guidelines as directed in U.S. Government and Department of Defense (DoD) instructions and directives
- The processes followed for PRC counterpart engagements

4. This memorandum also outlines specific key details related to my 30 October 2020 and 8 January 2021 phone calls with my PRC counterpart, General Li Zuocheng. This includes:

- A detailed timeline of key actions and events
- Establishes the causal relationship between U.S. intelligence community reporting and the DoD engagement with senior members of the PRC
- Highlights preparatory actions taken by OSD
- Confirms interagency involvement

5. Statutory Directive and Guiding Documents

Role of the CJCS. Per Sections 151, 153, and 163 of Title 10, U.S. Code (U.S.C.), the CJCS is the principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense (SecDef). The CJCS is not a member of the chain of command, but *is integral in the chain of communication, as directed by the*

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***President in the Unified Command Plan.*** Pursuant to this requirement, the CJCS regularly communicates with the President, the National Security Council, and the SecDef and transmits guidance and orders on their behalf to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Combatant Commands. Specifically:

- Section 163 of Title 10, U.S.C.
  - The President may direct communications between the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the commanders of the combatant commands be transmitted through the CJCS.
  - The President may also assign duties to the CJCS to assist the Secretary of Defense and President in their command functions.
  - Subject to Secretary of Defense authority, direction, and control, the CJCS is the spokesperson for the combatant commanders especially on operational requirements of their commands.
  - Responsibilities assigned by the President or Secretary of Defense do not confer any command authority on the CJCS, nor does it alter a combatant commander's responsibilities as prescribed in 10 U.S.C. §164.
- Section 153 of Title 10, U.S.C.
  - CJCS performs "such other duties as may be prescribed by law or by the President or the Secretary." (10 U.S.C. §153(a)(7))
- Section 151 of Title 10, U.S.C.
  - CJCS is the principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the SecDef.
  - CJCS shall provide dissenting or differing advice from the Joint Chiefs to the President, National Security Council, Homeland Security Council, or SecDef.

**Unified Command Plan.** The Unified Command Plan (UCP), signed by the President, establishes the missions and responsibilities for Commanders of Combatant Commands (CCMDs) (CCDRs). The UCP further defines the roles and responsibilities of the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, as it pertains to the CCMDs. Specific to the CJCS:

- **General.** *The CJCS (the Chairman) is the principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense.* Although the Chairman does not have command authority, in matters requiring global military strategic and operational integration, the Chairman, as global integrator, is responsible for providing advice to the Secretary on the arrangement of cohesive military

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actions in time, space, and purpose, executed as a whole to address trans-regional, all-domain, and multi-functional challenges. The Chairman's advice to the Secretary on the allocation and transfer of forces and responsibilities occurs through routine dialogue among senior leaders for optimal implementation of the Secretary's direction.

- *Communications between the President or the Secretary (or their duly deputized alternates or successors) and the CCDRs "will be transmitted through the Chairman unless otherwise directed."*

Department of Defense Guidance.

- National Defense Strategy (NDS). The 2018 National Defense Strategy identifies long-term strategic competition with China as the principal priorities for the Department. Both the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the NDS recognize the PRC as a strategic competitor vying for economic, diplomatic, and military advantages globally. The most far-reaching objective of this defense strategy is to set the military relationship between China and the United States on a path of *transparency and non-aggression*. The current administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance also recognizes that we are in an era of strategic competition with China, but also directs that we will work with China when it is in our national interests to do so.

- **Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC).** The Department of Defense Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs (ASD (IPSA)), produces an annual document titled *Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC)*. This document, in support of the NSS and the NDS – Implementation, provides direction and guidance to Department of Defense leadership and staff with respect to engagement with the Peoples Republic of China.

The CY2019 and CY2020 Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the PRC *directed the DoD to routinize and prioritize DoD contacts and exchanges with the PLA to enhance predictability, stability, and prevent an incident between U.S. and PRC operational forces from inadvertently escalating to crisis.*

The guidance document for CY2020 was signed and distributed within the Department in 2019 by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo Pacific Security Affairs, Mr. Randall G. Schriver. The guidance document for CY2021 was signed and distributed in December 2020 Mr. David F. Helvey performing the duties of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo Pacific Security Affairs.

The 2020 annual guidance establishes a **Policy Dialogue System (PDS)** that routinizes DoD contacts and exchanges with the PLA that drives toward the NDS objective of setting the military relationship between China and the United States on a path of *transparency and non-aggression*. The PDS prioritizes the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and the Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command for Key Leader Engagements with their PLA counterparts.

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In my first call with General Li in 2019, he and I agreed to conduct quarterly calls, which my staff incorporates into annual defense engagement planning, as directed by the annual guidance, in coordination with the Secretary's staff.

Engagement Processes and Methods.

- Since becoming Chairman in 2019, I have engaged with the PLA Chief of the Joint Staff Department, General Li, on four occasions: in December 2019, April 2020, October 2020, and January 2021. These four engagements were conducted via a Defense Telephone Link (DTL) connection, which is a dedicated secure video teleconference link between Washington and Beijing.
- These DTLs do not occur automatically. They must be pre-coordinated with the PLA via requests sent through our Defense Attaché Office at our embassy in Beijing, who send requests to the PLA's Office for International Military Cooperation. I have no other means of communicating with the PLA. My requests to speak with General Li takes days if not weeks to coordinate.
- Prior to sending any request to the PLA, my staff coordinates with the Secretary's Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China and his staff to ensure my objectives for the call are aligned with that of the Secretary of Defense. Briefing materials, talking points, and other background information is shared with the Secretary's staff, USINDOPACOM, the State Department, and others as necessary.
- During the calls, only General Li and I are visible on screen, but staff is present on both sides. Routine participants on my staff include my State Department Political Advisor, my Director for Intelligence, my Director for Strategy, Plans and Policy, among others.
- Immediately following the calls, my staff prepared readouts for distribution and I informed the Secretary of Defense and other Cabinet officials.

Appendix 1: PLA Engagement Timeline (November 2019 to January 2021)

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**Appendix 1: PLA Engagement Timeline (November 2019 to January 2021)****November 2019**

**5 Nov:** SecDef Esper conducted his first video teleconference (VTC) with Chinese MINDEF General (GEN) Wei.

**18 Nov:** SecDef Esper and GEN Wei met during ASEAN's Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) conference.

**December 2019**

**Dec:** ASD Schriver published guidance for U.S. DoD contacts and engagements with PRC.

**2 Dec:** GEN Milley prep session prior to VTC with GEN Li.

**3 Dec:** GEN Milley VTC with GEN Li.

**3 Dec:** Joint Staff (JS) published a press release of GEN Milley and GEN Li's engagement.

**12 Dec:** GEN Milley provided OSD an e-mail readout of his 3 Dec 2019 engagement with GEN Li.

**15 Dec:** JS sent DASD China, Mr. Sbragia, and INDOPACOM GEN Milley's 3 Dec readout.

**March 2020**

**03 Mar:** SecDef Esper VTC with PRC MINDEF GEN Wei.

**April 2020**

**08 April:** GEN Milley VTC with GEN Li.

**09 April:** GEN Milley provided OSD an e-mail readout of his 8 Apr 2020 engagement with GEN Li.

**May 2020**

**Mid-May:** PRC and India begin to surge troops and clash in largest cross-border altercation since 2017.

**July 2020**

**14 Jul:** A PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson publicly condemned the "irresponsible" shift in the U.S. policy towards South China Sea (SCS) claims.

**21 Jul:** State Department ordered closure of China's Consulate in Houston due to PRC-sponsored "influence operations."

**24 Jul:** PRC told the U.S. to close the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu.

**August 2020**

**6 Aug:** SecDef Esper called Chinese MINDEF General Wei.

**9-12 Aug:** U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Azar visited Taiwan and met with senior Taiwan officials.

**Aug:** Multiple PRC scholars expressed alarm the Trump administration would provoke a conflict with the PRC to win the November election.

**Aug:** The PLA delivered multiple demarches condemning U.S. activities near the PRC that Beijing viewed as provocative.

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September 2020

**Mid-Sep:** PLA officials claimed that PRC leadership remains concerned of a plot to provoke a conflict with the PRC.

**Late Sep:** PRC state media speculated the Trump administration might seek to create a military crisis with the PRC as an “October Surprise” to boost its reelection challenges.

October 2020

**Early Oct:** PLA issued a demarche condemning U.S. activities near PRC SCS claims.

**Mid-Oct:** PLA accused the U.S. of ‘saber-rattling’ and preparing to attack PRC interests in the SCS.

**19 Oct:** USINDOPACOM noted tense strategic environment with PLA.

**20 Oct:** DASD China and his PLA counterpart VTC.

**21 Oct:** Foreign media claimed that all five PLA theater commands are on ‘high alert’ status as a response to regional tensions.

**22 Oct:** SecDef, CJCS, and Admiral Davidson VTC; SecDef Esper directed GEN Milley to contact his counterpart.

**26 Oct:** JS coordinated with Beijing DAO for a VTC between GEN Milley and GEN Li.

**Late Oct:** PRC scholars claimed the PRC remains concerned of a potential U.S.-PRC conflict.

**28-29 Oct:** DoD and PLA officials conducted a Crisis Communications Working Group to improve mil-to-mil coordination.

**29 Oct:** A PLA spokesperson publicly acknowledged rumors of an “October Surprise,” claiming SecDef Esper assured the PRC the U.S. has no plans to start a military crisis against the PRC.

**29 Oct:** GEN Milley prep session prior to VTC with GEN Li.

**30 Oct:** GEN Milley VTC with GEN Li; GEN Milley provided e-mail readout to OSD.

November 2020

**1 Nov:** CJCS Milley directed the JS to coordinate another VTC with GEN Li before 20 Nov 20.

**3 Nov:** JS requested DAO Beijing coordinate a VTC with GEN Li on 18 Nov.

**Early Nov:** PLA issued a demarche condemning announced U.S. weapon sales to Taiwan.

**9 Nov:** President Trump relieved SecDef Esper and Mr. Miller assumed Acting SecDef position.

December 2020

**14 Dec:** PLA refused to attend the USINDOPACOM initiated Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) Meeting.

**14 Dec:** Acting SecDef Miller received NDS –Implementation briefing on U.S.-China Defense relations policy. Acting SecDef Miller carefully reviewed the slides and read ahead material and approved the Policy Dialogue System as a framework for U.S.-China defense relations to include prioritizing key leader engagements for the Chairman.

**22 Dec:** DASD-China, JS, and DAO Beijing coordinated to reengage with PLA for VTC with GEN Milley.

**23 Dec:** PDASD Helvey published guidance for U.S. DoD contacts and engagements with PRC.

**31 Dec:** PLA requested a VTC with GEN Milley on 8 Jan 21 or 15 Jan 21.

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**January 2021**

- 4 Jan:** GEN Milley's VTC was confirmed to occur on 8 Jan 21
- 4 Jan:** OSD requested a VTC between DASD China, Mr. Sbragia, and Maj Gen Huang to occur on 6 Jan 21.
- 5 Jan:** JS coordinated with DASD China office to review GEN Milley's talking points for VTC on 8 Jan 21.
- 6 Jan:** DASD China, Mr. Sbragia, conducted VTC with Maj Gen Huang.
- 8 Jan:** GEN Milley's VTC with GEN Li; readout provided to OSD and interagency.
- 11 Jan:** Joint Staff provided a verbal readout of GEN Milley's 08 Jan VTC to DASD China's Director of Defense Relations.
- 30 Jan:** Reports indicated PLA are reducing operational readiness levels.

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POLICY

UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
2000 DEFENSE PENTAGON  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-2000

JUN 22 2021

The Honorable Don Bacon  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Bacon:

Thank you for your letter, dated May 25, 2021, in response to President Biden's announcement to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

On June 8, 2021, President Biden made the determination that a waiver of the limitation under subsection 1215(a) of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY2021 is important to the national security interests of the United States, as provided for in paragraph (d) of this section. The President was thoughtful and deliberate in considering a range of facts and advice before he made his decision to withdraw our remaining U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

The Department continues to execute the safe and orderly withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. I look forward to working within the Department and with Congress to ensure that the United States continues to support our Afghan partners and that the U.S. Government has the necessary resources to protect U.S. personnel, our allies and partners, and our interests in Afghanistan. I am committed to ensuring that Congress is kept fully and timely informed on all aspects of our Afghanistan policy development.

Thank you for your support of our men and women in uniform as we implement the President's decision regarding our forces in Afghanistan. I am sending an identical letter to the other signatories of your correspondence.

Sincerely,

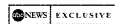
A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Colin H. Kahl", is written over a horizontal line.

Colin H. Kahl, PhD



9/29/21, 1:15 PM

Full transcript of ABC News' George Stephanopoulos' interview with President Joe Biden - ABC News



## Full transcript of ABC News' George Stephanopoulos' interview with President Joe Biden

*Stephanopoulos spoke to Biden in an exclusive interview Wednesday.*

By ABC News

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EXCLUSIVE: Biden remarks on Afghanistan exit

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GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS: Mr. President, thank you for doing this.

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PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: Thank you for doin' it.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Let's get right to it. Back in July, you said a Taliban takeover was highly unlikely. Was the intelligence wrong, or did you downplay it?

BIDEN: I think -- there was no consensus. If you go back and look at the intelligence reports, they said that it's more likely to be sometime by the end of the year. The idea that the tal -- and then it goes further on, even as late as August. I think you're gonna see -- the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and others speaking about this later today.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But you didn't put a timeline on it when you said it was highly unlikely. You just said flat out, "It's highly unlikely the Taliban would take over."

BIDEN: Yeah. Well, the question was whether or not it w-- the idea that the Taliban would take over was premised on the notion that the -- that somehow, the 300,000 troops we had trained and equipped was gonna just collapse, they were gonna give up. I don't think anybody anticipated that.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But you know that Senator McConnell, others say this was not only predictable, it was predicted, including by him, based on intelligence briefings he was getting.

