

[H.A.S.C. No. 116-95]

**THE U.S. MILITARY MISSION IN  
AFGHANISTAN AND IMPLICATIONS  
OF THE PEACE PROCESS ON  
U.S. INVOLVEMENT**

---

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

---

HEARING HELD  
NOVEMBER 20, 2020



---

U.S. GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

42-876

WASHINGTON : 2021

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

ADAM SMITH, Washington, *Chairman*

SUSAN A. DAVIS, California	WILLIAM M. "MAC" THORNBERRY, Texas
JAMES R. LANGEVIN, Rhode Island	JOE WILSON, South Carolina
RICK LARSEN, Washington	ROB BISHOP, Utah
JIM COOPER, Tennessee	MICHAEL R. TURNER, Ohio
JOE COURTNEY, Connecticut	MIKE ROGERS, Alabama
JOHN GARAMENDI, California	K. MICHAEL CONAWAY, Texas
JACKIE SPEIER, California	DOUG LAMBORN, Colorado
TULSI GABBARD, Hawaii	ROBERT J. WITTMAN, Virginia
DONALD NORCROSS, New Jersey	VICKY HARTZLER, Missouri
RUBEN GALLEGO, Arizona	AUSTIN SCOTT, Georgia
SETH MOULTON, Massachusetts	MO BROOKS, Alabama
SALUD O. CARBAJAL, California	PAUL COOK, California
ANTHONY G. BROWN, Maryland, <i>Vice Chair</i>	BRADLEY BYRNE, Alabama
RO KHANNA, California	SAM GRAVES, Missouri
WILLIAM R. KEATING, Massachusetts	ELISE M. STEFANIK, New York
FILEMON VELA, Texas	SCOTT DESJARLAIS, Tennessee
ANDY KIM, New Jersey	RALPH LEE ABRAHAM, Louisiana
KENDRA S. HORN, Oklahoma	TRENT KELLY, Mississippi
GILBERT RAY CISNEROS, Jr., California	MIKE GALLAGHER, Wisconsin
CHRISSY HOULAHAN, Pennsylvania	MATT GAETZ, Florida
JASON CROW, Colorado	DON BACON, Nebraska
XOCHITL TORRES SMALL, New Mexico	JIM BANKS, Indiana
ELISSA SLOTKIN, Michigan	LIZ CHENEY, Wyoming
MIKIE SHERRILL, New Jersey	PAUL MITCHELL, Michigan
VERONICA ESCOBAR, Texas	JACK BERGMAN, Michigan
DEBRA A. HAALAND, New Mexico	MICHAEL WALTZ, Florida
JARED F. GOLDEN, Maine	
LORI TRAHAN, Massachusetts	
ELAINE G. LURIA, Virginia	
ANTHONY BRINDISI, New York	

PAUL ARCANGELI, *Staff Director*

WILL JOHNSON, *Professional Staff Member*

MARK MOREHOUSE, *Professional Staff Member*

EMMA MORRISON, *Clerk*

# CONTENTS

	Page
STATEMENTS PRESENTED BY MEMBERS OF CONGRESS	
Smith, Hon. Adam, a Representative from Washington, Chairman, Committee on Armed Services .....	1
Thornberry, Hon. William M. "Mac," a Representative from Texas, Ranking Member, Committee on Armed Services .....	4
WITNESSES	
Biddle, Dr. Stephen, Professor of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University; Adjunct Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations .....	8
Crocker, Hon. Ryan, Career Ambassador, Retired, U.S. Foreign Service, Non-resident Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace .....	5
Jones, Dr. Seth G., Harold Brown Chair; Director, Transnational Threats Project; and Senior Adviser, International Security Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies .....	10
APPENDIX	
PREPARED STATEMENTS:	
Biddle, Dr. Stephen .....	62
Crocker, Hon. Ryan .....	51
Jones, Dr. Seth G. ....	76
DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD:	
[There were no Documents submitted.]	
WITNESS RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ASKED DURING THE HEARING:	
Mr. Smith .....	93
QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS POST HEARING:	
Ms. Speier .....	97



**THE U.S. MILITARY MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN  
AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE PEACE PROCESS  
ON U.S. INVOLVEMENT**

---

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,  
*Washington, DC, Friday, November 20, 2020.*

The committee met, pursuant to call, at 9:00 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 committee to order.

We—our full committee hearing today is on the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan and the implications of the peace process on U.S. involvement.

We are doing this hearing both with some members present and some members remote. We also have two of our witnesses that will be remote. So we are—this is the first time we have been back for a full committee meeting of the House Armed Services Committee since the COVID [coronavirus] outbreak. So I urge all of those of you participating and watching to be patient as we make sure we work out the bugs and get everybody the chance to say what they need to say, and run the committee in an orderly fashion. Before we start, along those lines, I am going to read the basic rules and outlines of how we are doing this particular hearing.

I welcome the members who are joining today's markup remotely. Those members are reminded that they must be visible on screen within the software platform for the purposes of identity verification when joining the proceeding, establishing and maintaining a quorum, participating in the proceeding, and voting.

Members participating remotely must continue to use the software platform's video function while attending the proceedings unless they experience connectivity issues or other technical problems that render the member unable to fully participate on camera. If a member who is participating remotely experiences technical difficulties, please contact the committee staff for assistance and they will help you get reconnected.

When recognized, video of remotely attending members' participation will be broadcast in the room and via the television/internet feeds. Members participating remotely are asked to mute their microphone when they are not speaking. Members participating remotely will be recognized normally for asking questions, but if they want to speak at another time, they must seek recognition verbally.

In all cases, members are reminded to unmute their microphone prior to speaking.

Members should be aware that there is a slight lag of a few seconds between the time you start speaking and the camera shot switching to you.

Members who are participating remotely are reminded to keep the software platform video function on for the entirety of the time they attend the proceeding. Those members may leave and rejoin the proceeding. If members depart for a short period for reasons other than joining a different proceeding, they should leave the video function on. If members will be absent for a significant period or depart to join a different proceeding, they should exit the software platform entirely and then rejoin it if they return.

Members are also advised that 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. Members may use the software platform chat feature to communicate with staff regarding technical or logistical support issues only.

Finally, remotely participating members should see a 5-minute countdown clock on the software platform's display. But if necessary, I will remind members when their time is up.

Yes, I was joking with staff before we got started here this morning that doing these hearings now is a little like trying to launch the space shuttle. It is not quite that bad, but there is a lot more technical stuff involved than usual.

But the purpose of this hearing is both incredibly important and very timely, and we are lucky to have three outstanding witnesses with us today. The Honorable Ryan Crocker, who will be appearing remotely, career ambassador, retired, U.S. Foreign Service, non-resident senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and among other things, a former ambassador to Afghanistan. Dr. Stephen Biddle, professor—also participating remotely—professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University and an adjunct senior fellow on the Council on Foreign Relations. And here in person we have Dr. Seth Jones, who is the Harold Brown Chair, director of Transnational Threats Project, and senior advisor for the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

As mentioned, this is an incredibly important and very timely topic. It is just about 19 years ago that we went into Afghanistan, and at the time, we had a very clear mission. Having just been attacked on 9/11 by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida out of Afghanistan, we went in there to make sure it never happened again, to stop the threat and to contain it. And I think that continues to be the top mission. We face a threat from transnational terrorist groups. We can debate how large that threat is, where exactly it comes from, and how best to contain it, but it is not debatable that that threat is there.

It's also worth noting that for all the problems and troubles and difficulties that we had, that mission has been successful in one sense. We have not had a transnational terrorist attack on the U.S. And when we think about all the men and women who serve in the military, those who lost their lives, those who were injured, those

who have suffered because of this, also all of the State Department personnel and all of the aid workers who have been there, and all of our allies and partners. Keep in mind, this is not just the United States of America. NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] and a number of other countries have participated in this mission.

And in that one key point, it has been successful and it should not be taken for granted. But the question is, where do we go from here? Because while that has been successful, there has also been a great cost. As was just mentioned, in terms of lives lost, people injured, and the sheer cost to the Nation, and money as well.

So where do we go from here and how do we move forward? I think it is important that we continue to maintain the mission to stop transnational terrorist threats. But some of the other costs associated with this is the fact that it is disruptive to have foreign troops in a country. And as we look to contain the terrorist threat and stop the spread of the toxic ideology that fuels it, the presence of U.S. troops in foreign countries is one of those things that we cannot deny fuels it.

And you can think of your—if you were in your own town, wherever you live in America, and a foreign troop came rolling through town telling you what you had to do, it would not make you feel good about that foreign country. We would be in a better place if we did not have to have our troops in foreign countries. And I don't think we should ever forget that.

The other aspect of this mission that has made it difficult is, in addition to preventing transnational terrorist threats, that mission has morphed a little bit into trying to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan. Now, there is a clear reason for that in connection to the basic principle of stopping transnational terrorist threats. We have learned that ungoverned spaces, failed governments make it easier for these terrorist groups to show up and take root.

And, certainly, South Asia is a place where there are a lot of ideological extremists who could take advantage of that. So one can argue, and many have, that if Afghanistan falls apart, we will be right back where we were on 9/11. I don't think that is necessarily as quick a guarantee as some argue.

I also believe that what we have learned in 19 years, is we are not going to impose peace on Afghanistan. We are not—you know, whether, however we are going to bring a coalition together and try to build institutions and reduce corruption and build confidence, outside forces are not going to bring peace to Afghanistan. One way or the other, the people of Afghanistan are going to have to make that choice.

And when we look at Afghanistan, I think we need to be very humble about imagining that there is something that we can do to make that different. We can help, certainly. We cannot ultimately solve the problem, and we have to balance that against all of the costs that I just laid out.

And it seems to me at this point that the commonsense thing to do is to have the absolute minimum presence that we require to meet our goal of stopping that transnational terrorist threat. I happen to believe that we need to draw down there, because of the cost, because of the impact, and because of the fact that it has be-

come clear that we are not going to be able to impose peace upon Afghanistan.

There are a lot of different ways to contain troublesome regions that could potentially pose transnational terrorist threats. Regrettably, we have an enormous amount of experience with doing just that. Whether you are talking about Libya or Yemen or Somalia or, you know, several different countries in West Africa, the disruptions that are present there, the instability and the presence of violent extremist groups, in some cases with transnational ambitions, has shown us that we have to work very hard with local partners in a variety of different ways to contain that threat. It doesn't require thousands of U.S. troops.