BIDEN: What -- what did he say was predicted?

STEPHANOPOULOS: Senator McConnell said it was predictable that the Taliban was gonna take over.

BIDEN: Well, by the end of the year, I said that's that was -- that was a real possibility. But no one said it was gonna take over then when it was bein' asked.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So when you look at what's happened over the last week, was it a failure of intelligence, planning, execution or judgment?

BIDEN: Look, I don't think it was a fa-- look, it was a simple choice, George. When the-- when the Taliban -- let me back -- put it another way. When you had the government of Afghanistan, the leader of that government get in a plane and taking off and going to another country, when you saw the

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significant collapse of the ta-- of the-- Afghan troops we had trained -- up to 300,000 of them just leaving their equipment and taking off, that was -- you know, I'm not-- this -- that -- that's what happened.

That's simply what happened. So the question was in the beginning the-- the threshold question was, do we commit to leave within the timeframe we've set? We extended it to September 1st. Or do we put significantly more troops in? I hear people say, "Well, you had 2,500 folks in there and nothin' was happening. You know, there wasn't any war."

But guess what? The fact was that the reason it wasn't happening is the last president negotiated a year earlier that he'd be out by May 1st and that-- in return, there'd be no attack on American forces. That's what was done. That's why nothing was happening. But the idea if I had said -- I had a simple choice. If I had said, "We're gonna stay," then we'd better prepare to put a whole hell of a lot more troops in --



President Joe Biden speaks with ABC News' George Stephanopoulos, Aug. 18, 2021, in... [Read More](#)

STEPHANOPOULOS: But your top military advisors warned against withdrawing on this timeline. They wanted you to keep about 2,500 troops.

BIDEN: No, they didn't. It was split. Tha-- that wasn't true. That wasn't true.

STEPHANOPOULOS: They didn't tell you that they wanted troops to stay?

BIDEN: No. Not at -- not in terms of whether we were going to get out in a timeframe all troops. They didn't argue against that.

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STEPHANOPOULOS: So no one told -- your military advisors did not tell you, "No, we should just keep 2,500 troops. It's been a stable situation for the last several years. We can do that. We can continue to do that"?

BIDEN: No. No one said that to me that I can recall. Look, George, the reason why it's been stable for a year is because the last president said, "We're leaving. And here's the deal I wanna make with you, Taliban. We're agreeing to leave if you agree not to attack us between now and the time we leave on May the 1st."

I got into office, George. Less than two months after I elected to office, I was sworn in, all of a sudden, I have a May 1 deadline. I have a May 1 deadline. I got one of two choices. Do I say we're staying? And do you think we would not have to put a hell of a lot more troops? B-- you know, we had hundreds-- we had tens of thousands of troops there before. Tens of thousands.

Do you think we woulda -- that we would've just said, "No problem. Don't worry about it, we're not gonna attack anybody. We're okay"? In the meantime, the Taliban was takin' territory all throughout the country in the north and down in the south, in the Pasthun area.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So would you have withdrawn troops like this even if President Trump had not made that deal with the Taliban?

BIDEN: I would've tried to figure out how to withdraw those troops, yes, because look, George. There is no good time to leave Afghanistan. Fifteen years ago would've been a problem, 15 years from now. The basic choice is am I gonna send your sons and your daughters to war in Afghanistan in perpetuity?

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STEPHANOPOULOS: That's--

BIDEN: No one can name for me a time when this would end. And what-- wha-- wha-- what-- what constitutes defeat of the Taliban? What constitutes defeat? Would we have left then? Let's say they surrender like before. OK. Do we leave then? Do you think anybody-- the same people who think we should stay would've said, "No, good time to go"? We spent over \$1 trillion, George, 20 years. There was no good time to leave.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But if there's no good time, if you know you're gonna have to leave eventually, why not have th-- everything in place to make sure Americans could get out, to make sure our Afghan allies get out, so we don't have these chaotic scenes in Kabul?

BIDEN: Number one, as you know, the intelligence community did not say back in June or July that, in fact, this was gonna collapse like it did. Number one.

STEPHANOPOULOS: They thought the Taliban would take over, but not this quickly?

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BIDEN: But not this quickly. Not even close. We had already issued several thousand passports to the-- the SIVs, the people-- the-- the-- the translators when I came into office before we had negotiated getting out at the end of s-- August.

Secondly, we're in a position where what we did was took precautions. That's why I authorized that there be 6,000 American troops to flow in to accommodate this exit, number one. And number two, provided all that aircraft in the Gulf to get people out. We pre-positioned all that, anticipated that. Now, granted, it took two days to take control of the airport. We have control of the airport now.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Still a lotta pandemonium outside the airport.

BIDEN: Oh, there is. But, look, b-- but no one's being killed right now, God forgive me if I'm wrong about that, but no one's being killed right now. People are-- we got 1,000-somewhat, 1,200 out, yesterday, a couple thousand today. And it's increasing. We're gonna get those people out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But we've all seen the pictures. We've seen those hundreds of people packed into a C-17. You've seen Afghans falling--

BIDEN: That was four days ago, five days ago.

STEPHANOPOULOS: What did you think when you first saw those pictures?

BIDEN: What I thought was we ha-- we have to gain control of this. We have to move this more quickly. We have to move in a way in which we can take control of that airport. And we did.

STEPHANOPOULOS: I-- I think a lot of-- a lot of Americans, and a l-- even a lot of veterans who served in Afghanistan agree with you on the big, strategic picture. They believe we had to get out. But I wonder how you respond to an Army Special Forces officer, Javier McKay (PH). He did seven tours. He was shot twice. He agrees with you. He says, "We have to cut our losses in Afghanistan." But he adds, "I just wish we could've left with honor."

BIDEN: Look, that's like askin' my deceased son Beau, who spent six months in Kosovo and a year in Iraq as a Navy captain and then major-- I mean, as an Army major. And, you know, I'm sure h-- he had regrets comin' out of Afganista-- I mean, out of Iraq.

He had regrets to what's-- how-- how it's going. But the idea-- what's the alternative? The alternative is why are we staying in Afghanistan? Why are we there? Don't you think that the one-- you know who's most disappointed in us getting out? Russia and China. They'd love us to continue to have to--

STEPHANOPOULOS: So you don't think this could've been handled, this exit could've been handled better in any way? No mistakes?

BIDEN: No, I-- I don't think it could've been handled in a way that there-- we-- we're gonna go back in hindsight and look, but the idea that somehow

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there's a way to have gotten out without chaos ensuing, I don't know how that happens. I don't know how that happened.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So for you, that was always priced into the decision?

BIDEN: Yes. Now, exactly what happened-- is not priced in. But I knew that they're gonna have an enormous, enorm-- look, one of the things we didn't know is what the Taliban would do in terms of trying to keep people from getting out, what they would do. What are they doing now? They're cooperating, letting American citizens get out, American personnel get out, embassies get out, et cetera. But they're having-- we're having some more difficulty in having those who helped us when we were in there--

STEPHANOPOULOS: And we don't really know what's happening outside of Kabul.

BIDEN: Pardon me?

STEPHANOPOULOS: We don't really know what's happening outside of Kabul.

BIDEN: Well-- we do know generically and in some specificity what's happening outside of Kabul. We don't know it in great detail. But we do know. And guess what? The Taliban knows if they take on American citizens or American military, we will strike them back like hell won't have it.

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STEPHANOPOULOS: All troops are supposed to be out by August 31st. Even if Americans and our Afghan allies are still trying to get out, they're gonna leave?

BIDEN: We're gonna do everything in our power to get all Americans out and our allies out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Does that mean troops will stay beyond August 31st if necessary?

BIDEN: It depends on where we are and whether we can get-- ramp these numbers up to 5,000 to 7,000 a day coming out. If that's the case, we'll be-- they'll all be out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: 'Cause we've got, like, 10,000 to 15,000 Americans in the country right now, right? And are you committed to making sure that the troops stay until every American who wants to be out--

BIDEN: Yes.

STEPHANOPOULOS: -- is out?

BIDEN: Yes.

STEPHANOPOULOS: How about our Afghan allies? We have about 80,000 people--

BIDEN: Well, that's not the s--

STEPHANOPOULOS: Is that too high?

BIDEN: That's too high.

STEPHANOPOULOS: How many--

BIDEN: The estimate we're giving is somewhere between 50,000 and 65,000 folks total, counting their families.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Does the commitment hold for them as well?

BIDEN: The commitment holds to get everyone out that, in fact, we can get out and everyone that should come out. And that's the objective. That's what we're doing now, that's the path we're on. And I think we'll get there.

STEPHANOPOULOS: So Americans should understand that troops might have to be there beyond August 31st?

BIDEN: No. Americans should understand that we're gonna try to get it done before August 31st.

STEPHANOPOULOS: But if we don't, the troops will stay--

BIDEN: If -- if we don't, we'll determine at the time who's left.

STEPHANOPOULOS: And?

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BIDEN: And if you're American force -- if there's American citizens left, we're gonna stay to get them all out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: You talked about our adversaries, China and Russia. You already see China telling Taiwan, "See? You can't count on the Americans." (LAUGH)

BIDEN: Sh-- why wouldn't China say that? Look, George, the idea that w-- there's a fundamental difference between-- between Taiwan, South Korea, NATO. We are in a situation where they are in-- entities we've made agreements with based on not a civil war they're having on that island or in South Korea, but on an agreement where they have a unity government that, in fact, is trying to keep bad guys from doin' bad things to them.

We have made-- kept every commitment. We made a sacred commitment to Article Five that if in fact anyone were to invade or take action against our NATO allies, we would respond. Same with Japan, same with South Korea, same with-- Taiwan. It's not even comparable to talk about that.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Yeah, but those--

BIDEN: It's not comparable to t--

STEPHANOPOULOS: --who say, "Look, America cannot be trusted now, America does not keep its promises--"

BIDEN: Who-- who's gonna say that? Look, before I made this decision, I met with all our allies, our NATO allies in Europe. They agreed. We should be getting out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Did they have a choice?

BIDEN: Sure, they had a choice. Look, the one thing I promise you in private, NATO allies are not quiet. You remember from your old days. They're not gonna be quiet. And so-- and by the way, you know, what we're gonna be doing is we're gonna be putting together a group of the G-7, the folks that we work with the most-- to-- I was on the phone with-- with Angela Merkel today. I was on the phone with the British prime minister. I'm gonna be talking to Macron in France to make sure we have a coherent view of how we're gonna deal from this point on.

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STEPHANOPOULOS: What happens now in Afghanistan? Do you believe the Taliban have changed?

BIDEN: No. I think-- let me put it this way. I think they're going through sort of an existential crisis about do they want to be recognized by the international community as being a legitimate government. I'm not sure they do. But look, they have--

STEPHANOPOULOS: They care about their beliefs more?

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BIDEN: Well, they do. But they also care about whether they have food to eat, whether they have an income that they can provide for their f-- that they can make any money and run an economy. They care about whether or not they can hold together the society that they in fact say they care so much about.

I'm not counting on any of that. I'm not cou-- but that is part of what I think is going on right now in terms of I-- I'm not sure I would've predicted, George, nor would you or anyone else, that when we decided to leave, that they'd provide safe passage for Americans to get out.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Beyond Americans, what do we owe the Afghans who are left behind, particularly Afghan women who are facing the prospect of subjugation again?

BIDEN: As many as we can get out, we should. For example, I had a meeting today for a couple hours in the Situation Room just below here. There are Afghan women outside the gate. I told 'em, "Get 'em on the planes. Get them out. Get them out. Get their families out if you can."

But here's the deal, George. The idea that we're able to deal with the rights of women around the world by military force is not rational. Not rational. Look what's happened to the Uighurs in western China. Look what's happening in other parts of the world.

Look what's happenin' in, you know, in-- in the Congo. I mean, there are a lotta places where women are being subjugated. The way to deal with that is not with a military invasion. The way to deal with that is putting economic, diplomatic, and national pre-- international pressure on them to change their behavior.

STEPHANOPOULOS: How about the threat to the United States? Most intelligence analysis has predicted that Al Qaeda would come back 18 to 24 months after a withdrawal of American troops. Is that analysis now being revised? Could it be sooner?

BIDEN: It could be. But George, look, here's the deal. Al Qaeda, ISIS, they metastasize. There's a significantly greater threat to the United States from Syria. There's a significantly greater threat from East Africa. There's significant greater threat to other places in the world than it is from the mountains of Afghanistan. And we have maintained the ability to have an over-the-horizon capability to take them out. We're-- we don't have military in Syria to make sure that we're gonna be protected--

STEPHANOPOULOS: And you're confident we're gonna have that in Afghanistan?

BIDEN: Yeah. I'm confident we're gonna have the overriding capability, yes. Look, George, it's like asking me, you know, am I confident that people are gonna act even remotely rationally. Here's the deal. The deal is the threat from Al Qaeda and their associate organizations is greater in other parts of the world to the United States than it is from Afghanistan.



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STEPHANOPOULOS: And th-- that tells you that you're-- it's safe to leave?

BIDEN: No. That tells me that-- my dad used to have an expression, George. If everything's equally important to you, nothing's important to you. We should be focusing on where the threat is the greatest. And the threat-- the idea-- we can continue to spend \$1 trillion and have tens of thousands of American forces in Afghanistan when we have what's going on around the world, in the Middle East and North Africa and west-- I mean, excuse me-- yeah, North Africa and Western Africa. The idea we can do that and ignore those-- those looming problems, growing problems, is not-- not rational.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Final question on this. You know, in a couple weeks, we're all gonna commemorate the 20th anniversary of 9/11. The Taliban are gonna be ruling Afghanistan, just I-- like they were when our country was attacked. How do you explain that to the American people?

BIDEN: Not true. It's not true. They're not gonna look just like they were we were attacked. There was a guy named Osama bin Laden that was still alive and well. They were organized in a big way, that they had significant help from arou-- from other parts of the world.

We went there for two reasons, George. Two reasons. One, to get Bin Laden, and two, to wipe out as best we could, and we did, the Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. We did it. Then what happened? Began to morph into the notion that, instead of having a counterterrorism capability to have small forces there in-- or in the region to be able to take on Al Qaeda if it tried to reconstitute, we decided to engage in nation building. In nation building. That never made any sense to me.

STEPHANOPOULOS: It sounds like you think we shoulda gotten out a long time ago--

BIDEN: We should've.

STEPHANOPOULOS: --and-- and accept the idea that it was gonna be messy no matter what.

BIDEN: Well, by the-- what would be messy?

STEPHANOPOULOS: The exit--

BIDEN: If we had gotten out a long time ago-- getting out would be messy no matter when it occurred. I ask you, you want me to stay, you want us to stay and send your kids back to Afghanistan? How about it? Are you g-- if you had a son or daughter, would you send them in Afghanistan now? Or later?

STEPHANOPOULOS: Would be hard, but a lot of families have done it.

BIDEN: They've done it because, in fact, there was a circumstance that was different when we started. We were there for two reasons, George. And we accomplished both ten years ago. We got Osama bin Laden. As I said and got criticized for saying at the time, we're gonna follow him to the gates of hell. Hell, we did--

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STEPHANOPOULOS: How will history judge the United States' experience in Afghanistan?

BIDEN: One that we overextended what we needed to do to deal with our national interest. That's like my sayin' they-- they're-- they-- they b-- b-- the border of Tajikistan-- and-- other-- what-- does it matter? Are we gonna go to war because of what's goin' on in Tajikistan? What do you think?

Tell me what-- where in that isolated country that has never, never, never in all of history been united, all the way back to Alexander the Great, straight through the British Empire and the Russians, what is the idea? Are we gonna s-- continue to lose thousands of Americans to injury and death to try to unite that country? What do you think? I think not.

I think the American people are with me. And when you unite that country, what do you have? They're surrounded by Russia in the north or the Stans in the north. You have-- to the west, they have Iran. To the south, they have Pakistan, who's supporting them. And to the-- and-- actually, the east, they have Pakistan and China. Tell me. Tell me. Is that worth our national interest to continue to spend another \$1 trillion and lose thousands more American lives? For what?

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STEPHANOPOULOS: I know we're outta time. I have two quick questions on COVID. I know you're gonna make-- be makin' an announcement on booster shots today. Have you and the first lady gotten your booster shots yet?

BIDEN: We're gonna get the booster shots. And-- it's somethin' that I think-- you know, because we g-- w-- we got our shots all the way back in I think December. So it's-- it's-- it's past time. And so the idea (NOISE) that the recommendation-- that's my wife calling. (LAUGH) No. (LAUGH) But all kiddin' aside, yes, we will get the booster shots.

STEPHANOPOULOS: And-- and finally-- are you comfortable with Americans getting a third shot when so many millions around the world haven't had their first?

BIDEN: Absolutely because we're providing more to the rest of the world than all the rest of the world combined. We got enough for everybody American, plus before this year is-- before we get to the middle of next year, we're gonna provide a half a billion shots to the rest of the world. We're keepin' our part of the bargain. We're doin' more than anybody.

STEPHANOPOULOS: Mr. President, thanks for your time.

BIDEN: Thank you.

Comments (225)



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**WITNESS RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ASKED DURING  
THE HEARING**

SEPTEMBER 29, 2021

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#### **RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. COURTNEY**

General MILLEY. To my knowledge, the Taliban never deliberately attacked U.S. or Coalition forces after the signing of the Doha Agreement. There were isolated instances of Taliban rocket and mortar fire targeting ANDSF bases that were also cohabited by U.S. Forces. On occasion there were reports of Taliban fighters returning fire at U.S. combat aircraft providing close air support to ANDSF.

However, the Taliban failed to fully honor other commitments from the agreement, including their pledge to not allow terrorists to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States. They also failed to earnestly negotiate with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to end the conflict and failed to reduce violence overall. Moreover, Taliban actions, including its brutal military campaign and targeted assassinations, completely undermined the spirit of the agreement, which sought a peaceful settlement to the conflict, not a military takeover. [See page 28.]

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#### **RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. WITTMAN**

Secretary AUSTIN. The Battle of Kunduz took place in 2015, which was the first year of the Resolute Support train, advise, and assist mission. During that period, the Taliban briefly captured Kunduz City. With the support from U.S. forces, the Afghan forces recaptured the city from the Taliban within a couple of weeks. [See page 33.]

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#### **RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MRS. HARTZLER**

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department of Defense continues to gather information about the ISIS network responsible for the Abbey Gate bombing and to analyze the ISIS planning and personnel, including the bomber, involved in the attack. We received credible information regarding a threat to Hamid Karzai International Airport in the days leading up to the attack. Unfortunately, we were unable to disrupt the attack. [See page 36.]

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#### **RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. MOULTON**

Secretary AUSTIN. We planned for multiple scenarios, including a contingency where the United States would have to facilitate the evacuation of our Afghan allies under difficult circumstances. The Department began planning for the possibility of a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) two weeks after the President's decision in April to withdraw from Afghanistan by early September, at which point military planners had crafted a number of evacuation scenarios. In mid-May, I ordered U.S. Central Command to prepare for a potential NEO and DOD began prepositioning forces in the region, including three infantry battalions.

A key DOD effort in support of expediting Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) processing was the establishment of "Project Rabbit," through which DOD provides employment verification of SIV applicants who worked for DOD contractors or sub-contractors directly to the Department of State. DOD has also endorsed and uploaded referrals for Afghan nationals under threat due to their association with DOD's mission into the Department of State's refugee referrals database. DOD will continue processing these referrals for as long as we continue to receive them directly from DOD personnel. In addition, the DOD has hosted tens of thousands of Afghan nationals on our facilities abroad and now at home as part of Operation Allies Welcome and Operation Allies Refuge. [See page 40.]

General MILLEY. Throughout the planning and withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, my primary focus was on safe and deliberate retrograde U.S. forces, contractors, citizens, and Afghan evacuees from Afghanistan. I had direct communications with Secretary Austin, General McKenzie, General Miller, leaders in the Intelligence Community, the Secretary of State, and the National Security Council to

share information, collaborate, and maintain a common operational picture on the activities in Afghanistan. My staff, at all levels, maintained communication to coordinate support for to these activities with their respective military and inter-agency (IA) counterparts.

Following the President's announcement on 14 April 2021 to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan, I immediately established a crisis management team (CMT) and later an Afghan evacuee cell to track the progress of the plan and enable operations. My staff provided me daily briefings that included intelligence updates, subordinate commanders' estimates, the status of security transition to Afghan security forces, the retrograde of U.S. and Coalition forces and equipment, the status of American Citizens (AMCITs), and the status of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) and other Afghan at Risk personnel in the country.

On 28 April, I hosted a DOD internal Rehearsal of Concept (ROC) Drill focused on the retrograde plan and its branches and sequels. On 8 May 2020, I hosted an Interagency table top exercise to review the retrograde timeline and multiple contingency operations that included the evacuation of non-combatant personnel. On 6 August 2020, my staff hosted a Non-Combatant Evacuation (NEO) rehearsal with the IA leaders to discuss the security, logistics, authorities, funding, and other requirements to enable the conduct of a conditions-based evacuation of AMCITS, SIV, and Afghan at Risk personnel.

In coordination with the Department of State and U.S. Embassy Kabul, CENTCOM completed contingency planning and prepositioned forces to support a NEO shortly after this rehearsal. From 14–31 Aug 21, DOD facilitated the evacuation of over 124,000 AMCIT, Afghan SIV, and Afghan at Risk personnel as part of Operation Allies Refuge. The DOD's Operation Allies Welcome and the relocation of Afghan SIV and Afghan at risk personnel continues today. My staff provides me daily updates on the movement personnel from Afghanistan and adjacent countries. This includes the relocation of Afghan personnel from locations in the Middle East and Europe to military bases in the Continental U.S. We have successfully received over 84,000 Afghan personnel and resettled over 78,000 in the U.S. to date. [See page 40.]

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#### **RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. CROW**

General MILLEY. The purpose of the 8 May 21 Interagency table-top exercise (TTX) was to refine and ensure a fully coordinated and synchronized USG and NATO plan for retrograde of forces and personnel from Afghanistan. My staff continued to conduct daily meetings with their State Department counterparts to maintain situational awareness and reinforce the need for a more-involved Interagency planning effort to ensure the development of a coherent NEO plan. [See page 66.]

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#### **RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MS. ESCOBAR**

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department has multiple efforts underway, including by the Joint Staff and the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, to conduct an independent review of the evacuation, the events leading up to it, and lessons learned. The Department is committed to understanding what worked, what did not work, and ensuring that we incorporate that into our planning and our strategic assessment going forward. [See page 77.]

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**QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS POST HEARING**

SEPTEMBER 29, 2021

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. LANGEVIN

Mr. LANGEVIN. I agree that “over the horizon” operations can be effective. However, I am concerned that, without complementary operations, they will be insufficient to keep us safe. Secretary Austin, are you confident that over the horizon capabilities, on their own, can mitigate the terrorist threat we face?

Secretary AUSTIN. Department of Defense over-the-horizon operations employ a mix of capability that contribute to a holistic and interagency counterterrorism strategy. The United States has significant operational and intelligence capability, to deny external operations by terrorist organizations that would threaten the homeland. We continue to work with our partners in the region, who share our interest in promoting a safe and stable South Asia and preventing a resurgence of terrorism.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Former CIA director and Secretary of Defense Panetta said that our national security is threatened by the Taliban takeover. One of our missions was to prevent a haven for terrorist groups and “we have failed in that mission.” Are you confident that we can prevent Afghanistan from becoming a haven?

Secretary AUSTIN. As the President has stated, we have one vital national interest in Afghanistan: to prevent terrorists from using Afghanistan to launch attacks against the United States. Department of Defense over-the-horizon operations employ a mix of capability that contribute to a holistic and interagency counterterrorism strategy. Our counterterrorism strategy layers multiple sources of intelligence to maintain awareness of terrorist threats with the capability to disrupt those threats directed against the homeland and our other interests. The United States has significant operational and intelligence capability, to deny external operations by terrorist organizations that would threaten the homeland. We continue to work with our partners in the region, who share our interest in promoting a safe and stable South Asia and preventing a resurgence of terrorism.

Mr. LANGEVIN. The director of the DIA has assessed that al Qaeda could threaten the homeland in 1–2 years. How will we keep our country safe?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department remains committed to ensure that Afghanistan cannot become a safe haven for terrorist organizations that threaten the homeland, and we will use all of the Department’s capabilities in service of that goal. We will continue our comprehensive, focused intelligence collection to inform U.S. kinetic and non-kinetic over-the-horizon capabilities. In addition, we will share appropriate intelligence with like-minded partners with capabilities to disrupt terrorist threats using a variety of means. Security cooperation within the region is also a key pillar of this strategy, working with those governments directly affected by terrorists and who are well-positioned to counter the threat.

Mr. LANGEVIN. General Milley, we have other train and equip programs and counterterrorism missions around the world, and we’ll likely have more as great power competition heats up. How can we better train and equip partner forces? How important is the on-the-ground human intelligence?

General MILLEY. We can better train and equip partner forces by more thoroughly accounting for regional and local politics and building a deeper understanding of their country’s institutional and logistical capacity to absorb our assistance. We must also carefully balance the partner’s priorities and concerns with our own, cultivating a sense of local-ownership and accountability.

On-the-ground human intelligence can be important in validating other forms of intelligence, which together increase our confidence in threat assessments.

Mr. LANGEVIN. I am also concerned about how many SIV applicants and holders remain in Afghanistan. They risked their lives for us and now are under a very real threat from the Taliban. General McKenzie, is there an impression amongst Syrians and Iraqis that it’s too risky to serve as an interpreter or intelligence asset for the U.S.? How are you mitigating this possibility?

General MCKENZIE. Currently, the linguist situation in OIR is different from that of Afghanistan in August 2021. CJTF–OIR does not utilize local national linguists and has not done so since April 2020 (when Partner training and the use of local nationals outside of the bases ceased due to COVID). Today, OIR’s linguists are either trained uniform military members/government employees or U.S. Citizens hired and vetted as part of a U.S. Government contract to work in Syria and Iraq.

However, the OIR Intelligence Community has observed no indicators that Iraqis or Syrians view working as a U.S. intelligence asset as too risky. Neither is there any appearance of a lack of desire among Syrians and Iraqis to perform linguist duties for the United States. Many are willing to risk everything to do so, often in hopes of earning a SIV or as a mechanism to secure their local neighborhood.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. WILSON

Mr. WILSON. Even before the August 31 withdrawal of troops, there were frustrating reports of Americans and Green Card holders being turned away at the gates of the airport or being instructed by the Administration and the U.S. military to stay away from the airport entirely.

Did you at any point ask President Biden for more time or support to enable U.S. forces to stay and complete a full evacuation of American citizens (AMCIT), as promised? If so, what was President Biden's response?

Secretary AUSTIN. My judgment remains that extending beyond August 31 would have greatly imperiled our people and our mission, as it would have dramatically increased security risks to U.S. forces. Since that time, the U.S. Government has continued its mission to evacuate U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents—to date, more than a thousand have departed by air and land routes.

Mr. WILSON. How many citizens, green card holders, and Afghan allies were left behind by the military's premature withdrawal on August 31st? What is the plan now to get these vulnerable people out of Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. Following the non-combatant evacuation operation phase, the Department of Defense continues to support the Department of State-led efforts to facilitate the safe and orderly departure of U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, and Afghans allies who wish to leave Afghanistan. Since September 1, 2021, the U.S. Government has continued that mission—to date, more than a thousand have departed by air and land routes.

Mr. WILSON. What U.S. military capabilities existed in Afghanistan following President Biden's April 14th announcement to withdraw all forces? When was air support to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) stopped? When was logistical support withdrawn? For how long after April 14th was the U.S. able to conduct intelligence activities?