And my hope today is that our witnesses can give us some guidance as we go forward how best to contain the threat that comes out of Afghanistan and South Asia, more broadly, while minimizing the risk, cost, and expense, and also crucially minimizing that disruptive effect that the presence of U.S. troops on foreign soil has, that the propaganda that it hands to our enemies to argue about what the U.S. is doing that requires this ideological extremism. How do we balance all of that?

And, again, this is timely because, you know, the President has just made his announcement that he is drawing down to 2,500 troops in Afghanistan. It is absolutely crucial that we work with our partners on whatever our plans are. But I think this is a crucial moment as we decide what our future is in Afghanistan.

Nobody wants to be there forever. Now, you know, people have said, well, we can't have forever wars. And I personally never liked that phrase, because a war that lasts one day that was done for the wrong reasons and wasn't necessary is completely and totally wrong. On the other hand, if you are going to war, if you are fighting because you need to protect a core interest, then it lasts as long as it lasts.

I never imagined myself one to quote Lindsey Graham, but when he said, you may be tired of fighting ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], but ISIS is not tired of fighting you, I think that is an important thing to think about as we try to figure out how we contain these threats while minimizing the risk and the cost and the impact of how we do that.

I look forward to the witnesses' testimony. With that, I will turn it over to Ranking Member Thornberry for his opening statement.

**STATEMENT OF HON. WILLIAM M. "MAC" THORNBERRY, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM TEXAS, RANKING MEMBER, COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES**

Mr. THORNBERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I have to say it is good to be back in our Armed Services Committee home. And because this may well be the last hearing of this session of Congress, I want to take a moment and just express appreciation to you and to the staff for the way you have dealt with incredibly challenging circumstances under COVID, and yet we have pressed ahead with hearings, we pressed ahead with having our bill passed overwhelmingly on the floor of the House, in conference now with the Senate. So our business has continued in spite of the challenges. And that is in no small measure a trib-

ute to you and the staff dealing with all the technical challenges that we face, and I appreciate it.

I agree with you that this is an incredibly important topic. Rightfully, our national security—our military and national security apparatus is more focused on great power competition, but the terrorist threat has not gone away. And so it is one of the challenges of our time that we have to worry about this wide range of threats.

The other thing I just want to emphasize, which you mentioned, and I think we maybe don't say it enough, is that when it comes to national security, it is really hard to prove what did not happen. And in the case of Americans who have fought, and some died, to prevent a repeat or worse of 9/11, I think it is very important for those who participated and family members who lost loved ones to know that it has been—the last 19 years has seen far greater success than I ever expected on September 11, 2001.

The idea that we would be this far removed—there have been terrorist attacks against our homeland, but nothing on the scale of 9/11. And we know from our classified briefings that they were planned, attempted, and some far worse even than that day.

So appropriate appreciation, as you say, to the military, but also intelligence community, law enforcement, who have helped prevent that is probably something we need to say and recognize more often.

I think it is very important to have this hearing today. I should say, by the way, that a hearing on Afghanistan has been on our agenda for months, but it turns out that this is a very timely hearing today. The goal all of us have is for the Afghans to be able to handle their security issues on their own so that no transnational threat emerges from that territory. But I do not believe that they are there yet.

I have tremendous respect for each of our witnesses today and look forward to hearing from them, what they see is the state of the conflict today, what effect our unilateral withdrawal in the midst of negotiations may have, and any advice they have for the incoming Biden administration on how to deal with the Afghan and broader situation in South Asia. So I look forward to hearing from them and appreciate their participation today.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Our first witness will be the Honorable Ryan Crocker who is participating remotely. Ambassador Crocker, you are recognized.

**STATEMENT OF HON. RYAN CROCKER, CAREER AMBASSADOR, RETIRED, U.S. FOREIGN SERVICE, NONRESIDENT SENIOR FELLOW, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE**

Ambassador CROCKER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Thornberry. Are you able to hear me?

The CHAIRMAN. Yes. We've got you loud and clear. Go ahead.

Ambassador CROCKER. Excellent.

I would note that I come to you this morning from the great State of Washington. It is about zero dark 30 out here, but I am honored to be here.

The CHAIRMAN. I approve of that, and I wish I was there as well.

Ambassador CROCKER. Mr. Chairman, you and the ranking member have summarized, I think, very, very well the central question that we as a nation are dealing with. Why are we in Afghanistan after 19 years? It is pretty simple, pretty basic, and pretty crucial: to ensure that nothing again ever comes out of Afghanistan to strike us in our homeland. After two decades, it is again very important to remind ourselves of that and to remind ourselves of who we face out there.

After 9/11, the Taliban was given a choice. It could give up the al-Qaida terrorists, who are enjoying a safe haven in Afghanistan, and we would not take military action, or they could stand back and suffer the consequences. They chose the latter, Mr. Chairman, and have been in exile now for almost two decades. Unfortunately, we are at a moment when the Taliban sees the end of its exile and an opportunity to return to control.

Mr. Chairman, I had the privilege of opening our Embassy in Afghanistan in the beginning of January 2002. What I saw there was a scene of utter devastation, a shattered city, a destroyed country. And as bad as the physical damage was, I was immediately aware of the profound damage two decades of conflict had done to the Afghan people, especially during the period of Taliban rule to women and girls in Afghanistan. I thought it important to move swiftly to try to repair the damage to the human capital as well as the physical. So we opened girls' schools right away.

Still in January of 2002, I had the privilege of hosting the then-chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Joe Biden. I took him to visit a girls' school. We sat in on a first grade class that had girls ranging from age 6 to age 12. The 12-year-olds, of course, came of school age when the Taliban took over the country.

So I saw a unique opportunity here. As this committee knows so well, we often find a tension between our core national values and our national security agenda. In Afghanistan, the two came together: our values and our interests. It dictated that we be present, that we ensure that the Taliban did not return with its al-Qaida allies. And the best way to do that, we felt, was developing that human capital.

So when I arrived in Afghanistan in 2002, there were about 900,000 students, all of them boys, in Afghan schools. I returned as ambassador a decade later. And when I ended that ambassadorial post, there were 8 million students, and around 35 percent of them were girls.

Over the long run, Mr. Chairman, it is the Afghan people, as you rightly note, who have to make peace. Certainly an educated population, and with girls and women playing the role they deserve in this momentous decision is the best way to secure—to ensure our own long-term security. It will take strategic patience and it will take continued U.S. engagement.

The peace process, so-called, it was launched now almost 2 years ago, represented a very bad U.S. concession. We agreed to a long-standing Taliban demand that we talk to them but not with the Afghan Government in the room; they considered it a puppet regime. So we gave in. And it underscored, I think, that this, again, so-called peace process, that is not what this is about.

These are surrender talks. We are waving the white flag, basically saying to the Taliban, you win, we lose, let's dress this up as best we can. An eerie reminder of the Paris peace talks on Vietnam. But I wouldn't push that parallel too hard and too far.

In Vietnam, neither the Viet Cong nor the North Vietnamese had attacked the homeland or ever considered such a step. Al-Qaida did attack the homeland from Afghanistan, hosted by the Taliban. They have not become kinder and gentler in the intervening years. It is, I am afraid to say, folly to think that a full U.S. troop withdrawal is somehow going to make us safer or uphold our core values.

We have, as you point out, NATO in the mix. I think that is very important. We have heard from the Secretary General of NATO expressing his concern over the President's decision this week to cut in half the already small number of troops we have in Afghanistan.

So, again, I commend you for holding this hearing. I do believe there is a way forward in Afghanistan that will minimize our cost and our human losses, which has to be an imperative. I will be part of a working group put together by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Atlantic Council to do just that. But we have to show the strategic patience we need to face down a determined enemy.

I would like to take just a moment on another special group of individuals that have sacrificed a great deal for us, and those are our interpreters and other Afghan individuals who have helped our mission in that country.

Mr. Chairman, you recently received a letter from Senators Shaheen and Wicker, asking that the necessary steps be taken to grant 4,000 additional visas for these brave individuals and their immediate families. There is a backlog of almost 18,000 cases. And, hey, these are individuals that are at enormously serious risk. No One Left Behind, a group dedicated to bringing our interpreters and others here to safety, calculates that about 300 individuals, interpreters and their family members, have been killed while waiting for the visas we promised them and have delivered slowly and in disappointingly small numbers.

So I would urge this committee as it moves ahead to—to do the right thing, the thing we promised, bring these brave people here, bring them home. Their new home. We will never regret having done so. If we fail in this endeavor, we will have traduced, I think, our own core values. The nature of war has changed. There is no more total war. We can be grateful. Conflicts of the future are going to require interpreters, and the world is watching to see how we handle this case.

So, again, I commend this committee for its support for the Special Immigrant Visa program. I urge that you take the necessary steps to see that these people are able to leave danger behind and come here to us. They earned it. They paid for it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The prepared statement of Ambassador Crocker can be found in the Appendix on page 51.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

Next, we have Dr. Stephen Biddle who is also coming to us remotely. Dr. Biddle, you are recognized for your opening remarks.

**STATEMENT OF DR. STEPHEN BIDDLE, PROFESSOR OF INTERNATIONAL AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY; ADJUNCT SENIOR FELLOW, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS**

Dr. BIDDLE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to thank the committee for this opportunity to speak with you today about Afghanistan and the important choices it faces there. I would also like to say that it is an honor to be part of such an august panel, with two colleagues that I have long respected and admired in Ryan Crocker and Seth Jones.

Normally, I would have used my opening remarks to summarize the key points from my written submission, but that submission was written prior to Tuesday's announcement of the 50 percent reduction in U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan.

In light of this new development, I thought I would take the liberty to use my opening comments chiefly to respond to the Tuesday announcement and to offer some thoughts on where U.S. policy should go from here in light of it; though, of course, I would be happy to respond to questions about my submission or any other aspect of the issue as the members may wish.

In my view, the drawdown policy announced Tuesday was a mistake. I suspect like all of us here, I would like to see U.S. troops come home. But the question is when and how. And it seems to me that a progressive incremental withdrawal, in my view, is the worst of three possible options before us: total withdrawal, no withdrawal without a negotiated settlement to end the war, and the announced policy of partial unilateral drawdowns.

As I argued in my submission, I believe our interests are best served by no further withdrawals without a settlement to end the war. In my view, we should maintain our current troop level chiefly for its political value as bargaining leverage in the ongoing talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban but that we should be prepared to withdraw those troops entirely in exchange for negotiated concessions from the Taliban precisely in order to increase our ability to get such concessions from the negotiations.