Secretary AUSTIN. On 14 April, there were approximately 4,000 U.S. service members in Afghanistan in primarily advisory and support roles. U.S. capabilities at this time included organic fixed and rotary wing aviation and Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance. Between 14 April and 31 July, eight bases were retrograded and consolidated resulting in a force of approximately 650 U.S. service members to support U.S. Embassy Kabul and HKIA operations. This retrograde was conducted in a deliberate manner to meet the President's direction while mitigating risk to force and risk to mission. U.S. air support missions continued throughout the month of August 2021. Strikes in support of ANDSF were conducted as late as 13 August 2021. During the NEO, air support was largely focused on support of operations at HKIA. While our logistical support capabilities to the ANDSF and the Afghanistan Air Force (AAF) decremented to some extent during the retrograde, a great deal of effort was focused on providing logistical support from over-the-horizon (OTH) locations, which continued through the fall of Kabul. Intelligence collection continued without decrement until the completion of the NEO on 30 August. It continues to this day, albeit at greatly diminished capacity.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MRS. HARTZLER

Mrs. HARTZLER. Secretary Austin, is it true that the suicide bomber who attacked the Kabul Airport on August 23 was a CIA prisoner at the Bagram Air Base whom the Taliban released after Biden's Administration left Bagram in July?

Secretary AUSTIN. I defer to the CIA for a response.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. SCOTT

Mr. SCOTT. Should Stage I of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF) have been activated sooner than August 22, 2021?

Secretary AUSTIN. No. The Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF) augments Department of Defense (DOD) airlift requirements in emergencies when the need for airlift exceeds the capacity of available military aircraft. DOD activated Stage I of the CRAF in anticipation of the need for additional long-range international passenger aircraft

as we expanded evacuation efforts. Activating the CRAF earlier could have negatively impacted the commercial carriers' ability to meet their day-to-day operational commitments before the additional capacity was required.

Mr. SCOTT. Did the inter-agency process work as planned during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. Department of Defense planning for the retrograde operation was robust, and there was significant interagency participation throughout the process. The President received regular updates on the progress of the retrograde and the security situation in Afghanistan. He sought out all perspectives, including from the Department of Defense, throughout the process.

Mr. SCOTT. Are you willing to declassify the necessary documents that pertain to the decisions to reduce forces in Afghanistan in order to invade Iraq?

General MILLEY. If directed, we could declassify what are Joint Staff equities that we are the classification authority on. Most of this, would be outside JS classification authority and would reside with Office of the Secretary of Defense.

Mr. SCOTT. In your military opinion, should the Chief of Mission have declared a NEO sooner than August 14, 2021?

General MILLEY. The decision to order a NEO is for civilian leadership and policymakers, not military officials, to make.

In preparation for a possible NEO, and following the President's decision to remove military forces from Afghanistan, CENTCOM updated contingency planning for a non-combatant evacuation operation, in coordination with the Department of State, including Embassy Kabul.

Because the Department of Defense had prepositioned forces in the region and run practice exercises, thousands of troops were able to arrive in Kabul, secure the airport, and facilitate the NEO.

Mr. SCOTT. Did the inter-agency process work as planned during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. Yes. Principals from DOD, DOS, DHS, the Intelligence Community and the various agencies involved in planning the Afghanistan withdrawal and subsequent non-combatant evacuation engaged in robust communication and coordination leading up to the withdrawal and throughout both operations. Frequent National Security Council-led Interagency Policy Committee meetings, Deputies meetings and Principals meetings exhaustively examined the issues and developed options, directly engaging the President throughout the crises. Senior leaders across the interagency were kept informed and provided input on all major decisions related to the withdrawal and evacuation.

Mr. SCOTT. How did the 8 May 2021 senior officials level interagency table top exercise miss the impact of the Afghan's morale/confidence in the aftermath of the July 5, 2021 withdrawal from Bagram in the dead of night?

General MILLEY. The DOD was unable to effectively gauge the morale of the Afghan Security Forces (ANDSF) after we removed U.S. advisors from its units. The withdrawal of embedded advisor teams from ANDSF units virtually eliminated America's ability to monitor, track, and mitigate flagging Afghan morale and confidence. Additionally, the 8 May 21 TTX occurred only three weeks after the President announced the complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces. At that time, the Taliban had not yet initiated its decisive offensive effort against the ANDSF and the primary indicators of Afghan government stability had not been put under stress.

Mr. SCOTT. When can we expect Joint Pub 3-68 Noncombatant Evacuation Operations be updated to reflect the lessons learned from the Afghanistan NEO?

General MILLEY. The Joint Force learned multiple lessons during the conduct of Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) in Afghanistan. These lessons are already being incorporated into planning for any potential contingency NEOs. Joint Publication (JP) 3-68 Noncombatant Evacuation Operations is under revision with the Joint Doctrine Development Community (JDDC). Joint Staff J-3 will complete consolidation of comments and lessons learned from the Joint Force in April. The Director of Operations, Joint Staff J-3, will approve JP 3-68 at the end of July. Once signed, JP 3-68 will be published and available to the Joint Force as early as August 2021.

Mr. SCOTT. Mirror Imaging is clearly one of the many mistakes of the Afghan War. Do the War Colleges need to do a better job of teaching their students about the dangers of mirror imaging?

General MILLEY. As I stated in my testimony on 28 September 2021, the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan to build the Afghan military in the mirror image of U.S. forces is a significant lesson for the Department of Defense (DOD) to consider and address as we prepare for future wars. In Afghanistan, we based the training of Afghan security forces on "American doctrine, tactics, techniques, and proce-

dures...(and we) made a military that may have been overly dependent upon us, our presence, contractors, and higher tech systems...to fight a counterinsurgency war." Applying strategic and operational lessons from the War in Afghanistan into education of joint force professionals aligns with my 2020 Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision for Professional Military Education. The war colleges use this guide to educate and develop students to effectively assess national security challenges in order to serve as future strategic leaders, planners, and advisors. The document directs the war colleges to incorporate case studies, like the War in Afghanistan, to improve experiential learning. Through this process, students apply analytical frameworks to strategic and operational problems in order to develop critical thinking, judgment, and complex problem-solving skills. The war colleges will continue to adapt curricula with lessons from the War in Afghanistan to better prepare our joint force professionals for future service at the strategic level of the U.S. government.

Mr. SCOTT. In response to questioning, you stated that you recognized Afghanistan was a stalemate 5–6 years ago. Obviously, this was before your time as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. What is the responsibility of the nation's senior military officer to both the Commander-in-Chief and the American public should the armed forces of the United States ever find themselves engaged again in a stalemate?

General MILLEY. I'm the principal military advisor to the President, the Secretary of Defense, and NSC as outlined in title 10, sec 151 of U.S. code. The chain of command goes from the President, to the Secretary Defense, to the combatant commanders, and the secretaries of the military departments. My job is strictly advisory—I am very much involved but I do not have decision authority. I am expected to give my advice and ensure the President is fully informed on military matters. I give my best military advice and it's up to the President to make decisions.

Mr. SCOTT. AMCIT Charlotte Maxwell-Jones is the director and founder of Kabul Small Animal Rescue, a veterinary clinic and animal rescue organization. Ms. Maxwell-Jones and her team had over 100 dogs in their custody in Hangar 12 of HKIA for nearly a week awaiting evacuation. All of these dogs had health certificates, proof of rabies vaccinations, and in the case of over 50 working dogs, photographs identifying them. The dogs were working dogs, family pet dogs of U.S. citizens who were forced to leave them behind during the chaos of the evacuation, and some dogs that had been rescued by the charity.

While Maxwell-Jones was offered safe passage out of the country, the dogs were not permitted on any of the flights, even when there was room and didn't take a seat from any human beings. In the end, Maxwell-Jones was escorted out of the airport and the dogs were released from their carriers and crates before the U.S. military evacuated. The result was the confiscation of the working dogs by the Taliban government, the horrific deaths of some dogs, and the survival of some—of which Maxwell-Jones is still trying to rescue.

Why was Maxwell-Jones and the dogs in her care not granted space on any evacuation flights? Who made the decision not to permit them safe passage to the United States and why? Why was Maxwell-Jones not given the opportunity to exit the airport with the dogs?

General MILLEY. U.S. Customs restrictions, stipulated in the 14 Jun 21 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the Department of Health and Human Services notice entitled "Notice of Temporary Suspension of Dogs Entering the United States from High-Risk Rabies Countries," prevented the U.S. military from evacuating the Kabul Small Animal Rescue dogs. Afghanistan was listed as one of the high-risk rabies countries in the notice.

#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. BROOKS

Mr. BROOKS. We have had 20 years to study this country and think about our potential exit. The communication issues between the Department of State and the Pentagon that have plagued our efforts throughout the last two decades certainly manifested themselves in the end. I think you all know the difference between tactical and strategic successes and that one does not necessarily equal the other. How do you plan to assess these historical problems and address them in moving forward with strategic planning to counter and deter China?

Secretary AUSTIN. Given that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is increasingly synchronizing its military and non-military efforts to achieve its strategic objectives, it is essential that the Department of Defense (DOD) and other U.S. Government departments and agencies are aligned to address the challenge posed by the PRC. President Biden's Interim National Security Strategy has set forth a whole-of-government agenda that will strengthen our enduring advantages and allow us to pre-

vail in strategic competition with the PRC. Pursuant to that strategy, DOD and other U.S. Government departments and agencies, including the Department of State, will work together as we address the China challenge, taking into consideration the critical role of interagency coordination and synchronization.

Mr. BROOKS. We have had 20 years to study this country and think about our potential exit. The communication issues between the Department of State and the Pentagon that have plagued our efforts throughout the last two decades certainly manifested themselves in the end. I think you all know the difference between tactical and strategic successes and that one does not necessarily equal the other. How do you plan to assess these historical problems and address them in moving forward with strategic planning to counter and deter China?

General MILLEY. We continuously assess and review our operations for relevant insights and improvements. The withdrawal from Afghanistan is no exception. We are already incorporating lessons from these events into our approaches and processes for dealing with other strategic challenges, to include China. In fact, given the magnitude of the China challenge, there is no way to deal with it except through robust interagency coordination.

The National Security Council is already implementing a robust schedule of China-focused interagency meetings at all levels: Interagency policy Committees, Deputies Committees, and Principals Committees. They have added a weekly China Communications Hub meeting to increase cross-agency visibility and coordination of strategic messaging related to China.

Achieving better integration across Departments, especially two as large and complex as DOD and State, comes down to developing positive personal relationships between principals and staff at all levels. The experience of the Afghanistan withdrawal provided a crucible to forge those relationships among our present leadership. More than scheduled meetings, these relationships break down the traditional bureaucratic stovepipes and are helping us move forward in addressing the issues your question highlights.

Mr. BROOKS. Reuters issued a transcript copy of a June 23 phone call between President Biden and President Ghani. In this call, Biden tells President Ghani “there’s a need, whether it is true or not, there is a need to project a different picture.” Did this lack of confidence expressed by the President ever give the Administration pause in considering our withdrawal at that point or consider providing reinforcement to the Afghan National Security Forces? If not, why not?

General MILLEY. I did not participate in this phone call, nor am I familiar with those details. However, I want to go back to the tasking, the mission that we had from the President, which was to execute a deliberate, responsible, coordinated, synchronized strategic retrograde from Afghanistan, of all U.S. military forces. We executed the retrograde as directed and evacuated over 124,000 people from the country of Afghanistan. Ultimately, the legacy of our nation’s efforts in Afghanistan are the 20 years that have passed without a major terrorist attack on our homeland as the result of the efforts of our brave men and women overseas, as well as the thousands of Afghans who are now living in freedom in the United States.

Mr. BROOKS. Did CENTCOM suggest Bagram would be the best option to prevent bottlenecks and logistical challenges for an evacuation?

General MCKENZIE. My assessment was that Bagram Air Field (BAF) was not a suitable location for any potential NEO based on its distance from Kabul and the U.S. Embassy Kabul (USEK).

#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. GALLAGHER

Mr. GALLAGHER. Secretary Austin, public reporting last year highlighted the key role NSPM 13 has played in executing offensive cyber operations as part of U.S. efforts to defend forward. It was reported that a key element of the success was the delegation of authority to act to the Secretary of Defense once a campaign was agreed to. Without discussing any specific campaigns or plans, are these operations continuing at an equal or greater pace under the Biden Administration? If not, what impediments are you experiencing to continuing this reportedly successful program?

Secretary AUSTIN. The existing U.S. policy framework for approving offensive cyber operations continues to enable the Department to effectively perform its mission to disrupt threats overseas at the source. Our forces operate routinely in cyberspace to maintain awareness of the evolving cyber environment, observe adversary activities, and generate opportunities to disrupt foreign malicious cyber activities. The Department conducts offensive cyber operations when threats meet the threshold for action as established in policy. Challenges exist as cyberspace is a domain of fleeting opportunity and constant change.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Secretary Austin, the Pentagon has said repeatedly in recent years that the Indo-Pacific is its “priority theater.” If INDOPACOM is the priority theater, would you agree that INDOPACOM should be the option of last resort for sourcing requests for forces by other combatant commands, particularly for high-demand, low-density assets? As the Department of Defense formulates options for conducting over-the-horizon counterterrorism options in Afghanistan, have you provided explicit guidance to minimize the use of forces assigned to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command? If not, would you take this opportunity to publicly provide that guidance? If not, why not? As our over-the-horizon planning takes shape, would you commit to having your staffs report back to this committee on the specific steps you took to avoid allocating forces assigned to INDOPACOM?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department’s focus is on China as the pacing challenge, and this is our priority throughout the Global Force Management (GFM) process. The GFM process provides a robust review of available forces with the expertise, training, readiness, and experience necessary to successfully complete the mission and includes scrutiny at multiple levels within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Combatant Commands, the Joint Staff, and the Services. Their combined recommendations provide the foundation for a Department-wide approach to address emergent crises and global challenges. I am confident that our current processes prioritize requirements related to the INDOPACOM theater and that we can maintain this focus effectively while also addressing global counterterrorism requirements, including in Afghanistan. As always, we would be happy to answer any questions you may have on how we are meeting the China challenge and executing over-the-horizon counterterrorism missions, in a classified setting.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Secretary Austin, I understand the National Security Council held a drill on May 8 where the interagency rehearsed the withdrawal. Can you please tell the Committee who from each cabinet Department represented their agency?

Secretary AUSTIN. Extensive planning was conducted across a range of U.S. Government departments and agencies and the DOD was a full participant at all levels.

Mr. GALLAGHER. General Milley, U.S. forces, sensors, and platforms vary in their relevance for an over-the-horizon counterterrorism operation. Would you agree that an aircraft carrier operating from the Arabian Sea is a relatively expensive and inefficient way to conduct counterterrorism operations? When INDOPACOM is our priority theater, and when strategic competition with China and Russia are the top priorities of our strategy, is it really the best use of our limited fleet of aircraft carriers to operate in the Arabian Sea monitoring terrorist groups in Afghanistan?

General MILEY. Multiple factors contributed to the decision to maintain a Carrier Strike Group in the CENTCOM region through the Noncombatant Evacuation Operation and in the period immediately after, including the need to preserve options to protect U.S. citizens and our allies in Afghanistan. Additionally, the near proximity of the Carrier Strike Group greatly reduced the requirement for airborne refueling capacity, reducing risk to force and mission. The Carrier Strike Group’s position was continuously evaluated throughout the operation and it was moved as soon as the situation warranted.

As a global force, the Department of Defense strives to balance priorities worldwide. We align capabilities, not specific assets, to these priorities and there are many factors to consider when doing so. This often means an asset like an aircraft carrier, with its wide range of capabilities and great mobility, will shift from one Combatant Command to another as we adjust forces globally in support of our highest priorities.

Mr. GALLAGHER. General McKenzie, did you convey the Taliban’s offer, during your meeting with Mullah Baradar, to allow U.S. forces to take control of Kabul to the President? Who made the decision to turn down the Taliban offer to allow the U.S. military to secure Kabul and put the safety of our troops in the hands of the Taliban?

General MCKENZIE. I met with the Taliban in Doha alongside Ambassador Khalilzad, however in our discussions the Taliban did not provide a sincere offer to secure Kabul. Securing Kabul would have required the additional deployment of a reinforced combat division, which would have had to deliberately clear the city before securing its outer perimeter—activities that would have provoked overt hostilities with the Taliban and jeopardized the NEO. During this meeting, I reaffirmed the specific purpose for my participation: to warn the Taliban of the severe consequences of interfering with our NEO. The Taliban pledged that they had no intention of doing so and subsequently abided by this commitment. I reported key elements of the meeting to my chain of command afterward.

Mr. GALLAGHER. General McKenzie, on September 29th you said the attack on FOB Chapman did not breach the Doha agreement, Did we respond with lethal

force to the attack on our base? Did the Taliban get the message not to breach Doha Agreement via air strikes, drone strikes, special operations? By not responding to an attack, doesn't that send a message to Taliban? A message they could act with impunity and Biden Administration wouldn't respond?

General MCKENZIE. Following the Doha Accord (29 Feb 20), there were three indirect fire attacks against FOB Chapman from late March to early April 2021. All three were attributed to the Taliban, who, we assessed, thought it was unlikely that we would meet the 1 May 2021 deadline to withdraw U.S. forces and perhaps intended to apply pressure to meet the deadline. No U.S. or Afghan forces were injured or killed during these attacks, but CNN later reported that seven Afghan civilians were reportedly injured (outside the wire) during one of the attacks. There were no operations conducted specifically in response to these attacks. I cannot speculate whether the Taliban interpreted a non-response to the attacks as evidence that they could act with impunity against U.S. forces. However, the overall level of violence was reduced following the Doha Agreement. Although a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire was an agenda item for dialogue and negotiations, an attack on U.S. forces between 29 February 2020 and 31 August 2021 confirmed to have been conducted by the Taliban or forces under its direction could be understood as a violation of one of the Taliban's commitments under the Doha Agreement. However, determinations concerning whether any particular engagement or engagements violated the Doha Agreement were policy matters, to be informed by USCENTCOM's military assessments, rather than military decisions for USCENTCOM to render.

Mr. GALLAGHER. General McKenzie, on September 29th, you testified the Doha Agreement negatively affected Afghan Troops. Did the failure of the U.S. to enforce Doha conditions have an even greater impact on Afghan troops? Did abandoning Bagram without notice have a negative impact on Afghan troops?

General MCKENZIE. I believe the February 2020 Doha Agreement was the operational reason for the eventual collapse of GIRoA. It is not possible to overstate the pernicious and devastating affect this agreement had on the ANDSF, particularly aggravated by our negotiation strategy, which did not subsequently apply conditions. Subsequent announcements regarding reductions of U.S. force levels contributed further to the sense of demoralization, as did the closure/handoff of our bases. Bagram was handed off to the ANDSF in coordination with its leadership. Nothing indicates that the handoff of this particular base had any effect on ANDSF morale, which was already in terminal decline by that point.

Mr. GALLAGHER. General McKenzie, does an over the horizon posture require a partner on the ground? Do you see the Taliban as that partner? Typically, OTH requires neighboring partners as well. Do we have any of those around Afghanistan, such as any Central Asian partners who may have agreed to help?

Do you have confidence that Pakistan will allow us to use their airspace if we need to go after al Qaeda? Our air assets will take much longer to reach Afghan airspace than when we could fly them out of Bagram, correct? Does this mean that they will have less time on target?

General MCKENZIE. An OTH posture does not necessarily require a partner on the ground. There are capabilities that can strike a threat without partner forces on the ground. OTH does require neighboring partners. We are currently staging out of the Gulf region and DoS continues to coordinate with Central Asia Countries on agreements for conducting OTH operations. In closed-door meetings we are quietly discussing with Pakistan the continued use of their airspace. Assets will take longer to get to Afghanistan than assets originating in Afghanistan. Air assets originating outside of Afghanistan will have less time on target. This can be minimized but not erased by using multiple assets.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. KEATING

Mr. KEATING. Secretary Austin, were NATO allies consulted on the decision to withdraw by August 31st? Did you consult with any NATO leaders about withdrawal on August 31st? Were NATO in agreement about withdrawal? Were they consulted during the withdrawal as well? How many of these countries had troops on the ground in Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. DOD, along with our counterparts throughout the U.S. Government, conducted dozens of consultations and engagements with Allies and partners leading up to the April 14, 2021, announcement to withdraw forces from Afghanistan. This coordination continued through the conclusion of the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan, and consultation remains a priority as the Alliance

engages in the process of examining lessons learned that will inform current and future operations.

NATO's Resolute Support Mission focused primarily on training, advising, and assisting Afghans working at the security-related ministries, in other government institutions, and among the senior ranks of the army and police. At the time of the April 14 announcement, 7,000 non-U.S. military personnel from 35 NATO and non-NATO countries supported RSM.

Mr. KEATING. In my capacity as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I had the opportunity to question the Special Representative for Syria Engagement. Specifically, I asked about the timeframe between the decision to withdraw our service members to when our allies in the region were notified. I was surprised to hear that hours, or possibly days, transpired before our allies were notified. Moreover, they had to hear about the decision in the media. During my questioning, the Special Representative admitted that was a mistake. I want to know if that mistake was repeated during our withdrawal in Afghanistan. How long after the decision to fully withdraw our service members from Afghanistan were our allies notified?

General MILLEY. U.S. Government officials from different agencies and departments conveyed to Allies and partners who had personnel and citizens on the ground alongside the United States in Afghanistan the President's decision. Those communications took place over the course of weeks in different formats—in Washington, at NATO and CENTCOM, in the capitals of those Allies and partners, and on the ground in Afghanistan. The discussion was continuous with the sharing of critical fresh information and coordination for the evacuation of their citizens and Afghan nationals.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. BANKS

Mr. BANKS. Secretary Austin, During the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on September 28th, you confirmed to Senator Cotton that Secretary Blinken missed an important Rehearsal of Concept drill at the Pentagon on May 8th, 2021 that discussed Afghan withdrawal. Instead, he sent Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Brian McKeon in his place. Did Secretary Blinken indicate why he needed to miss such a critical meeting? Did Secretary Blinken state where he would be instead of at that event? Did Secretary Blinken use any DOD assets, whether aircraft, air bases, personnel, ground transport, etc. to travel during in the days before or following this critical exercise between May 7, 2021 and May 10, 2021?

Secretary AUSTIN. For information on Secretary Blinken's travel schedule and logistics, I recommend contacting the Department of State.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MS. ESCOBAR

Ms. ESCOBAR. What is the Department of Defense's guidance with respect to any military-grade weapons, vehicles, and equipment being turned over to DLA as a result of the U.S. drawdown from Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. Military Departments make the determinations for the disposition of their military grade weapons, vehicles and equipment. As U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) determined that items were no longer needed, USFOR-A checked Military Department databases that provide specific disposition instructions. These databases indicated whether to prepare items for retrograde out of Afghanistan or to turn the item over to DLA for disposal. If a Military Department had a requirement for the item, it was typically retrograded for use by other units. If there was no requirement for the item indicated by a Military Department, disposition instructions typically direct a transfer to DLA for disposal. DLA would then dispose of the materiel in accordance with DOD Manual 4160.21 volumes 1 and 3.

Ms. ESCOBAR. How will the U.S. deal with the Taliban from hereon, and does the Department anticipate the Taliban consolidating control over Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. It is clear that the international community has a stake in ensuring that the Taliban lives up to its public commitments. We continue to engage the Taliban on our core interests in Afghanistan, including counter-terrorism, safe passage for individuals seeking to leave Afghanistan, and inclusive governance.

Ms. ESCOBAR. How will the U.S. deal with the threat of international terrorism, that brought us into the region in the first place, again taking root in Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. The terrorist threat that exists today is not the same threat that brought us to the region in 2001. Over the last 20 years, terrorist organizations have evolved their methods and structure—but make no mistake: we have evolved our methods and capabilities as well. Our advances in biometrics, global information



sharing, and security cooperation have increased security measures throughout the world. Department of Defense over-the-horizon operations employ a mix of capability that contribute to a holistic and interagency counterterrorism strategy. The United States has significant operational and intelligence capability, to deny external operations by terrorist organizations that would threaten the homeland. We continue to work with our partners in the region, who share our interest in promoting a safe and stable South Asia and preventing a resurgence of terrorism.

Ms. ESCOBAR. What will it take for the U.S. to possibly return to placing a stronger foothold in Afghanistan again?

Secretary AUSTIN. I will not speculate on future policy decisions. Any decision to return to Afghanistan would be made by the President.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Can you provide any clarity on the backlog of refugee cases and/or SIV applicants that still need to be processed? Given that it was the DOD that contracted and worked closely with these allies and their families on the ground, what is the Department's level of involvement in the SIV clearance and resettlement efforts now that DHS is leading much of the resettlement efforts?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security are the lead federal agencies for the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program and the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), respectively. The Department of Defense (DOD) has been involved in the interagency process to accelerate SIV processing since these efforts began in March. We continue to work closely with the Department of State to accelerate SIV processing. A key DOD effort in support of expediting SIV processing was the establishment of "Project Rabbit," through which DOD provides employment verification of SIV applicants who worked for DOD contractors or subcontractors directly to the Department of State. DOD has also endorsed and uploaded numerous referrals for Afghan nationals who are under threat due to their association with DOD's mission directly into the State Department's refugee referrals database. DOD will continue processing these referrals for as long as we receive them directly from DOD personnel.

Ms. ESCOBAR. While I commend the Department for their steadfast efforts that helped pull thousands of allies and others from the region in a timely manner, I was hoping to get clarity on why were evacuation efforts not ramped up when President Biden set the August withdrawal date in April 2021?

Secretary AUSTIN. Throughout the planning process, the Department of Defense collaborated closely with the Department of State on security arrangements for our Embassy in Kabul and options for evacuation. In April, the Department of State began reducing the Embassy staff, ordering non-essential personnel to depart, and issued numerous messages to U.S. citizens in Afghanistan, urging them to depart and offering assistance to do so. The Department of Defense offered inputs to Department of State's planning efforts, mindful of concerns that urging people to leave too quickly might have created a sense of panic and cause the very collapse of the Afghan Government that we sought to avoid. The fact that our forces were on the ground so quickly to support the non-combatant evacuation is due in large part to our planning and our pre-positioning of forces.

Ms. ESCOBAR. With many of the SIVs here in the U.S. being housed at military installations, how will the Department care for those Afghans it pulled out? And how will it care for those at risk that it has not yet pulled out?

Secretary AUSTIN. Regarding care for persons evacuated from Afghanistan and hosted at Department of Defense (DOD) installations, DOD is honored to host our guests and is dedicated to treating our guests with dignity and respect while we care for their needs. DOD is supporting the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services and working closely with non-governmental organizations, and State and local authorities to provide our Afghan guests an appropriate level of support. This includes transportation from the port of entry to the location of the accommodation, local transportation in and around the installation, provision of housing and other necessary facilities for the humanitarian needs of individuals and families, sustenance, and necessary medical and dental care (including medical screenings and referral to off-base, non-DOD care, if necessary).

Regarding other at-risk Afghans, DOD continues to support the Department of State-led efforts to facilitate the safe departure of U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs), and other Afghans who are eligible for resettlement who wish to leave Afghanistan. Since September 1, 2021, more than a thousand individuals have departed through air and land routes.