This view is premised on my hope that a settlement, although difficult, is achievable if we husband our remaining leverage carefully. Inasmuch as our troop presence is a major element of that leverage, in my own view, thus we should not give this leverage away unrequited. That said, a reasonable case can be made that the prognosis for a successful negotiation is now so poor that this is fruitless. I disagree, but this is a reasonable position. If so, however, the logical implication would be total withdrawal.

Our current posture is vastly less expensive than it was during the 2009 to 2011 surge, but it involves sacrifice all the same. And as I argue in my written submission, our Afghan allies cannot maintain the current military stalemate indefinitely. Even if we maintain today's small U.S. presence indefinitely, the battlefield situation on the ground in Afghanistan is a slowly decaying military stalemate that the Afghan Government will eventually lose unless today's battlefield trends reverse and——

[Audio malfunction.]

The CHAIRMAN. Dr. Biddle, you went silent on us. I apologize for that.

Dr. BIDDLE. Sorry.

The CHAIRMAN. You are back. It is not your fault.

Dr. BIDDLE. Some argue that I am better when silent. I suspect the committee's purposes are better served by——

The CHAIRMAN. You are back. So go ahead.

Dr. BIDDLE. Very well.

The point I was making when I assume I went silent was that in a slowly decaying military stalemate, if nothing changes, we will eventually lose the war. This decay will eventually produce the collapse of the allied position in the country. And what that implies, then, if you accept that assessment, is that in the long run, the plausible alternatives are either eventual defeat or some kind of negotiated settlement before that happens.

If a settlement really is impossible, then defeat is the likely outcome, and we would then be better served to lose cheaply via immediate total withdrawal than to lose more expensively via a series of slower partial withdrawals that simply prolong the process of failure and increase its cost. Instead, what the administration announced on Tuesday is the slower, more expensive version of failure.

Whatever one thinks of the prognosis for a successful negotiation, it goes down every time we announce such partial withdrawals. We have two chief remaining sources of leverage in these talks: the promise of post-settlement aid and the foreign troop presence. The Taliban want us out. This has been among their most consistent and oft-expressed aims.

In a negotiation where we are radically leverage-poor, troop withdrawal is thus a crucial bargaining chip. In fact, this political role as a bargaining chip for negotiation is now, in my view, the most important contribution U.S. forces make to the war. Of course, this is not their only role. The U.S. air strikes, in particular, are also important for enabling our Afghan allies to maintain today's stalemate, but our forces' political function as bargaining leverage in the negotiation is, in my view, the most important contribution they make.

When we gradually draw down that troop presence, we thus reduce the leverage available from a now smaller troop presence, diminishing our ability to negotiate relatively favorable terms in the talks. And perhaps most importantly, partial incremental draw-downs encourage the Taliban to freeze the talks. Why should they offer concessions when the U.S. keeps giving away what they want for free, step by step, gradually over time?

And every time we reduce U.S. support for the Afghan Security Forces, we create some chance that those security forces might break under the strain of reduced support, which gives the Taliban a further incentive to wait and see whether their opposition on the battlefield might just melt away this time.

And even if the Afghan Security Forces don't break altogether, they will surely be weaker with less U.S. support, enabling a faster expansion in Taliban territorial and population control and moving the possible bargaining space in the talks further in the Taliban's direction, reducing the scale of concessions we could reasonably expect. All of this tends to stall real bargaining while the Taliban

await further, potentially favorable developments created by our policy of progressive incremental withdrawal.

Again, reasonable people can differ on the prognosis for these talks. I still believe there is a potential bargaining space for a negotiated settlement that would be much better for us and for our Afghan allies who have sacrificed so much than would be outright defeat. But I believe we just reduced that bargaining space via our withdrawal announcement. And if we—but if we suspend further drawdowns and retain the remaining troops in theater pending a successful settlement, then perhaps we can still get out of this with something better than simple failure. But if one disagrees on this, the logical policy would be total withdrawal, not difference-splitting partial drawdowns that just make defeat slower and more expensive.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Biddle can be found in the Appendix on page 62.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

Dr. Jones, you are recognized.

**STATEMENT OF DR. SETH G. JONES, HAROLD BROWN CHAIR;  
DIRECTOR, TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT; AND SENIOR  
ADVISER, INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM, CENTER  
FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

Dr. JONES. Thank you, Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Thornberry, and distinguished members of the committee, both in person and virtually, for the opportunity to testify before the House Armed Services Committee on an important—actually, a critically important subject, the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan and implications of the peace process.

I am going to break my introductory remarks into four sections. First, U.S. objectives, not just in Afghanistan, but more broadly, and how they have evolved. Second is the state of the peace settlement and discussions right now. Third is the war and the Taliban itself. And, fourth, I will summarize with some brief conclusions.

But let me just begin by noting, as others have noted, including Dr. Biddle, that U.S. policy options at this point two decades in are not optimal. They are suboptimal. We do not have a range of good options. And I think it is worth noting that.

My concern, though, is absent a peace deal, the further withdrawal of U.S. forces will likely continue to shift the balance of power on the ground, in the military campaign, in favor of the Taliban, other militant groups including al-Qaida, and the Taliban's outside supporters which include Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and other countries, and outside actors. The drawdown will have an impact on the U.S. ability to train, advise, and assist Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in the middle of the war against the Taliban, a group which we should all remember is an extremist organization committed to establishing an Islamic emirate in the country, and something that I think we have got to grapple with, is that what we want in the end, is that what we want to leave behind in Afghanistan?

So let me begin with my first section on U.S. interests. I think there is no question, as we have heard both from Chairman Smith

and Ranking Member Thornberry, the U.S. is in a different position than it was in 2001. There are other important objectives overseas, including competition with a rising China and aggressive Russia. There are also implications of COVID, including economic ones.

The U.S. does, in my view, have some interests in Afghanistan and South Asia, a region that I would remind everyone has three of the U.S. major competitors. It has got the Chinese on the border, it has got the Iranians on the border, and it has the Russians very close by. And as we have, I think, seen with news reports this year, they have—they continue to have a relationship with the Taliban, including a lethal relationship.

Al-Qaida continues to be active in Afghanistan. The numbers are relatively small. But I would urge anybody that has not seen it, there are a series of U.N. assessments, United Nations assessments, including one this summer, which continued to note that the Taliban retains close links with senior and lower level al-Qaida leaders, particularly ones associated with al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, al-Qaida's local affiliate. As the report concluded: Relations between the Taliban—I am quoting here—Relations between the Taliban, especially the Haqqani Network and al-Qaida, remain close, based on friendship, a history of shared struggle, ideological sympathy, and intermarriage.

We also have—we have seen attacks and continue to see activity from the Islamic State's local affiliate, the Islamic State Khorasan Province.

I also think there are broader, strategic interests that the U.S. has to be aware of, including regional balance of power competition between the Indians and Pakistan, both of which are nuclear-armed. And I do think we have to be mindful of a potentially worsening humanitarian crisis if we were to leave. Afghanistan has the second largest refugee population in the world at the moment, at 2.5 million. A withdrawal at this point would likely significantly worsen that prospect.

Let me just move very briefly to the peace talks. We have already heard other witnesses remark along these lines. On February 29, 2020, the U.S. and the Taliban, not the Taliban and the Afghan Government, the U.S. and the Taliban signed agreement intended to be a first step. Negotiations began on September 15 of this year. But the peace process has stalled. In fact, I would argue it has never really begun meaningfully.

So what we have right now is Taliban advances. Data right now suggests that Taliban attacks are at the highest levels, some of the highest levels of the war. This year, in 2020, they continue to fight.

So let me just briefly conclude by noting that—and this really goes back to the announcement this week. The U.S. decision to go down to 2,500 troops did not occur because of successful peace talks. In fact, it occurred in spite of them. The U.S. did not coordinate—and I think this was a mistake—meaningfully with NATO forces operating in the country. They were alerted just before the announcement. And I think it is worth noting that they stood with us on 9/11, committed to Article 5 of NATO, and then sent forces after that. So we do have other countries that have shed their

blood in Afghanistan, sent advisors, diplomats, and intelligence officers.

And then also, I think, a withdrawal has an impact on our intelligence collection and other capabilities in Afghanistan, particularly from CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the National Security Agency, as we withdraw forces. We will be increasingly blind to what is happening in the country.

So moving forward, I think the U.S. goal should be to continue to build political consensus in Afghanistan, to support peace talks, and at least to prevent the overthrow of the Afghan Government by the Taliban.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Jones can be found in the Appendix on page 76.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

A couple of housekeeping items. We are going to have votes here shortly. Now, one of the advantages of the COVID voting thing is it is spread over an extended period of time. It is my intention, with the ranking member's consensus, that we continue the hearing and stagger when we go so that we can have members here asking questions. I will need someone to sit in for me when I go. We are going to keep going on that.

Second, as we get into the Q&A [question and answer], as we discovered with remote people, it is really helpful if you direct your questions towards one specific witness. You are going to have a devil of a time getting through a 5-minute window there for bouncing all over the place remotely.

And towards that end, let me start with you, Dr. Jones. You know, the general theme here seems to be, you know, we can't get out because of all the bad things that would happen, which raises the question of why is there so much pressure for us to want to get out. Now, I think it is really important to understand that.

Number one, there was a strong feeling amongst a lot of people, I included, that no matter the scenario, we are not going to defeat the Taliban and we are not—there is not going to be a successful peace process. The level best that we can hope for by maintaining our presence is it doesn't get much worse. Okay. The idea that we are going to defeat the Taliban, peace is going to come, and we are going to have a stable government there, most people think is insane. I would say off the top of my head, you know, I can't predict the future, but if you tell me I got to bet a hundred dollars one way or the other, I am betting rather confidently that the chaos is going to continue. And we are in the middle of that chaos.

Now, we are not as in the middle of it as we were before. But lives are still being lost, money is still being spent, and people are still—you know, our troops and others are still being forced to be sent over there. I think the American people are saying, for what? Okay. And if the answer is because, gosh, if we just hang in for another year or two, if we just send another 5,000 troops, we will get to a peace deal. I don't think anybody believes that, okay, not in any serious way. So we are not going to get there. That peace is not going to be achieved.

So what happens if we pull out? Well, I mean, a slightly different flavor of chaos in the minds of most people. So we have protected

lives and saved money and just traded one type of chaos for another, and that is a win.

Now, the real threat is what we have talked about. Okay. Well, what if we have another al-Qaida-like situation? But I think the other conclusion is, as awful as the Taliban is, and there is a lot of awful governments all over the world doing a lot of awful things, do we really think that at this point, if the Taliban came back into power—they are fighting ISIS too, by the way. Those two do not get along. So they are not going to be snug and secure in a peaceful situation. Do we really think that we will face anything anywhere approaching the type of transnational terrorist threat that we mistakenly didn't see back before 9/11? I mean, that is the bottom line. Because I don't think so. I don't think that same type of threat is going to be there and, therefore, it doesn't justify the cost.

And then the final point is, I get our partners, but I totally, you know—and I was all over the Trump administration for what happened in Syria, as a lot of people on this committee were. They did not consult. They pulled the rug out from under our allies in the blink of an eye. That is not what happened this time. The discussion to go down to 2,500 has been going on for months. Okay. And at some point, we had a disagreement with our allies and the President decided, sorry, this is what we are going to do. So I get the ally point, but if they are in a different place from us, that is something we have to manage.

But, again, the question is, you know, can someone tell me that we are hanging out and less chaos is going to result, number one? And number two, can you really argue that we face the—let's say everything falls apart and the Taliban take over, do we really face a significant transnational threat at that point?

Dr. JONES. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for the questions. You have actually hit, I think, on what are the most important questions that the U.S. and the American population need to think through.

My response is severalfold. One is, when I look at—since World War II, there have been roughly 200 insurgencies across the globe. In about 37 percent of those cases, the government won on the battlefield; about 35 percent of the cases, the insurgent side won; and at about 27 percent—these are my numbers—there was a peace settlement or some kind of draw.

So just to be clear, that means about two-thirds of the cases we have had either a government win or a peace settlement. And I think, as I look at the odds, that is the kind of—those are the odds that I would look for in Afghanistan. I don't know whether a peace—

The CHAIRMAN. Sorry to interrupt on that point. But that is like the guy who drowned by, you know, walking across the river with an average depth of 3 feet. Okay, that is great. Okay. But this is Afghanistan. And this is what is going on right now. And you don't sort of get the average. And I think you can look at Afghanistan and see where we are going to fall on that ledger. I mean, the average, that is nice that out of 132 things, but this is a very specific case with very specific facts that ought to inform that opinion as well. Don't you think?

Dr. JONES. Yes, absolutely. I have spent much of the last 20 years in Afghanistan. I would just say that if I am a betting person right now, those are the odds that I would be looking for in the foreseeable future.

I would note a few other things. One is that the U.S. has been successful with its force presence there in severely weakening al-Qaida, including killing Osama bin Laden and a number of senior leaders. And actually most importantly, I think, is some of the recent killing of al-Qaida leaders have actually been Afghan forces that have been supported by U.S. forces. And I think what we are seeing is some successes, particularly among Afghan special operations forces; they still need U.S. help, but we are making progress.

What has me concerned, Mr. Chairman, though, is that in 2011, the U.S. pulled out of Iraq, and the situation deteriorated significantly. Now, the upside in Iraq is that we had an ally where we could push forces back in. In Afghanistan, were we to leave, we would have an enemy in Kabul, the Taliban. The ability to come back in a meaningful way, I think, would be much more significant.

And I think what worries me, and this gets to your final question, is the number of militant groups operating in some capacity in Afghanistan today, not just al-Qaida, but a range of the Kashmiri groups, including ones that perpetrated attacks in Mumbai that involved Americans like David Headley, still persist.

So what I can't say is tomorrow things are going to get as bad as they were, say, on 9/11, but I think the trajectory is where I would be concerned about.

The CHAIRMAN. Fair enough.

One more question, and I will just have to take this for the record because I want other people to get in here.

But, Dr. Biddle, you had made the point about, you know, basically all or nothing. And I do think that if we go the nothing route, you still have to draw down. And I think you would agree with that. You can't just pull them out tomorrow. You've got to do it over, you know, a certain amount of time and be safe.

But the other point that I would like if you could give me a written—sir, you used to be on that screen, and now I am just looking at myself, so it really doesn't do me any good.

But the question is, I have heard the argument that the 2,500 troops, and I have heard this from senior Pentagon leaders right now, is a sufficient counterterrorism force. That, in fact, that 2,500 number does—it performs exactly the mission that Dr. Jones just alluded to, which is to be able to, you know, keep the more—the terrorist groups at bay.

So if you could just give me a written response on why you don't think 2,500 makes sense from a CT [counterterrorism] standpoint, that would be helpful.

With that, I will turn it over to Mr. Thornberry for his questions.

[The information referred to can be found in the Appendix on page 93.]

Mr. THORNBERRY. Let me ask each of you to address this question. And we will go Ambassador Crocker and then Dr. Biddle and then Dr. Jones.

The question is, if you had 1 minute to speak with the President-elect on what he should do in Afghanistan, what would you tell him? So what—

Again, Ambassador Crocker, we will start with you. One minute to speak with the President-elect on what he should do in Afghanistan, what would your message to him be?

Ambassador CROCKER. Joe, for strategic reasons, stay the course. As my colleagues, Dr. Biddle and Dr. Jones, have pointed out, the worst thing we can do is what we are doing in a [inaudible]. So I would tell the Vice President that hold where we are prior to President Trump's announcement and then reassess. The most important thing to reassess would be the [inaudible]. We could not go over it with them any further without some meaningful concessions from the Taliban. And we would need to show the strategic patience to see that through, remembering that [inaudible] security as a Nation and our values as a Nation.

Mr. THORNBERRY. Okay. We had some connection issues there that made it hard for me to understand everything you were saying. It may be we will either work on the connection or you could help provide that to the committee in writing when we are done, because it was hard to—we didn't get all the words.

We will try, Dr. Biddle, can you address that?

Dr. BIDDLE. Yeah. My advice would be that the plausible long-term outcomes at this point are either outright defeat or a negotiated compromise settlement. Our strategy should be to get serious about a compromise negotiated settlement, and we should understand our troop level in Afghanistan in that light. That means we should maximize its potential leverage as a bargaining chip, which means don't partially withdraw without some sort of compensating concession from the Taliban. If you think the negotiations are hopeless, which is a defensible position, the sensible strategy in that scenario is cut our losses and get out altogether.

Mr. THORNBERRY. Sorry, if I could follow up. So would you go back up to 4,500 because you believe that there is a chance of negotiations?

Dr. BIDDLE. That would be my preference. Whether that is politically sustainable is an area beyond my expertise, of course. But I think the chance of a compromise settlement is not zero. I think the cost of our remaining presence at this point by comparison with what we were paying in 2009 to 2011 certainly is extremely small. Our interests in Afghanistan, though limited, are nonzero. Given the costs of continuing to pursue a settlement, which I think are fairly modest, I think it is in the U.S. interest to do our best, to try and get out of this with a deal we can live with rather than simply failure.

Mr. THORNBERRY. Okay. Thank you.

Dr. Jones.

Dr. JONES. I think to follow on what my two colleagues noted, I would say three things. One is I wouldn't go down any further. I think I would ask, among other issues, I would ask the commanding general, U.S. general in Afghanistan and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for their advice on what the 4,500 or the 2,500 gives us. Do we need more than just a counterterrorism force? Do we need to continue to provide training, advice, and as-

sistance. And I think that is going to be an analytical judgment from our senior military leadership is where to go.

The second is I think we do need to show commitment to the Afghan Government. Some of this will be financial. Some of this is just a political commitment that we will remain an ally against an extreme Islamic emirate.

And third, I think we have got to be able to tell the Taliban that our one major—or one of our major bargaining chips, our forces, they are not going to come down without a peace settlement. So I think we have got to ramp up pressure along those lines. Those would be my three issues.

Mr. THORNBERRY. Okay. Good. Thank you.

I yield back.

Mrs. DAVIS [presiding]. Thank you.

I am going to continue, Susan Davis, with the questions, and then we will try and grab our colleagues as they come in the room.

You know, this is always difficult for me because I have spent the last 15 years traveling to Afghanistan, visiting our troops, our female troops particularly, and our deployed moms. And over the course of that time, we witnessed the progress of women who had started businesses, had served in parliament. And certainly as Ambassador Crocker said, you know, we shared with them that we had their back. It doesn't feel like we have their back anymore.

And I wanted to just get a sense, Dr. Crocker—Ambassador Crocker, I probably know your response, but from Dr. Jones and Mr. Biddle, just where that value analysis falls in this and whether—what's the role of Congress in that? Can that be helpful or no longer helpful?

My other concern is really about, you know, talking about the challenges of integrating the Taliban into society. I mean, is there any hope for that? Is there any reason anybody should trust that that is possible? And given that, where do we go? Is there any kind of a plan B that actually incorporates that concern?

We haven't really spoken much about ISIS. And I think we know that former Taliban fighters are going to be looking for another group to pick up arms with. And despite the fact that they don't have any great feeling for one another, nevertheless, it can be attractive.

So I wonder—first, let me go to Dr. Biddle, if I may, and then to—or, Dr. Jones, why don't you start.

Dr. JONES. Thank you very much. All of these were important issues. Let me start with the women issue. I have an article out in West Point, the U.S. Military Academy's journal, it comes out today, the CTC [Combating Terrorism Center] Sentinel. And among other things, it notes—it looks at the Taliban today, who they are. And I think one of the things it notes is that the Taliban's continuing persecution of women is deeply troubling. Women have been victims—women that have been victims of domestic violence by the Taliban have little recourse—or living in Taliban-controlled areas have little recourse to justice in Taliban courts. The Taliban continues to discourage women from working, denies women access to modern healthcare, prohibits women from participating in politics to look at Taliban's makeup during the negotiations, and supports punishments against women, such as stoning and public lash-

ing. So I think Congress has a very important role to keep this as a front burner issue.

Now, you know, Afghanistan does have some conservative elements of society, so there is a broader debate. And I don't think we want to entirely put our—our values on Afghanistan. But I think what we have seen is there has been major progress on this in the past 20 years. A Taliban takeover, in my view, will eliminate that virtually immediately.

I do think, you know, we have had some examples of the integration of senior Taliban leaders into the government or at least on the government side. Rice Pograni, Mullah Zaeef, Mudua Akill, they have generally behaved when they have integrated back to the government. So I think we have some cases where we can trust them.