Ms. ESCOBAR. The New York Times and other sources have reportedly claimed that at least 100,000 people were left behind, who might be eligible for expedited U.S. visas. What is the Department's strategy to continue providing protections for such populations and eventually bringing them to safety here in the U.S.?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department of Defense continues to support Department of State-led efforts to facilitate the departure of U.S. citizens, Lawful Permanent Residents, Special Immigrant Visa applicants and other Afghans who are eligible for resettlement. The DOD supports the Department of State team, led by the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE), in interagency engagements and those with private organizations to align efforts to enable the safe departure of these individuals out of Afghanistan. This includes weekly interagency meetings attended by senior leaders from OSD and the Joint Staff, and DOD has embedded liaison officers with the State/CARE team to inform DOD policy and support and the larger U.S. evacuation and relocation effort.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Do you feel like the U.S. intelligence community provided your personnel with credible and accurate assessments of the situation on the ground and especially on what would be an astonishingly quick fall of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces?

Secretary AUSTIN. We evaluated the situation in Afghanistan based on a number of different diplomatic, military, and intelligence assessments, and these assessments yielded a number of different scenarios we believed were possible. DOD planned for these various scenarios, including a potential noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) under duress. This prudent planning led to the pre-positioning of thousands of forces in the region who were ready to deploy in support of the NEO.

Ms. ESCOBAR. How would knowing what we did not know about the expeditious fall of Kabul have changed things in terms of our exit, if anything?

Secretary AUSTIN. The rapid collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) took us by surprise. However, we had developed numerous plans for a range of scenarios, and we were prepared for this contingency. As it began to look increasingly likely that the ANDSF would collapse rapidly, I directed the inflow of additional forces into theater to prepare for and execute the evacuation.

Ms. ESCOBAR. How will the U.S. deal with the Taliban from hereon, and does the Department anticipate the Taliban consolidating control over Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. As our relations with the Taliban are a diplomatic issue, I defer to the White House or the Department of State for a response.

Ms. ESCOBAR. How will the U.S. deal with the threat of international terrorism, that brought us into the region in the first place, again taking root in Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. We remain committed to preventing Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist safe haven. In conducting Over the Horizon Counterterrorism (OTH-CT), the Joint Force leverages the full breath of intelligence collection capabilities, to include Airborne Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (Airborne ISR), Human Intelligence (HUMINT), Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), Measurement and Signature Intelligence (MASINT) and Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) to gain and maintain understanding of terrorist networks' activities and intentions. When authorized, the Joint Force can also employ a variety of offensive capabilities, to include precision strikes, to address threats to the U.S. homeland, our allies, and our interests abroad.

Ms. ESCOBAR. What will it take for the U.S. to possibly return to placing a stronghold in Afghanistan again?

General MILLEY. It would take a Presidential determination that U.S. military forces on the ground in Afghanistan are necessary to defend against a threat to the United States. It would require a significant U.S. military force, at tremendous risk, to establish any military footprint back in Afghanistan.

Ms. ESCOBAR. Can you provide any clarity on the backlog of refugee cases and/or SIV applicants that still need to be processed? Given that it was the DOD that contracted and worked closely with these allies and their families on the ground, what is the Department's level of involvement in the SIV clearance and resettlement efforts now that DHS is leading much of the resettlement efforts?

General MILLEY. The resettlement process is a Department of State (DoS) responsibility, the Department of Defense (DOD) does not monitor the processing times/backlogs in the SIV application process. Since the start of evacuations from Kabul in July 2021, the DOD has housed over 84,000 Afghan evacuees at 11 different OCONUS Lily Pad facilities and 8 different CONUS Safe Havens. Over the past two months (Dec and Jan), DOD has closed six different CONUS Safe Havens. As of 7 Feb, DOD currently houses 935 Afghan evacuees across two OCONUS Lily Pads and 4,820 Afghan evacuees across two CONUS Safe Havens. A total of 2,264 Afghan evacuees remain at the UAE Humanitarian City in Abu Dhabi, administered by the UAE government. At each of the DOD military bases, DOD has provided wrap-around services to include food, basic medical care, vaccinations for Measles and Varicella in-line with CDC guidance for Afghans traveling to CONUS, initial health screenings and documentation to support the SIV application process, and data entry efforts and contracts to process information for Afghan evacuees.

Ms. ESCOBAR. While I commend the Department for their steadfast efforts that helped pull thousands of allies and others from the region in a timely manner, I was hoping to get clarity on why were evacuation efforts not ramped up when President Biden set the August withdrawal date in April 2021?

General MILLEY. As soon as President Biden set the August withdrawal date, the Department of Defense increased focus on the safe and deliberate withdrawal of U.S. Forces, contractors, citizens, and potential Afghan evacuees. I established a crisis management team that developed indicators, planned and executed rehearsals, and monitored all aspects of the Afghanistan withdrawal to include non-combatant evacuations in the event of a breakdown of the diplomatic mission in Kabul. Once those indicators were tripped, and at the request of the Department of State, DOD transitioned to the non-combatant evacuation operation; In April 2021, our planning assumption within the crisis management team was that the U.S. would maintain a diplomatic mission in Kabul.

If you remember, in April the Afghan government was still in place, their military was still intact, and we expected the government and Afghan National Security Forces to maintain control of the country at least until the Fall. Specific to non-combatant operations, the mission was to secure the Embassy, keep the Embassy open, and maintain a diplomatic mission. In May, I hosted an interagency table top exercise to review the retrograde timeline and contingency operations while my staff provided daily intelligence updates, the status of Afghan security forces along with U.S. and coalition forces, and monitored the status of American Citizens (AMCIT) and Afghans holding and applying for Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) as well as other Afghan at risk personnel.

On 6 Aug, my staff hosted a Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) rehearsal with international assistance leaders to identify and address any issues that we might come across in the process. Once the NEO was declared, we facilitated the evacuation of over 124,000 AMCIT, Afghan SIV, and Afghan at-risk personnel as part of Operation Allies Refuge. As of 7 Feb, we have continued to help 1,198 AMCITs and legal permanent residents (LPRs) evacuate back to the U.S. or third countries since 31 August, and have successfully evacuated and safely integrated over 84,000 Afghans.

Ms. ESCOBAR. With many of the SIVs here in the U.S. being housed at military installations, how will the Department care for those Afghans it pulled out? And how will it care for those at risk that it has not yet pulled out?

General MILLEY. The Department of State (DoS) is responsible for Afghan evacuees located overseas. Once evacuees arrive in the U.S., the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) assumes responsibility for their care. At their request, the Department of Defense (DOD) provides assistance to both DoS and DHS, including providing facilities to house the evacuees and medical support. Water, beds and bedding, shuttle services, latrines and showers, food service, linguists, spaces for recreation and religious observations, and power generation are also provided. Additionally, further expansion on these sites has provided cultural and recreational improvements such as space for movies, games, and meeting with population representatives. As requested, the DOD will continue to provide appropriate services to all current and future residents of the temporary safe havens that reside on current military installations or on a non-DOD installation or facilities.

Ms. ESCOBAR. The New York Times and other sources have reportedly claimed that at least 100,000 people were left behind, who might be eligible for expedited U.S. visas. What is the Department's strategy to continue providing protections for such populations and eventually bringing them to safety here in the U.S.?

General MILLEY. Adjudication of applications for U.S. visas—whether Special Immigrant (SIV) or refugee (categories P1 or P2) are the responsibility of the Department of State.

The Joint Staff and Department of Defense work closely with the Department of State and non-governmental organizations to ensure that persons eligible for potential resettlement in the United States are afforded any support to which they might be entitled while the processing of their applications proceed.

Ms. ESCOBAR. How would knowing what we did not know about the expeditious fall of Kabul have changed things in terms of our exit, if anything?

General MILLEY. In the fall of 2020, my analysis was that an accelerated withdrawal without meeting specific and necessary conditions risked losing the substantial gains made in Afghanistan and could precipitate a general collapse of the Afghan security forces and the Afghan government, resulting in a complete Taliban takeover or a general civil war. There are many lessons to be learned, to include the reasons for the unprecedented speed of the collapse of the Afghan Security Forces.

Ms. ESCOBAR. What equipment, if any, does the DLA plan to dispose of through the 1033 program?

General MCKENZIE. All U.S. origin equipment procured under the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) which was in the process of transfer to the GIROA is under the de facto control of DSCMO-A. Following the 1532 notification to Congress, the equipment will revert to U.S. military service control. The services will make a final determination as to the disposition of the equipment, including transfer of unwanted equipment to DLA for further disposition or disposal. U.S. Central Command is not aware of DLA intentions or disposition plans.

Ms. ESCOBAR. How will the U.S. deal with the Taliban from hereon, and does the Department anticipate the Taliban consolidating control over Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. DOD will follow the direction of the Administration regarding U.S. relations with the Taliban. DOD will work with the other departments to execute a strategy developed and led by the National Security Council. In terms of the Taliban consolidating control, we anticipate the Taliban will attempt to consolidate control over Afghanistan, however, there are many steps and several opposition groups that stand in the way of the Taliban being able to achieve this aim.

Ms. ESCOBAR. How will the U.S. deal with the threat of international terrorism, that brought us into the region in the first place, again taking root in Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. While challenging, we will work hard to keep the threat of international terrorism at bay as we draw upon the lessons we have learned over the last 20 years. The USG interagency team continues to address the threats posed by international terrorism through interagency coordination and action. As it relates to Afghanistan, the DOD plans to maintain an over the horizon (OTH) capability to identify and target emerging threats. DOD will also support DoS as it continues to coordinate with allies and partners on a regional counter-terrorism (CT) approach to address concerns posed by violent extremist organization (VEO) activities.

Ms. ESCOBAR. What will it take for the U.S. to possibly return to placing a stronger foothold in Afghanistan again?

General MCKENZIE. A future U.S. foothold in Afghanistan would require a POTUS-level decision. As appropriate, DOD will support DoS in decisions the Administration makes regarding a future U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. MORELLE

Mr. MORELLE. A consistent frustration of mine throughout the evacuation was the inability of the administration to communicate a clear set of procedures and guidelines to congressional staff, refugee advocates, and Afghans on the ground during the evacuation at Kabul airport. When can we expect briefings for staff on lessons learned from the lack of clear communication during the evacuation; the current process to evacuate Afghans from Afghanistan; and what is being done to ensure communication failures like this do not happen again in the future?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department is supportive of congressional proposals for an independent commission to review the U.S. government's 20-year war in Afghanistan. We also have efforts underway, including by the Joint Staff and the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, to conduct an independent review of the evacuation, the events leading up to it, and lessons learned. The Department is committed to understanding what worked, what did not work, and ensuring that we incorporate that into our planning and our strategic assessments going forward.

Mr. MORELLE. One of the challenges with helping SIV applicants leave Afghanistan has been getting the necessary documents that prove they served with our military or American contractors. The Department of Defense has a crucial role to play as a part of the SIV process; Afghans must obtain an employment letter then receive a letter of recommendation from their supervisor, and finally get verification of that recommendation letter. These steps have proven to be a significant hurdle for Afghans who may not be able to contact their previous employer or whose supervisor is no longer serving with the armed forces or employed as a defense contractor. There are similar issues with the P-2 program. What can DOD do to expedite this process for SIVs and P-2 applicants still on the ground in Afghanistan, and how can we change this process in the future?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition & Sustainment (OUSD A&S) has partnered with the Defense Digital Service (DDS) and Department of State's Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) team to help expedite and streamline the SIV process for Afghan nationals who were employed by contractors of the Department of Defense (DOD). This effort is called Project Rabbit. The goal of the project is to simplify the Employment Verification & Letter of Recommendation phase of the SIV application process. Project Rabbit has replaced the

need for companies to write employment verification letters and letters of recommendations for each of their Afghan employees who have applied for a SIV. HR data and employment records are voluntarily provided by companies and matched to data in the National Visa Center's (NVC) SIV applications submitted by Afghans who worked under USG contracts, specifically DOD contracts. Since mid-August, DOD has helped verify information for more than 4,000 SIV applicants who were missing employment documentation and otherwise would not have moved forward in the SIV processing.

Mr. MORELLE. Our 20 year-long presence in Afghanistan was an enormous undertaking costing hundreds of millions of dollars, overseen by four administrations and countless dedicated service members both in Afghanistan and in the Pentagon. Now that the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan has ended, how does the department plan to reallocate dollars and resources to the new challenges this country faces while maintaining an over the horizon counter-terror presence in Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. Terrorism remains a persistent and enduring global threat. The Department of Defense (DOD) will retain the assets and capability to monitor and counter threats to the United States and our allies that emanate from Afghanistan. To conduct over-the-horizon operations, the U.S. Government has committed aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets and other collection capabilities to support this mission, and we are working with partners in the region to develop a range of options to enable direct action when necessary. This will require continued engagement with regional partners to ensure the United States has viable access, basing, and overflight.

DOD is taking key steps to prioritize future challenges—most notably, focusing on China as our primary pacing challenge. DOD must shift resources from legacy platforms and weapons that are ill-suited for technologically-advanced threats, to investments in cutting-edge technologies and capabilities that will provide a military advantage to the U.S. Joint Force. DOD must combine new technologies with existing capabilities, continue to develop new operational concepts, and strengthen our bonds with Allies and partners, to meet our vision for integrated deterrence.

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General MILLEY. As the SIV application process owner, any future changes to the SIV and P-2 application processes are at the discretion of the Department of State (DoS). Verification of former employment or support to the Department of Defense in Afghanistan is a part of the DoS-owned SIV application process.

Mr. MORELLE. With thousands of our Afghan SIV's and allies still on the ground in Afghanistan, how will the individuals on the ground be identified, contacted, issued visas, and manifested on a flight? If there is not currently a plan in place, what processes are being preliminarily discussed? Furthermore, we have seen credible reports that the Taliban are requiring passports and visas for any Afghans let onto international flights, how do we plan to get Afghan's passports and visas without a presence on the ground.

General MCKENZIE. The State Department's Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts, Ambassador Beth Jones, oversees the U.S. Government's ongoing efforts to facilitate the relocation of individuals from Afghanistan through commercial or charter flights and overland routes. Currently the State Department is using civilian aircraft to transport individuals. USCENTCOM contributes to the process by supporting relocated individuals' temporary stay in third-country transit points, such as Qatar and UAE. USCENTCOM continues to support the U.S. Government's efforts to press the Taliban to allow all people who want to leave Afghanistan to do so, including American citizens and Afghans.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MRS. MCCLAIN

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Why was relinquishing Bagram Air Base and conducting intelligence operations from "over-the-horizon" a better military and intelligence strategy

than keeping and utilizing the large Bagram Air Base which we had developed and turned into an effective military installation over 20 years?

Could the U.S. not have kept Bagram and continued to conduct intelligence and counter-terror operations safely from that location?

Secretary AUSTIN. Following the April 14 decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the Department of Defense conducted a planned transition as part of the retrograde operation, including transitioning Bagram Air Force Base to the Afghan National Defense Forces. The Department of Defense considered a range of options, but ultimately, the Department's military task was to protect the American diplomatic presence in Kabul—and if needed, to conduct a non-combatant evacuation—from Kabul's airport. The Department of Defense transferred Bagram Air Base to the Afghan government, following extensive consultations.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Why was relinquishing Bagram Air Base and conducting intelligence operations from “over-the-horizon” a better military and intelligence strategy than keeping and utilizing the large Bagram Air Base which we had developed and turned into an effective military installation over 20 years?

Could the U.S. not have kept Bagram and continued to conduct intelligence and counter-terror operations safely from that location?

General MILLEY. U.S. policy directed a full withdrawal of the military from Afghanistan, leaving only the Department of State led diplomatic mission in Kabul. Continuing operations at Bagram, even just for counter-terrorism purposes would have been inconsistent with that policy. Further, once U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan dropped below 1,000 personnel it was no longer feasible to hold and sustain both Bagram and the international airport in Kabul.

Mrs. MCCLAIN. Why was relinquishing Bagram Air Base and conducting intelligence operations from “over-the-horizon” a better military and intelligence strategy than keeping and utilizing the large Bagram Air Base which we had developed and turned into an effective military installation over 20 years?

Could the U.S. not have kept Bagram and continued to conduct intelligence and counter-terror operations safely from that location?

General MCKENZIE. Bagram Air Field's closure was a function of policy decisions to limit U.S. troops to approximately 650 personnel with the mission to secure the U.S. Embassy and support the Turkish-led security of HKIA. Therefore, it was not feasible to retain Bagram Air Field in an operational status.

#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. KAHELE

Mr. KAHELE. Secretary Austin, General Milley—DOD is providing important support to our Afghan allies who are now spending weeks at U.S. military bases, many without legal counsel to prepare their immigration cases.

Q1: Can you share your thoughts on how DOD and Congress can work together to help expedite getting Afghan evacuees from DOD installations into American communities, and how can we make their resettlement successful?

Q2: Would you support legislation that would help Afghan adjust their immigration status, especially given that so many were forced to destroy their documentation to protect themselves as they left Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. Response for Q1: DOD is supporting the Departments of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, and State by providing temporary housing, sustainment, and other support. DOD defers to the Departments Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, and State to address the resettlement process.

Response for Q2: Regarding care for persons evacuated from Afghanistan and hosted at Department of Defense (DOD) installations, DOD is honored to host our Afghan guests and is dedicated to treating our guests with dignity and respect while we care for their needs. DOD is supporting the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services and working closely with non-governmental organizations, and State and local authorities to provide our guests an appropriate level of support. This includes transportation from the port of entry to the location of the accommodation, local transportation in and around the installation, provision of housing and other necessary facilities for the humanitarian needs of individuals and families, sustainment, and necessary medical and dental care (including medical screenings and referral to off-base, non-DOD care, if necessary).

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Q2: Would you support legislation that would help Afghan adjust their immigration status, especially given that so many were forced to destroy their documentation to protect themselves as they left Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. Over the last two weeks of conflict, the U.S. military helped evacuate more than 124,000 Americans, Afghans and other allies—the largest military airlift in history. We continue to support the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security as the lead agencies for the resettlement of Afghan evacuees, and will continue to support them within the bounds of law and policy.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. CARL

Mr. CARL. How the Department plans to earn back the confidence and trust of our Allies for future counter terrorism efforts around the world, while addressing threats from foes like China and Russia?

Secretary AUSTIN. The threat from terrorism remains a global and persistent concern. We remain engaged with our partners and Allies globally who have shared interests in mitigating the threat of terrorism, both within their own countries and trans-regionally. A joint approach and persistent engagement, across all levels of DOD, is the cornerstone of how we affirm our commitments to our Allies and partners. At the same time, the Department's pacing challenge is China, and we are balancing our focus accordingly. In recent years we have dedicated considerable resources to current and future requirements needed to enhance integrated deterrence with our Allies and partners to deter Chinese aggression, assure regional stability, and deny a Chinese victory should deterrence fail. We also recognize the ongoing threat posed by Russia and its proxies. I am confident that DOD can appropriately balance strategic competition requirements while also effectively executing our counterterrorism mission.

Mr. CARL. How the Department plans to earn back the confidence and trust of our Allies for future counter terrorism efforts around the world, while addressing threats from foes like China and Russia?

General MILLEY. Confidence and trust in the U.S. military remains strong among our Allies and Partners. We continue to be actively engaged and synchronized with Allies and Partners in our operations around the globe. Each day we participate in deterrence activities and training exercises side by side with Allies and Partners, and in the case of countering violent extremist organizations, combined combat operations. At the same time, the Joint Force continues to build confidence with Allies and Partners through close consultation and coordination in a number of routine bilateral and multilateral fora that include, but are not limited to, NATO, the FVEY nations, the Military Framework for countering violent extremist organizations, and other military coalitions. These fora enable us to work with our Allies and Partners to achieve military objectives and desired strategic effects related to competition with China and Russia, while enabling Ally and Partner capabilities to counter violent extremist organizations. Most importantly, within these fora, we have increased our communications and taken action to include them earlier in our planning processes to ensure their national systems are provided the time needed to align with ours. We are removing ambiguity and providing them with clarity. It is a balance as we work with Allies and Partners countering violent extremist organizations to safeguard the homeland—ours and our Allies' and Partners'—while simultaneously working with them to compete against China and Russia.

Mr. CARL. How the Department plans to earn back the confidence and trust of our Allies for future counter terrorism efforts around the world, while addressing threats from foes like China and Russia?

General MCKENZIE. The dynamics in South and Central Asia have changed with our departure from Afghanistan. However, the threats that brought the Coalition together still remain. DoS and DOD continue to develop and build relationships with our allies and partners through security cooperation efforts. These efforts aim to build trust with our partners so that we may enable their action in the region. Engagement with Central Asian States continues through military sales and multiple training exercises and opportunities. The more engagement and placement the U.S. has in the region, the more likely we are to counter Russian and Chinese influence through cost imposition.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. MOORE

Mr. MOORE. I am increasingly concerned that the military does not have the regional basing and cooperation agreements required for establishing effective over-the-horizon counter-terrorism capabilities. In May, Mr. Helvey confirmed that the

Administration had not yet secured the necessary agreements in the region to establish over-the-horizon capabilities. Did the Administration secure any such agreements prior to the U.S. military's full departure from Afghanistan on August 31?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department is currently conducting over-the-horizon operations supported by agreements in the region and has been since before August 31.

Mr. MOORE. You testified on June 23rd that you had developed and were executing a detailed plan to conduct a "safe, orderly, and responsible" withdrawal from Afghanistan. As the Taliban began to gain momentum in the weeks that followed, was there ever a discussion within the Administration of slowing that withdrawal or altering the plan as the Taliban began to take control of significant portions of the country?

Based on your assessment of how things were going in June, how did things derail so quickly? How was the Administration so caught off guard and ill-prepared for the overrun of Kabul on August 15th?

Secretary AUSTIN. As part of the planning process, I had many discussions with my interagency counterparts on the security situation in Afghanistan during the withdrawal. One aspect of these discussions was prudent planning for a range of scenarios, including a potential evacuation under difficult circumstances. The fact that our additional forces were on the ground so quickly to support the evacuation is due in large part to our planning and our pre-positioning of forces.

Mr. MOORE. What plans were put in place to mitigate the increased risk to U.S. forces and civilian personnel within Afghanistan following the release of 5,000 Taliban and Al Qaeda prisoners from the airbase when the U.S. withdrew from Bagram?

General MILLEY. I did not assess the 5,000 Taliban and Al Qaeda prisoners posed an immediate threat to our forces in Kabul. I assessed the plans for the military retrograde, and then later for the non-combatant evacuation operation, included a sufficient force to mitigate threats to U.S. military and civilian personnel within Afghanistan. This includes the forces on the ground, as well as those available "over-the-horizon" from elsewhere in the region.

Mr. MOORE. Has the Biden Administration secured the necessary agreements to provide you with the basing and over-flight capabilities you need to perform effective over-the-horizon operations?

General MCKENZIE. The DOD, in support of the DoS, continues to engage with countries in the region to ensure the necessary capabilities are in place to perform effective OTH CT operations.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. HORSFORD

Mr. HORSFORD. When did the last American citizen successfully pass through the Taliban perimeter into the HKIA gate?

General MCKENZIE. At 0536 Local on 30 August, the last group of U.S. citizens came through the South Gate. There were 41 U.S. citizens in that group. Since August 31st, the State Department has further evacuated U.S. citizens via civilian aircraft.

Mr. HORSFORD. When did the last Afghan civilian successfully pass through the gate?

General MCKENZIE. At 0241 Local on 30 August, the last group of Afghans came through the South Gate.

Mr. HORSFORD. How many individuals successfully passed through the Taliban perimeter in the 72 hours preceding the departure of the final flight?

General MCKENZIE. In the final 72 hours 166 U.S. citizens, 3651 Afghan citizens, and 31 third country nationals passed through the Tb perimeter and entered HKIA. Since August 31st, the State Department has continued evacuation efforts through civilian aircraft.

Mr. HORSFORD. You stated that you did not have facts on why the Taliban did not allow Americans to continue to enter HKIA in the final hours of the evacuation. What were the specific contingency plans to continue the evacuation after the Taliban closed checkpoints surrounding the airport? Why were these plans not implemented once it became clear that no additional American citizens were going to be allowed to pass through the Taliban checkpoints?

General MCKENZIE. We fully developed a contingency plan to continue the NEO in a contested environment. This entailed the deployment of the rest of the 82nd Airborne Division and other enablers and potentially involved the seizure and re-opening of Bagram Airfield and significant combat operations. These plans were never implemented because the Taliban continued to facilitate the passage of



AMCITs onto HKIA throughout the NEO and because we retained—and exercised—the capability to bring AMCITs in without Taliban involvement or knowledge.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. GOLDEN

Mr. GOLDEN. Now that the Department of Defense and Department of State have completed the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, what steps are being taken to evacuate the remaining Americans and Afghan SIVs who still remain in Afghanistan?

Can you speak to any operations or strategies that are being implemented to assist and communicate with Americans/Afghanistan SIVs who are still looking to be evacuated?

How is the Taliban working with or obstructing the U.S. regarding the remaining evacuations?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department of Defense is committed to supporting the U.S. Government's priority of facilitating the departure of U.S. citizens, LPRs, their immediate family members, and eligible Afghans, from Afghanistan. The facilitated departure of these groups requires coordination across numerous U.S. Government departments and agencies to support Department of State-led efforts. Ongoing public-private coordination with advocacy groups has been beneficial to align efforts on commonly shared objectives. The Department of State remains engaged with the Taliban on its commitment to allow the safe passage and departure of individuals who wish to leave Afghanistan.

Mr. GOLDEN. Now that the U.S. military is no longer in Afghanistan, you have stated that the department will conduct future “over the horizon” counterterrorism operations in the region. What authorization authority will the department cite to conduct these kinetic missions? What assets and equipment will be required to accomplish this mission? Will this mission require agreements with other countries in the region to house equipment and personnel?

General MILLEY. The statutory authority for offensive counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan is the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force. In conducting Over the Horizon Counterterrorism (OTH-CT), the Joint Force leverages the full breadth of intelligence collection capabilities, to include Airborne Intelligence, Surveillance, And Reconnaissance (Airborne ISR), Human Intelligence (HUMINT), Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), Measurement and Signature Intelligence (MASINT) and Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) to gain and maintain understanding of terrorist networks' activities and intentions. When authorized, the Joint Force can also employ a variety of offensive capabilities, to include precision strikes, to address threats to the U.S. homeland, our allies, and our interests abroad. U.S. Central Command has a variety of forces allocated to conduct the Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism mission and may request additional forces should they be required. Our Over-the-Horizon Counterterrorism efforts will require support from our partners in the region. Many regional partners strongly support our counterterrorism efforts and are committed to preventing Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist safe haven.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. GARAMENDI

Mr. GARAMENDI. In regards to the information pertaining to the withdrawal from Afghanistan, did you directly provide the same advice to President Trump as you gave to President Biden? Please elaborate if you did not provide any advice or the advice was different. Please note, we are not asking you to divulge the specifics of the advice just to clarify if any direct advice was given.

General MILLEY. It is my statutory obligation to provide my military advice to the President and I have consistently done that for both Administrations.

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#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MR. KHANNA

Mr. KHANNA. Is DUSD-P involved in the investigation into the Kabul drone strike? What are they doing to see that this terrible tragedy isn't repeated again?

Secretary AUSTIN. The August 29, 2021 strike was a tragic mistake. U.S. Central Command conducted a review of the strike, and I ordered a 45-day three-star independent review conducted by the Air Force Inspector General. There is also a separate, independent, Department of Defense Inspector General review underway. These reviews have looked at policies and procedures, to ensure that this terrible tragedy is not repeated.