And I would just finally highlight your concerns about the Islamic State. It has shrunk in size as it has been targeted, but I think a growing civil war in the country does provide an opportunity for them to regenerate.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you.

Dr. Biddle, would you want to comment? And I would love to hear from Ambassador Crocker quickly too.

Dr. BIDDLE. Ma'am, certainly. We have many important values at stake in Afghanistan. The rights of women are an important value. The rights of ethnic minorities are an important value. The rights and the future of an entire generation of young Afghans who put their trust in us and have tried hard to build a new country and have brought about actually significant change in Afghanistan since the Taliban were in control in 2000.

The trouble is, if we want to realize these values, we are going to have to make an investment commensurate with the threat to those values. If we want to defend the rights of Afghan women, and we are concerned that the Taliban won't respect those, it is going to require a military investment on our part sufficient to prevent the Taliban from taking control of the country.

The dilemma we face, of course, is that we have interests that we care about, but many Americans worry that those interests aren't commensurate with the scale of military effort from the United States that would be required to secure that. So we are stuck in this unfortunate situation where we have to look at a potential compromise to values we care about and should care about to at least some degree, given the limits and the scale of the military investment we are willing to make. And given that, it seems to me, the only way to square that circle at the moment is through the negotiating process.

Now, with respect to the Taliban and whether we can trust them and what their behavior is likely to be, obviously, the Taliban are not an ideal negotiating partner. One rarely encounters those in war termination.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you, Dr. Biddle. It is my responsibility to keep this going. So as much as I would love to have you continue to speak, Mr. Conaway, you are next.

Mr. CONAWAY. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

I think both Dr. Jones and Dr. Biddle helped answer part of the question. The only question really is, the Taliban of the nineties,

are they distinctly different than the Taliban of today? And what I heard Dr. Jones say is not really, that what we saw happen in Afghanistan to women, thought leaders, teachers, all forms of folks who disagreed with the Taliban, they were eliminated, killed, and persecuted. I am not sure that wouldn't happen today.

And I think the question for Americans is making these decisions with eyes wide open. In America today, we tend to defend the rights of smaller and smaller groups of individuals against the rights of larger groups, and to great lengths. And so the question is are we willing to do that, you know, in Afghanistan? Is it the right thing for us to do? Those kinds of issues. So this is a real conflict within ourselves as to what we do next in that country.

But I do think that we bear responsibility for having led the reforms that are there, the expectations, particularly on folks who have grown up post-Taliban era, they don't really—well, they may know the history. They didn't live under the Taliban rule in the mid-nineties, late nineties, and so their expectations are different.

Are those expectations—and either Dr. Jones or Ambassador Crocker—are those expectations strong enough to lead that nation out of the wreck that a Taliban takeover, again, in my view, would happen? Can they lead themselves out? Are they strong enough to take those risks to move forward?

Dr. Jones.

Dr. JONES. Well, I would certainly say, without U.S. and broader international assistance, they are not. And I think this is a—it is an unfair fight in that sense, because the Taliban are continuing to have sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan, support from Iran and Russia.

But I think with support, both some military, even small levels of military, and financial support, some financial support—the Europeans have actually provided a fair amount of assistance to a range of these programs—I do think the Afghan Government and the population is able to do what you are outlining.

It will take time, but I think we see in public opinion polls conducted by The Asia Foundation that the population supports that kind of a vision and does not generally support the Taliban's extremist vision.

I would say in response to your first comment, I do think that the Taliban has modified its views on a few issues. They appear to be allowing some girls to go to school now. They are a lot more technologically savvy. They were not in the 1990s. But in terms of ideology, same kind of organization, same kind of Islamic emirate that they are trying to establish.

Mr. CONAWAY. Professor Crocker, your thoughts?

Ambassador CROCKER. Yes, I hope you can at least hear me now.

I would associate myself with the remarks of my two colleagues. I do not see this as mission impossible and, indeed, the experience we have had with force levels one-tenth of what they were when I was Ambassador to Afghanistan indicate that that is the case.

So this is—you know, we are not facing defeat on the battlefield, so it is ironic that we seem to be trying to defeat ourselves. It is true that all wars must end and return to the political process; it is true in this one, but not on the terms that this administration has set for these talks. These are surrender negotiations.

I would hope the President-elect, when he becomes President, will simply freeze them, not cancel them out, but as my colleagues again have suggested, to tell the Taliban that, until you live up to your side of the deal, we are not going anywhere, and then be prepared to back that up.

Mr. CONAWAY. Dr. Biddle, is it fair to say that the Taliban is getting significant outside help and that an Afghan Government with no outside help, that would be an unfair fight?

Dr. BIDDLE. Yes, absolutely. The Taliban have been getting substantial support from the Pakistanis and from others and from illicit economic activity like the drug trade in Afghanistan for a very long time.

I think there is very good reason to believe that if outside assistance to the Afghan Government ceased, the Afghanistan National Security Forces would break up, the Taliban would then quickly march into Kabul, and we would get a chance to find out what chaos presents in Afghanistan. That is not a social science experiment I would personally like to run.

I think it is important to note that the great majority of the money required to keep the Afghan National Security Forces in the field comes from outside. Their operating budget annually is more than twice the entire domestic revenue of the Afghan Government. If that outside support to the Afghan Security Forces were to stop, their ability to sustain a stalemate, much less do better, I think would go away quite quickly.

Mr. CONAWAY. Thank you, gentlemen.

Yield back.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you.

Mr. Langevin, you are next.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Thanks, Madam Chair. Can you hear me okay?

Mrs. DAVIS. Yes, we can hear you.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Okay. Thank you.

So let me start with Dr. Jones. First, I want to thank all of our panelists for testifying today.

But, Dr. Jones, I would like to go back to the chairman's question. If I understood it right, he seemed to say that if we stay there could be chaos, if we withdraw there could be chaos, so it is just one kind of chaos for another, and that we were caught off guard, not anticipating the plotting or planning that was going on before 9/11, and that do we really think that that kind of thing could go on again without us knowing.

So if I understood that question the right way, my question is, if we are not there and we do withdraw precipitously, how would we know with adequate fidelity whether al-Qaida or any other terrorist organization is plotting or planning against us? And without a presence there, how could we respond effectively and know exactly where to hit?

I know that we would certainly engage still in intelligence gathering with our partner agencies. But would we even know enough how and where to adequately be able to respond should there be a known threat to America or our allies?

Dr. JONES. Thank you. Very, very good questions.

On the chairman's—on the discussion with the chairman, my response was essentially that while—I wouldn't characterize nec-

essarily the situation as chaos now. I mean, there is a war. But I think were the U.S. to withdraw, it would significantly worsen.

I mean, it is worth pointing out that the Taliban controls not a single major city right now, and compare that, say, 2014, 2015, 2016, to Iraq and Syria where the Islamic State controlled Raqqa and Fallujah and Ramadi and Mosul. The Taliban controls zero, zero cities right now.

So I think it is worth noting that that would change, I think. My assessment is that would change with a U.S. withdrawal.

How would we know, you ask. It would become a lot more difficult. Obviously, as you noted, the U.S. would have some intelligence collection capabilities. But it would be much more difficult to understand what al-Qaida was doing, what the Taliban, what other militant groups were doing in Afghanistan without a military—CIA, NSA [National Security Agency]—meaningful presence in the country.

Mr. LANGEVIN. And I would agree with that. That would be my interpretation as well.

Ambassador Crocker, the U.S.-Taliban agreement commits the Taliban to preventing any groups, including al-Qaida, from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States and its allies. So what would the verification mechanism be to ensure the Taliban are compliant? And would a troop reduction impact our ability to ensure the Taliban are compliant?

Ambassador CROCKER. Thank you for that excellent question.

The Taliban has no intention—and in their view no need—to make good on any of their commitments. They will say what we want to hear, but they know that we are going home as these negotiations are currently structured. And, again, the President's latest decision to cut by half our small remaining force tells the Taliban all they need to know about our staying power and our willingness to continue our support and our presence in Afghanistan.

So unless or until this whole so-called peace process effort is restructured to show that we are serious about this, that if they do not live up to their basic commitments we are not going away—if there is a single phrase that I would commend to this committee on what we need, we need strategic patience.

The Taliban and al-Qaida have that strategic patience. They believe they can outlast us, and we are proving them right. We have got to stay and we have got to show that we do have the will to stay a course until we see circumstances in Afghanistan that warrant further withdrawal.

Mr. LANGEVIN. Very good. Thank you very much to all of our panelists.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Thank you.

Mr. Byrne, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. BYRNE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Been a great morning.

So I am not an expert on this issue like the three of you are, but I am an expert on what the people in my district think. We all are. That is how we got here. And I don't think what the people in my district think is much off of what the people in America in general think on this issue.

The people of my district are tired of nation building in Afghanistan. They think 19 years, thousands of lives, American lives lost, all these injuries, all these hundreds of thousands of service men and women lives disrupted, obviously billions and billions and billions of dollars, you know, enough.

So I think they are not for nation building anymore. We have done great things. Ambassador Crocker has made a great point about all that. But my folks think we have done enough. And I think they probably would support a continuing counterterrorism effort, okay, they don't want al-Qaida to get back in control there.

So when you talk about the drawdown, the question in my mind is, what is the right number? Can we have a successful counterterrorism effort with 2,500 versus 5,000 troops there?

And, Dr. Jones, I will start with you and ask you that question.

Dr. JONES. That is really the \$64,000 question. And let me say—

Mr. BYRNE. It is a lot more than that.

Dr. JONES. That is probably true. The \$64 billion question maybe.

Mr. BYRNE. Yeah.

Dr. JONES. I am tired of nation building. We are well beyond that. And I don't think anybody, as you note, is talking about anything close to the 100,000 forces we had in Afghanistan in 2009.

What I would say is the question I think that we need to ask our military leadership is, is 2,500 enough to prevent a Taliban overthrow of the government? For me it is not just a counterterrorism issue. It is also a prevention of the overthrow of the government.

And so what does 2,500 give us versus something closer to 4,500 or 5,000? That is a question for General Miller. That is a question for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. And I think that is where I would come back to.

I think, again, I would say it is more than just killing or capturing al-Qaida leaders. It is also, do we want to prevent the overthrow of the government, and how can we continue to sustain and support the Afghan Government to do the fighting and dying?

Mr. BYRNE. Well, I think I know the answer to this, but let me ask it because I think it is a fundamental question.