Mr. KHANNA. The Civilian Casualty EO, in Section 4, says there will be a periodic review of civilian harm trends with the goal of addressing problems like the ones we saw in the August Kabul drone strike. So, why hasn't the current Administration been doing these reviews? Do they plan to resume them?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department of Defense continues to periodically review civilian harm resulting from U.S. military operations, as well as its processes related to minimizing and responding to civilian harm. In response to reports of civilian harm, the Department conducts formal investigations and applies lessons learned, as was the case in the August 29, 2021 strike in Kabul, Afghanistan. For questions specifically regarding EO 13732, we would refer you to the White House National Security Council.

Mr. KHANNA. One of the concerns raised about the Kabul drone strike—and other strikes like it including the attack on the MSF hospital in Afghanistan in 2015 or the killing of 30 pine nut farmers in 2019—is that we learn that—in contrast to the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Department of Defense Law of War Manual takes the most unusual view that under international humanitarian law, “no legal presumption of civilian status exists for persons of objects” targeted in U.S. attacks.

Will the Department make a commitment for the Office of General Counsel to review this legal position, and do so in coordination with the Department of State?

Secretary AUSTIN. The difference in view stems from the fact that the United States is not a party to Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions. I fully support the proposition, as expressed more fully in DOD's Law of War Manual, that lethal attacks may not be directed based on merely hypothetical or speculative considerations regarding a contemplated target's possible status as a military objective. In assessing whether a contemplated target of attack is a military objective, commanders and other decision-makers must make the decision in good faith based on the information available to them in light of the circumstances ruling at the time.

Mr. KHANNA. The Civilian Casualty EO, in Section 4, says there will be a periodic review of civilian harm trends with the goal of addressing problems like the ones we saw in the August Kabul drone strike. So, why hasn't the current Administration been doing these reviews? Do they plan to resume them?

General MILLEY. To meet the intent of Section 4, DOD conducts periodic reviews of civilian harm trends and reports the results to Congress. We continually review and refine our civilian casualty assessment process to incorporate lessons and to increase our transparency and credibility as the global leader in mitigating and responding to civilian casualty incidents.

The 2018 Joint Civilian Casualty Review provided a number of recommendations that we have either fully implemented or that we have plans to implement. Critical to our implementation of many of these recommendations is the development of a new DOD Instruction on Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response, which we anticipate publishing in 2022. The instruction has taken some time to develop due to the need to establish clear responsibilities across the Department and standardize procedures related to civilian harm. Building upon the 2018 Joint Civilian Casualty Review, RAND just completed an independent assessment of our standards, processes, procedures, and policies related to civilian casualties resulting from U.S. military operations. The RAND study further evaluated our mechanisms for identifying, assessing, and responding to reports of civilian casualties, as well as how we are resourced and organized to do so.

We anticipate making the report available to Congress soon, and we are already developing an action plan for implementing RAND's recommendations. Additionally, IAW section 1057 of the National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 2018, DOD submitted four annual reports to Congress on Civilian Casualties in Connection with U.S. Military Operations, which include a description of steps the Department has taken to mitigate harm to civilians in combat operations. Protection of civilians is both a national security priority and a moral and ethical imperative, and we will continue to advance the Department's approach to these issues.

Mr. KHANNA. Is DUSD-P involved in the investigation into the Kabul drone strike? What are they doing to see that this terrible tragedy isn't repeated again?

General MCKENZIE. USCENTCOM is unaware of any OUSD(P) involvement in the SecDef-directed investigation into the 29 August Kabul strike, which resulted in unfortunate civilian deaths. Any questions regarding what OUSD(P) may be doing to prevent future similar occurrences should be referred to OUSD(P).

Mr. KHANNA. The Civilian Casualty EO, in Section 4, says there will be a periodic review of civilian harm trends with the goal of addressing problems like the ones we saw in the August Kabul drone strike. So, why hasn't the current Administration been doing these reviews? Do they plan to resume them?

General McKENZIE. USCENTCOM cannot speak on behalf of the Administration as to whether periodic reviews of civilian harm trends are being conducted. However, USCENTCOM takes all allegations of civilian casualties (CIVCAS), regardless of origin, seriously and ensures all such allegations are thoroughly assessed. If we believe we see a potential trend based on these allegations, USCENTCOM will take appropriate measures to address it.

Mr. KHANNA. Regarding the Kabul drone strike, General McKenzie, you stated that “the vehicle was observed being approached by a single adult male assessed at the time to be a co-conspirator.” It turns out that man was Ahmad Naser, an innocent civilian and an SIV applicant who had worked for the U.S. military in Afghanistan. On what basis other than that he was a military-aged male opening the gate for the Toyota could the U.S. military have made an assessment that he was a lawful target and not a civilian?

General McKENZIE. Lt Gen Sami Said’s public remarks, which followed the completion of his Secretary of Defense-directed investigation, confirmed my previous description of the circumstances, and specifically, that U.S. forces assessed that the vehicle was going to be used in an imminent attack on U.S. forces and Afghan civilians. No assessment was made as to whether Mr. Naser was a lawful target because the vehicle—which was mistakenly assessed to contain explosives intended to be deployed against U.S. forces and Afghan civilians—and not Mr. Naser, was the target of the self-defense strike, which unfortunately resulted in civilian casualties.

Mr. KHANNA. General McKenzie, you stated that the strike occurred under a standard of “reasonable certainty.” What is the definition of “reasonable certainty” and do you think this definition is understood the same way across the Department of Defense, CENTCOM, among operators down range, and JAGS?

General McKENZIE. “Reasonable certainty” is not strictly defined in U.S. policy. However, it is commonly understood to be a less stringent standard than “near certainty.” Whether a commander’s certainty of a target is “reasonable” or not depends on a number of factors, including the time available to the commander to observe the target, the intelligence information reasonably available to the commander at the time of the strike, and the surveillance resources available to develop the commander’s understanding of the target, each of which may be further influenced by whether the strike is intended to be conducted as a deliberate or offensive strike, or whether it is to be conducted in self-defense of U.S. or coalition forces. In a self-defense scenario, as was the case with the strike on 29 August 2021, the “reasonable” determinations that an on-scene commander must make are, first, that the intended target is committing a hostile act or is engaged in conduct that demonstrates hostile intent to U.S. forces and, second, that the nature, duration, and scope of the force used by U.S. forces does not exceed that which is needed to respond decisively to the hostile act or demonstration of hostile intent.

Mr. KHANNA. DOD’s completed investigation of the strike on an MSF hospital in Afghanistan in 2015 found that the DOD strike cell didn’t have access to the no-strike list at that time.

In an effort to learn such lessons, had DOD known that the building Ahmadi parked his Toyota Corolla in front of was in fact the office of a U.S.-based charity, would DOD have first contacted NEI, to help determine whether Ahmadi might have been an aid worker instead of an IS-KP operative?

General McKENZIE. When assessing a potential threat, all relevant information can be helpful. As I have previously expressed in detail, the activities of the vehicle in question were observed for several hours, and a touchpoint with the NEI compound was one of many. In this case, the vehicle’s activities also correlated with other locations that our intelligence associated with ISIS-K personnel and activities. I have reviewed in detail the findings and recommendations of the SecDef-appointed investigation into this matter, which will inform our efforts to refine our tactics, techniques, and procedures in a continued effort to reduce the risk of civilian casualties that is unfortunately inherent to the conduct of military operations.

#### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MS. JACOBS

Ms. JACOBS. Had DOD known that the building Ahmadi parked his Toyota Corolla in front of was in fact the office of a U.S.-based charity, would DOD have first contacted NEI, to help determine whether Ahmadi might have been an aid worker instead of an IS-KP operative?

Secretary AUSTIN. I won’t speculate on what would or would not have occurred with different information available. I am saddened by the loss of innocent life, and I am determined that we, as an organization, will learn from this tragic mistake. U.S. Central Command conducted a review of the strike, and I ordered a 45-day

three-star independent review conducted by the Air Force Inspector General. There is also a separate, independent, Department of Defense Inspector General review underway. These reviews have looked at policies and procedures, to ensure that this terrible tragedy is not repeated.

Ms. JACOBS. Up until now DOD has insisted that the Kabul drone strike that killed Zemari Ahmadi and 9 members of his family began with correct intelligence about an “ISIS safe house.” But yesterday the NYT found that this was wrong too. The “safe house” was Ahmadi’s boss’s family home. Is the NYT reporting, correct?

Secretary AUSTIN. The investigation into the August 29th Kabul airstrike concluded that the strike, conducted to prevent what was believed to be an imminent threat to Hamid Karzai International Airport, resulted in the deaths of as many as 10 people, including up to seven children. U.S. Central Command conducted a review of the strike, and I ordered a 45-day three-star independent review conducted by the Air Force Inspector General. There is also a separate, independent, Department of Defense Inspector General review underway. These reviews have looked at policies and procedures, to ensure that this terrible tragedy is not repeated.

Ms. JACOBS. Had DOD known that the building Ahmadi parked his Toyota Corolla in front of was in fact the office of a U.S.-based charity, would DOD have first contacted NEI, to help determine whether Ahmadi might have been an aid worker instead of an IS-KP operative?

General MILLEY. U.S. Central Command leadership made the decision to conduct the strike on 29 August based on the best available intelligence at the time. Our leaders are trained to evaluate all available intelligence and modify operations accordingly to mitigate the potential for civilian casualties.

The Department of Defense conducted a thorough investigation of the 29 August strike in an effort to improve our practices and further reduce the probability of civilian casualties. The investigation identified procedures that the DOD can employ to reduce the risk of confirmation bias and improve information sharing during the strike process.

Ms. JACOBS. Had DOD known that the building Ahmadi parked his Toyota Corolla in front of was in fact the office of a U.S.-based charity, would DOD have first contacted NEI, to help determine whether Ahmadi might have been an aid worker instead of an IS-KP operative?

General MILLEY. I am saddened by the loss of innocent life, and I am determined that we, as an organization, will learn from this tragic mistake. U.S. Central Command conducted a review of the strike, and the Secretary of Defense ordered a 45-day three-star independent review conducted by the Air Force Inspector General. There is also a separate, independent, Department of Defense Inspector General review underway. These reviews have looked at policies and procedures, to ensure that this terrible tragedy is not repeated.

We will scrutinize what we decided to do and not to do on August 29, as well as how we investigated those outcomes. We owe that to the victims and their loved ones, to the American people, and to ourselves.

Ms. JACOBS. Up until now DOD has insisted that the Kabul drone strike that killed Zemari Ahmadi and 9 members of his family began with correct intelligence about an “ISIS safe house.” But yesterday the NYT found that this was wrong too. The “safe house” was Ahmadi’s boss’s family home. Is the NYT reporting, correct?

General MILLEY. As the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Mr. Kirby said on December 13, 2021 during a press conference, the strike was a breakdown in process and execution and procedural events, not the result of negligence, misconduct, or poor leadership. The strike was a tragic mistake. The results of investigations led by Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., U.S. Central Command, and Gen. Richard D. Clarke, the head of the Special Operations Command, were announced. A third investigation by Air Force Lt. Gen. Sami D. Said was announced in November and found no violation of law, including the law of war.

Ms. JACOBS. Before the Senate you said the biggest mistake in building the Afghan security forces is we tried to make them too much in our image, so they became organized around on U.S. military doctrine which did not fit the country and became too reliant on air power which was never going to last. Are you applying those same insights to other security assistance the Department is engaged in? I ask this because while the effort in Afghanistan was certainly unique in scale, the fact of the matter is we partner with nations across Africa and elsewhere.

General MILLEY. We are applying those insights. Our experience in Afghanistan highlights how current and future security cooperation efforts will need to emphasize our partners’ capacity to manage, maintain, and employ their own forces, independent of sustained U.S. government support.

In Africa, for example, our defense security assistance is focused on African solutions for African partners, with efforts aimed at bolstering the development of sustainable and self-supporting military capacity.

Ms. JACOBS. Had DOD known that the building Ahmadi parked his Toyota Corolla in front of was in fact the office of a U.S.-based charity, would DOD have first contacted NEI, to help determine whether Ahmadi might have been an aid worker instead of an IS-KP operative?

General MCKENZIE. When assessing a potential threat, all relevant information can be helpful. As I have previously expressed in detail, the activities of the vehicle in question were observed for several hours, and a touchpoint with the NEI compound was one of many. In this case, the vehicle's activities also correlated with other locations that our intelligence associated with ISIS-K personnel and activities. I have reviewed in detail the findings and recommendations of the Secretary of Defense-appointed investigation into this matter, which will inform our efforts to refine our tactics, techniques, and procedures in a continued effort to reduce the risk of civilian casualties that is unfortunately inherent to the conduct of military operations.

Ms. JACOBS. Up until now DOD has insisted that the Kabul drone strike that killed Zemari Ahmadi and 9 members of his family began with correct intelligence about an "ISIS safe house." But yesterday the NYT found that this was wrong too. The "safe house" was Ahmadi's boss's family home. Is the NYT reporting, correct?

General MCKENZIE. In deference to the Secretary of Defense-directed investigation on the 29 August strike in Kabul, I would refer you to OSD for further comment.

Ms. JACOBS. In answering my question about the ability to prevent civilian casualties in future "over the horizon" counter-terrorism operations you said that future strikes would not be designed to prevent an "imminent attack" and thus would be subject to more scrutiny. Often the Department argues that "imminence" is required to justify an Article II/self-defense attack. If the Department is not rely the prevention of an imminent attack to justify future CT operations in Afghanistan, would legal rationale will it be using?

General MCKENZIE. The future over-the-horizon counter-terrorism operations you refer to will likely be offensive or deliberate strikes taken pursuant to the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (2001 AUMF), and not strikes taken in in extremis self-defense to counter tactical threats to U.S. forces. Any strikes taken pursuant to the 2001 AUMF will be conducted consistent with the applicable international laws of armed conflict, including the core principles of necessity, distinction, proportionality, and humanity, as well as U.S. domestic laws, policies, and rules of engagement applicable at that time. I will defer to the legal and policy judgments of the Department as to the circumstances under which future CT operations in Afghanistan might be conducted.