Is it a given, if the Taliban take back over again, that they will allow the country to be a harbor for al-Qaida? How much they hate ISIS, I think they still like al-Qaida. Will they allow al-Qaida to be harbored again?

Dr. JONES. I would answer that in two ways. One is the U.N. assessments in 2020 have been unambiguous on this, that they continue to have strategic, operational, and tactical-level—the Taliban has strategic, operational, and tactical-level relations with al-Qaida, al-Qaida senior and al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent. And I think we have also seen local Taliban commanders have been willing to give sanctuary to al-Qaida leaders in areas that they control.

So I think the answer there is, yes, we will see—continue to see Taliban/al-Qaida relations in the future.

Mr. BYRNE. On that last question, Dr. Biddle, what is your opinion?

Dr. BIDDLE. Yeah, I would agree with my colleague, Dr. Jones. It is a mistake to separate counterterrorism and the survival of the Afghan Government. If the Afghan Government falls and the Taliban take over or there is simply a chaotic civil war, the terrorism threat from Afghanistan will go substantially up and the ability of a handful of American troops operating from a handful of bases that will look like, you know, a sieged fort disaster in the middle of a catastrophe will be very, very limited.

Worse still, the security of Afghanistan's neighbors will be importantly implicated, and especially the security of a nuclear-armed Pakistan. In the event that chaos in Afghanistan flows across the border in the aftermath of a government collapse, we then have the potential for militant groups in Pakistan, if that government falls, getting their hands on actual usable nuclear weapons.

So I think the tendency to say what we really want is counterterrorism, let's forget all of this counterinsurgency to protect the government, is a false dichotomy in very important ways.

Mr. BYRNE. Very quickly, Ambassador Crocker, on that last question?

Ambassador CROCKER. I share the view, Congressman. We have seen this movie before. We were heavily engaged with the Pakistanis and Afghan fighters throughout the decade of the 1980s to expel the Soviets. We succeeded, and then we walked out.

What did we get? The Afghanistan civil war, the rise of the Taliban, and the road to 9/11.

It would be folly to think it is somehow going to be magically different this time if we walk out. As my colleagues have said, there is no doubt about the link between al-Qaida and the Taliban. Again, the Taliban gave up the country for al-Qaida.

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

Mr. Garamendi, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And to the witnesses, thank you very much.

To my colleagues for their questions, you have provided some really good questions and good insight into the situation. Hopefully I can do the same.

I am looking at the—all of you have argued for the presence of American troops somewhat higher than 2,500 for the purposes of securing a negotiated settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan Government. Could you please describe what that settlement would look like? What exactly do we want to see? How will the Taliban and the Afghan Government merge into some sort of a reconciliation?

Let's start with Mr. Jones, and then we will go Crocker and end with Biddle.

Dr. JONES. Thank you very much for the question.

I mean, I think it is important to ask very specifically what a settlement might look like. And, obviously, it is at this point, with negotiations just starting in September, it is difficult to predict where they might go.

But I think what we have seen in those Taliban that have defected and come to the Afghan Government side is a willingness to participate in the political process.

I think what we probably have to see is some compromise on both sides on issues, including power-sharing arrangements, ministry, key ministries, including security services.

I think one would ideally want to see the Taliban allowed, as they have been in some other wars—think of El Salvador or even Colombia, where there was a peace deal—demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of fighters, some cases potentially into the government security services. I think there also has to be some discussion on the Afghan Constitution, the role of Islam in the Constitution.

So I think the issue is can we get to a place where the Afghan Government and the Taliban can compromise on a range of these types of issues and get support from their constituencies, which will be hard, and I think there is room for bargaining.

Mr. GARAMENDI. I am going to interrupt you. I have just a few moments. So a short answer would be necessary here.

Let's go on.

Mr. Biddle.

Dr. BIDDLE. Yeah, I think the nature of the bargaining space here is that the Taliban would have to give up several things. They would have to break with al-Qaida. They would have to renounce violence. They would have to disarm. And they would have to accept some variation of today's Afghan Constitution. That is a lot, but it is plausible.

We would have to give up a lot. We would have to legalize the Taliban as a political actor in Afghanistan. We would have to agree to withdraw all foreign troops, including our counterterrorism presence, unless the Afghan Government asked us to stay to train their troops to defend their own borders. And we would have to provide the Taliban with some sort of set-aside of guaranteed offices in the Afghan Government, guaranteed seats in the Afghan Parliament.

They know they are unpopular. If all we are doing is offering to let them run for election in ways they know they would lose, they won't agree to a deal.

Where turkey will be talked is over what kind of set-aside. How big? What will the power sharing look like? What version of the Afghan Constitution will we get? But I think that is what the general bargaining space within which a deal would be cast looks like.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Thank you.

Ambassador Crocker. Ambassador, your thoughts on this? What is a negotiated settlement?

Apparently Ambassador Crocker is not available.

The CHAIRMAN. I think we lost him for one reason or another. We will work on that.

Go ahead, John.

Mr. GARAMENDI. The next question really is one that we need to consider. It has been said a couple of times. And that is the neighborhood is also involved. We haven't talked much about the neighborhood. Could you do so in, I don't know, 15-second spots here, starting with Mr. Biddle?

Dr. BIDDLE. Fifteen seconds on the neighborhood?

The most important neighbor is Pakistan. They are a nuclear-armed country that is fighting a civil war at the moment. That civil war could go badly for them. If it does—and the prospects of that

would go up a lot if the government in Kabul collapsed—then you could have a failed state with nuclear weapons running around and lots of militants that don't like us any more than they like them.

Mr. GARAMENDI. I should not have asked for 15 seconds.

Dr. BIDDLE. I could go on longer if you wish. That is up to you.

Mr. GARAMENDI. Let's go Jones.

Dr. JONES. Agree with Dr. Biddle. Pakistan is the primary supporter of the Taliban. It is where its leadership structure is located. Taliban also does receive some assistance from Iran and Russia, among others.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Your time has expired.

Mr. GARAMENDI. So in my final 5 seconds here, I just would simply say that we need—

The CHAIRMAN. John.

Mr. GARAMENDI [continuing]. We need to consider the neighborhood in all of this.

Thank you very much.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mrs. Hartzler is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I appreciate the questions of my colleague about the status of the women in Afghanistan. I had the privilege of traveling with Representative Davis—we are going to miss you—but on one of those trips and met with many of the women who are now in Parliament and heard some of the stories of what life was like when Taliban was in charge. And so I am very concerned about that. But since there have already been some questions asked about that, I wanted to move on.

Start with Mr. Biddle, talking about the status of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. We have invested in them for years. And I would like you and the other witnesses to kind of summarize in your mind the progress that has been made in their abilities. And do you envision a future where the Afghanistan security forces are self-sustaining? And what level of support or time commitment should the United States provide to ensure Afghanistan has adequate defense forces?

And along with that goes, along with our assistance, should the United States and international community continue to provide military and economic assistance, specifically economic assistance to Afghanistan, into the future?

So, I know there are several questions there. But, Mr. Biddle, if you could start, that would be great.

Dr. BIDDLE. Time permitting.

I am on the pessimistic end of the spectrum of opinion on the prognosis for the Afghan National Security Forces. I think what we see with a lot of forces of this kind in the developing world, not just in Afghanistan, is in weakly institutionalized political settings, where you don't have a judiciary, you don't have courts, you don't have police that can resolve conflicts between armed elites, the government is required to maintain an internal balance of power in which it cannot allow its own military to get too strong, because it threatens other warlords and armed actors within the elite, broadly defined. And that is a bigger threat to the government usually than an insurgency is.

What that means is you end up with corruption and cronyism as tools to control the threat that the national military poses to armed elites within the regime, broadly defined, and that is a profound, systematic, deeply rooted limiter on the combat potential of the Afghan Security Forces, and forces in similar countries elsewhere, in their ability to actually defeat an insurgency.

I think they are strong enough to maintain a slowly decaying stalemate. There are almost 300,000 of them in the country after all at the moment. I don't think they are a plausible capability for defeating the insurgency, regardless of plausible levels of U.S. support.

Now, in terms of U.S. aid moving forward, I think the primary role for U.S. aid moving forward, once we get a settlement—before a settlement—is to keep the Afghan forces in the field and maintaining a stalemate. Without our support, they can't do that.

After a settlement, aid will be required as a way of enforcing the terms of the settlement. The presence or absence of outside aid is the critical tool to get a power-shared government, in which the Taliban will play a role, to behave itself and observe the terms of the agreement.

Therefore, some kind of international aid is going to be necessary in the long term, nothing like the current scale. But a complete shutdown of U.S. aid, even if we get a settlement, will lead to a collapse of the settlement because we will lose our leverage to enforce its terms.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Let me follow up real quickly before we go to Dr. Jones.

You mentioned the courts. So when I was there in 2011, we visited with our Department of Justice and officials from the State Department. We were there actually helping them set up their court system, and it was progressing.

What would you say is the status of the courts? You indicated that you think there is no ability of the courts to maintain justice. Could you expand on that, please?

Dr. BIDDLE. I think the courts are better than they were, but they have the fundamental limit of their inability to enforce adjudication of disputes on armed members of the elite. We have seen over and over again that the kind of grand mal corruption that is used to maintain this internal balance of power within the Afghan elite, broadly defined, is largely beyond the ability of the courts and the judicial system to solve.

When Afghan power brokers are accused of corruption and evidence is presented, the judiciary system as a general rule has been unable to enforce its will on them.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you.

Dr. BIDDLE. And I don't think that is surprising.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you.

Thirty seconds, Dr. Jones. Can you expound on any of these topics?

Dr. JONES. Yes. Actually just briefly, starting with women, I think we have also seen the Taliban in areas they control today, not just in the 1990s, oppressive of women. So their track record today is not very good.

I think the area where we have seen the most success on Afghan National Defense and Security Forces has been the commandos, roughly the 20,000 commandos, and I think the important lesson here is that has been sustained U.S. training from special operations forces. Those are the best. They are the best trained, they are the most consistently trained, and that is where I think we have had the most success.

Thank you, ma'am.

Mrs. HARTZLER. Thank you very much.

Yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Norcross is recognized for 5 minutes. And I believe we do have Mr. Crocker back. So if you wish to ask questions of Mr. Crocker, you can do that as well.

Mr. Norcross.

Mr. NORCROSS. Thank you, Chairman.

This is directed to the Ambassador.

The 15th of January is the date by which the report has the withdrawal of the troops. What strategic advantage, if any, did we achieve, or what are we getting in response for the drawdown, in your opinion?

Ambassador CROCKER. We are getting nothing in response to that drawdown. That has been the problem with these talks from the beginning. By sitting down with the Taliban without the Afghan Government in the room, they knew from the start that this is a negotiation on the terms of our surrender. And everything that has happened since I think has validated that view in the eyes of the Taliban.

So they will continue to press their offensive, and we will continue to withdraw. That is not a staged, reasoned step. It is, frankly, cutting our force in half in 2 months. That is a rout.

Mr. NORCROSS. So that brings me to the next question, for Dr. Biddle.

One of the four pillars, obviously, in my opinion, is the [inaudible] harboring terrorists. We have seen so many times throughout our history the plausible deniability: "I had no idea they were there."

In your opinion, how does one enforce or obtain true information that is verifiable whether they are harboring terrorists? And that is a relative question.

Dr. BIDDLE. Yeah, there are two pieces to that. There is the intelligence problem of figuring out whether they are behaving themselves, whether they are complying with the terms of whatever agreement we eventually reach. And then there is the issue of leverage, if we decide that they are not complying, to force them back into compliance.

On the intelligence side of this, it is partly a function of the intelligence mechanisms of the U.S. Government. But it is also a part, in part, a function of the intelligence mechanisms of Afghans who oppose the Taliban within a power-sharing regime.

If we get some sort of settlement, it won't involve a Taliban takeover. If what we end up with is a surrender instrument for us, then, of course, we will offer no aid to support that kind of a deal. If we are talking about a deal that is in our interest and that we are willing to support that will involve power sharing in which we

retain allies within the Afghan Government who would have an incentive to report to us violations of the agreement by the Taliban, that, coupled with our own intelligence, is necessary for us to know whether the agreement is being violated.

If it is violated, our leverage to bring them back into compliance is aid. That is one of the reasons why I think continued aid is essential if any agreement we reach is going to be stable.

Mr. NORCROSS. Thank you.

So, Dr. Jones, let's bring this back to the end. Does Taliban control automatically equal a terrorist, an existential threat of some sort to the United States—existential goes too far—but a threat to the United States, either they directly or through them allowing other groups to come back in? Does that automatically mean they are going to look at the United States for some sort of an additional attack?

Dr. JONES. Well, I think it is important to differentiate types of terrorist organizations. The Taliban has been committed to conducting attacks against the Islamic State Khorasan Province, in Afghan provinces such as Kunar and Nangarhar. So I think we could expect the Taliban to fight those kinds of organizations. But those are a minority.

I think, based on the relationship today between the Taliban and al-Qaida at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, I think we could expect over time that the U.S. national security interests are threatened based on international and regional terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, including al-Qaida.

Mr. NORCROSS. So assuming that, maybe not immediately, that we are going to be back in the same situation, what does that new Afghanistan look like in terms of troops?

Obviously, after the Second World War, we are not looking at Germany, but certainly we have been prepared for Russia and the Soviet Union. Are we potentially looking at a long-term presence in order to keep in check those who would do us harm?

Dr. Jones.

Dr. JONES. My answer to that is, until there is a peace agreement or something else that weakens the Taliban, yes, I think my judgment would be a continuing U.S. military presence, a small presence that is able to fight against these and weaken these organizations.

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

Mr. NORCROSS. Thank you. I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Ms. Stefanik is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. STEFANIK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Jones, I represent Fort Drum, which is home of the 10th Mountain Division, which you know is the most deployed division in the U.S. Army since 9/11 to Afghanistan. Currently the division headquarters and members of the 1st Brigade Combat Team are operating in Afghanistan with the 2nd Brigade Combat Team on schedule to deploy to the region throughout this fall.

I want to wish our 10th Mountain soldiers a very happy Thanksgiving. I know this is not the first Thanksgiving for many of them who are away from their friends and family at home.

Given your experience advising military commanders, how can we balance the reduction of forces in Afghanistan with the necessary force protection measures to ensure that our remaining troops that are in-country are protected and able to safely conduct their daily operations and missions? I want to ensure that we are keeping force protection to the absolute highest level.

Dr. JONES. Force protection is obviously essential, as are logistics, and there are other components of that. So I think the question, when we talk about numbers, is, as you are implying, I think, it is not just the number of counterterrorism forces that are striking targets or arresting or even training Afghan terrorists—or training Afghan commandos to target terrorist organizations like al-Qaida—but it is also the force protection of bases that is necessary.

That may be military police and others to secure bases. On any of the bases that I have ever served on, we have also hired local Afghans to provide basic protection and in some cases contractors as well. So that does need to be added to the mix of the force posture we are talking about.

Ms. STEFANIK. And then in your written statement you mentioned a troop drawdown's impact on our ability to conduct the train, advise, and assist mission and conduct CT missions and operations and collect intelligence.

What overall does this mean for the resurgence and strengthening of terror groups in Afghanistan, particularly in reference to potential difficulties we may have when it comes to conducting CT? Does this put us in a similar situation that we faced in Iraq in 2011 to 2014 in which we will be back in Afghanistan down the road to combat stronger, more organized terrorist groups that threaten us?

Dr. JONES. Well, I don't think it entirely puts us back to 2011 where we pulled all forces out, but we are now taking a risk by going down to 2,500.

What it means, I think, is that that force posture may be enough to conduct strikes against terrorists, but we are going to have to move a range of our train, advise, and assist trainers from the kandak level, from the Afghan Air Force, up to the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior level.

So what we lose is the ability to train Afghans at the operational and tactical level, actually where the fight is happening. So that means it is a risk to the state of the war. And I think that is where we are at right now and that is where we are going to accept some risk.

Ms. STEFANIK. Thank you. Yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Gallego is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. GALLEGO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I defer to my colleague, Representative Crow.

Mr. CROW. Thank you, Mr. Gallego, for yielding your time to me.

Everyone here today has spoken about the need to address the threat, and I think there is universal agreement that there is indeed a threat in Afghanistan. But the fact of the matter is we face a lot of threats, we have a lot of adversaries, and we do so with limited resources.

So because we have to take a holistic view and make decisions about those limited resources, there are ultimately tradeoffs and opportunity costs to that.

I went to war after 9/11 three times, twice in Afghanistan, and fought the Taliban, because I do take seriously our charge to keep our country safe and our responsibility to respond to those threats.

But I also know that we face domestic terror threats that we haven't adequately addressed, that over a thousand Americans a day are dying of COVID-19 because we are not adequately addressing that, over 50,000 Americans a year are dying by opioids because we are not adequately addressing that, and over 20 veterans a day are dying because we are not addressing that threat and that need as well.

But this isn't a philosophical discussion about the value that we place on different threats. It is a practical one. And what I believe is that we do have to draw down for the reasons that many of my colleagues have articulated before, but there is a right way to do it and there is a wrong way to do it.

From my perspective, the administration's process has been largely a black box. It has changed and we don't have sufficient information and we can't have a discussion as a body here and as an American public about the process and the relative risks.

So from your perspective, very briefly, starting with Dr. Jones, since you are here, going to Ambassador Crocker, and then to Mr. Biddle, do you believe that America would benefit from a more transparent process like the one that we outlined in the National Defense Authorization Act, a provision that would require broader engagement with Congress and our partners so we better understand those threats and the proper way to draw down?

Dr. JONES. Yes, very briefly, I think it is always better to have a transparent process where we have any administration outline what its objectives are in places like Afghanistan and what is the force posture necessary to meet those objectives, as well as the diplomatic presence, intelligence presence, and others, yes.

Mr. CROW. Thank you.

Ambassador Crocker.

Ambassador CROCKER. Thank you.

We are a great democracy, and the greatness of our democracy depends on the transparency of an administration. The American people will sacrifice a lot and deal with a lot of hardship if they understand why they are being asked to make these sacrifices.

So I would hope that there will be an effort in the coming months for the new administration to articulate precisely that. What are the stakes in Afghanistan? Why are we there?

I think those are questions that we can answer and have answered in this committee, but the case needs to be made and made repeatedly.

Mr. CROW. And very briefly, Mr. Biddle, because I do have one more question, but love your thoughts on that first question.

Dr. BIDDLE. Transparency is key. A democracy waging a war is engaging in policies that take lives in the name of the state and spend billions of dollars of public treasury. We owe it to the public to debate this publicly, to build a consensus behind whatever policy

we adopt. And I commend the committee for its role in furthering the debate with today's hearings.

Mr. CROW. Thank you.

My last question is, America is strong just not because of our power and our military, but because we have friends. We have friend and allies. That has an outsized impact not just on Afghanistan but in every way that we engage.

And I am extremely concerned that there hasn't been consultation with our NATO partners. Thirty-eight partners and allies have committed to the U.S.-led NATO mission, and they, by my estimation, have not been given adequate information about what we are trying to do.

In fact, as you mentioned, Dr. Jones, Article 5 has only been invoked after 9/11, and there was always an estimation that we would go in together and come out together.

So very briefly, each of you, 15 seconds on the impact on the NATO alliance of not adequately consulting with them.

Dr. JONES. Well, I think it makes it hard—not consulting with allies makes it harder for them to make a case to their own populations to keep a presence in Afghanistan that we need because it provides additional value to us.

Mr. CROW. Thank you.

Ambassador Crocker.

Ambassador CROCKER. Clearly we have got to do a better job of communicating with our strategic partners in NATO. We have seen the statement of the Secretary General of NATO this past week after the President's announcement, expressing his distress over where we are going and how we are doing it.

So, yes, NATO has stood up for us in Afghanistan. They are with us there now. They need to hear from us that we will stay the course.

Mr. CROW. Thank you. Mr. Biddle, very briefly?

Dr. BIDDLE. Our alliance system is one of the great grand strategic advantages of the United States relative to our primary competitors in China and Russia, neither of whom enjoys the alliance system that the United States enjoys. Respect for our allies enables us to take advantage of the things that this alliance system brings to the table. We should further that critical grand strategic advantage by taking our allies seriously and consulting them to the greatest degree possible.

Mr. CROW. Thank you.

Thank you again to Mr. Gallego for yielding me his time.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mrs. DAVIS [presiding]. Thank you, Mr. Crow.

Mr. Gaetz is next for 5 minutes.

Mr. GAETZ. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And not only am I a minority member of this committee, I hold a minority view on the war in Afghanistan on the committee. I am against it.

Based on even the words of our own witnesses today, the corruption in Afghanistan is unsolvable, the war is unwinnable, and the strategy is indecipherable. It is not a criticism of the current administration. These are conditions that have been present for the

last 19 years as we have traded the same villages back and forth with the Taliban.

I listened intently as Dr. Biddle said we are leaving and we are getting nothing. What we are getting is out.

To me the biggest loser in Afghanistan is the nation that stays the longest.

Now, as I read some of the prepared testimony of our witnesses, particularly Dr. Biddle, here is how the argument seems to go. Twenty-five hundred troops really has no military value. There is no technical capability with 2,500 troops that we have that is going to fundamentally win this war. We have had 100,000 troops there and we couldn't win it and now we think with 2,500 that is what is going to, like, preserve these alliances and ensure our allies that we are really there with sufficient grit.

But the purpose of these 2,500 troops is politics, that it is a political feature of the war in Afghanistan that if we leave 2,500 troops there we will get more leverage, and that if we engage in accelerated drawdowns, well, the Afghans, the Taliban in particular, will see that this is sort of a war of attrition that the United States is going to lose. And so they are just going to stick there and maintain a level of violence that allows them to potentially recapture their political power.

But the obvious question is, if we know that the 2,500 troops we are leaving there don't have military value and are there as a political statement, probably the enemy knows that, too. Probably they understand the very dynamics that our witnesses have laid out through their testimony today that this only ends one way: with us leaving, with the Taliban getting more power, and with conditions in Afghanistan in pretty rough shape going forward, as they have been for the last two decades, as they were for a substantial period of time before that.

I am grateful that in the Trump administration we have highlighted our near-peer adversaries as the requisite focus for our work. I am glad that we don't believe we have to chase every potential terrorist into every potential cave in "Whereveristan" so we can thump our chests and say that we are being tough with a global counterterrorism mission.

It is my sincere hope that we not only reduce our troop levels to 2,500, but that we reduce them to zero, that we leave Afghanistan. This has been the longest war in our Nation's history. Our country is weary of it, even if the Armed Services Committee is not.

And I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Mr. Moulton, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MOULTON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

You know, having served four tours in Iraq, there is no one who wants to bring the troops home more. But if there is one lesson we have learned after the last 20 years, it is harder to get out of these wars than to get in. And we leaving willy-nilly, without any plan, without any leverage, is clearly the wrong thing to do according to every witness, Republican and Democrat, before this committee.

I want to end the war in Afghanistan, too, but I want to end it responsibly. And more importantly, I want to bring the troops home for good. I do not want to repeat the mistake we made in

Iraq where we withdrew so quickly, without sufficient plans, that we had to turn around and go back in.

And although I think all of our witnesses also agree that we are not going to, quote, unquote, win the war in Afghanistan—frankly, that is not on the table and hasn't been for a long time now—there are very devastating ways that we could lose—most of all, of course, a repeat of 9/11.

Ambassador Crocker, I would like to ask you a question about another way that we could lose, which is that there are two Americans that we suspect are being held hostage in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, by groups with close ties to the Taliban: Paul Overby, an author from Massachusetts, and Mark Frerichs, a Navy veteran and defense contractor.

As this administration proceeds with plans to withdraw troops early and without any concessions from the Taliban, there is no indication that Mr. Overby or Mr. Frerichs' release and safe return are being considered in diplomatic negotiations or required as a precondition for an accelerated drawdown.

In your experience and opinion, what are important factors to consider in securing the release of these two Americans? And if we withdraw troops earlier than anticipated, what other potential leverage do we have to ensure that Mr. Overby and Mr. Frerichs are returned safely to their families?

Ambassador CROCKER. Thank you, Congressman.

As with these sad cases, we, I think, see another illustration of what we are giving up by giving up our leverage, and we are certainly doing that by unilateral troop withdrawals that require nothing of the Taliban. They have no incentive to cooperate at any scale or on any level. And that would impact both from the top strategic level of support for the government and its survivability in Afghanistan and it goes down to this level as well.

It is pretty hard to get something if you have given up your leverage. There is no incentive for the Taliban, who we presume are holding these two Americans, to take any steps to release them.

So, again, if you are programmed for defeat, which we seem to be, you have no leverage and no expectation that we will gain anything, including a release of these two Americans.

Mr. MOULTON. Well, certainly a principle that I understood in the Marine Corps is we don't leave Americans behind. And I hope that the purported "art of the deal," who should know a little bit about negotiation, is thinking about these two Americans, as well as our troops, as we figure out the best way forward.

Mr. Ambassador, I would like to ask you about the importance of the Special Immigrant Visa program that you stressed in your opening statement. I was proud to support an extension of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa program in the House version of the fiscal year 2021 NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act]. We recognized the critical importance of the program for U.S. Government operations in Afghanistan and also for future operations where young troops, like I was, are going to have to convince allies overseas to trust us enough to put their lives on the line to support us.

So can you just tell us why the program is so critical in your eyes and the effect that the success of the program in Afghanistan will have on future national security operations overseas?

Ambassador CROCKER. I think that is exactly right, Congressman. As I noted, there is a backlog of some 18,000 cases in Afghanistan. The sad reality is probably today more interpreters and their family members are getting killed in Afghanistan because of their service to us than are getting Special Immigrant Visas to make good on our pledge to them that we would take care of them.

And you are quite right, this has implications far beyond the borders of Afghanistan. The world is watching. The nature of war has changed. The wars of the future are going to look a little like this in the sense that we have got to have people from the community, from the nation, working with us, otherwise we are blind out there. And you know what that is like from your extraordinary service in Iraq.

Mr. MOULTON. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

Madam Chairman, I yield back.

Mrs. DAVIS [presiding]. Thank you very much.

Mr. Keating, you have 5 minutes.

Mr. KEATING. Sorry. I couldn't hear that, Madam Chairman. Madam Chairman, who did you call on?

Mrs. DAVIS. Mr. Keating. Are you ready? You have 5 minutes.

Mr. KEATING. Yes, I am. I couldn't hear my name.

Mrs. DAVIS. Oh, sorry.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you.

Mr. KEATING. Very briefly, there is not a broad consensus today on exactly what we should do in terms of our troops in Afghanistan and their deployment. But there is a broad consensus on the fact that the way the administration is proposing this drawdown is precipitous and it is disagreed with, I think, by virtually everyone that has spoken today.

It is pretty clear that one of the reasons is it undercuts our—the so-called peace plan, you know, where there is a political date that was put on this, Inauguration Day, for the drawdown.

It also is one more example, a large one, of our inability to coordinate and respect our allies who have troops on the ground.

This falls on the heels of dealing with the pullout after discussions with President Erdogan in Syria so quickly, without notice, adequate notice certainly, hours, I heard in questioning, to our allies about that decision; pullouts from Germany of the troops there, another political decision on the heels of the G7 pullout by the Chancellor of Germany; and also the political switching of funds from things like the European Defense Initiative—Deterrence Initiative.

So these abound, let alone our inability to consult with them on—our allies on INF [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces] Treaty or the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] decisions.

I mean, this is a critical problem. I was in discussions just in the last few days with our allies, private discussions, and their concern for the way that this has been decided, their lack of consultation, is profound.

But I want to just quickly go on a couple of other issues that we haven't dealt with directly, I don't think.

The danger of this pullout and the timing, the contracted nature of it, with troop safety, this isn't the longer term issue of force protection, but actually moving our troops safely out in such a tight timeframe.

Also, the protection of our military assets, billions of dollars of assets that could fall into terrorist hands as a result of this artificial timeframe.

And also, the third thing, justification because of our situation with Pakistan, a very complicated issue. But how exactly can troop deployment there help us with Pakistan as opposed to our increasing inability to deal with them directly?

So those are the issues, the troop safety short term, asset protection short term, and exactly how this is going to benefit our position strategically with problems in Pakistan.

I will throw it open probably first to Dr. Jones.

Dr. JONES. Thank you very much for the questions.

On the danger of pullout and the safety issue, you do raise very important questions. I think the Taliban has shown over the last couple of months since the February deal that it is not—it has significantly decreased, in fact it has generally stopped targeting U.S. forces in Afghanistan. It is targeting Afghan forces, but not U.S.

So I would not expect the Taliban to take advantage of this opportunity. But as we have already noted during this committee hearing, we have other groups, including the Islamic State Khorasan Province, that continue to conduct attacks.

So I think there are issues related to the safe withdrawal in spite or in the face of groups like the Islamic State that may conduct attacks.

I do think there also has to be very serious questions about what are we doing with American assets, infrastructure in the country. The U.S. has poured large amounts of money. What is going to happen? Who is going to get it, including who is going to be in the bases, if the U.S. is also downsizing.

On Pakistan, just very briefly, I think Pakistan almost certainly believes this is a win for it. Its ally, the Taliban, is likely to advance with a continuing U.S. drawdown. So I see this as largely viewed positively by Islamabad.

Mr. KEATING. Thank you.

I have got 30 seconds left. I will yield back so my colleagues can ask questions. Thank you.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you very much.

Mr. Carbajal. Mr. Carbajal, you have got 5 minutes.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ambassador Crocker, we have been in Afghanistan for almost two decades. While I am concerned with the administration's recent unilateral announcement to draw down U.S. troops to 2,500 in January, we cannot be in an open-ended war.

How can the U.S. better assist diplomatically and militarily in addressing the main barriers that are inhibiting an intra-Afghan agreement? And I know you briefly have touched on this. But if you could elaborate, I would greatly appreciate it.

Ambassador CROCKER. Thank you, Congressman. Your question was broken up with my technical problems, but I think I have the gist of it.

Again, it is an issue of strategic patience, of a long-term view. The Taliban certainly have it. They have spent all those years in exile rather than give up their al-Qaida colleagues. They know they can—they believe they can outwait us, and the course of these so-called peace talks would, I think, vindicate that.

I know about being tired, Congressman. I spent 7 out of the first 11 years after 9/11 in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq. I was ambassador to all three. So I get that, too, I get it, that the American people are tired.

But getting tired and giving up need to be two different things, and I just pray that it is not too late to reverse the disastrous course we are on right now. That is simply running up the white flag and we will pay for it down the line, not just in Afghanistan.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Ambassador, if you could just touch on what concrete steps we could do to create that intra-agreement.

Ambassador CROCKER. Well, first, we need to make it clear that we are not neutral in this matter, that the Afghan Government has our solid backing, that we are not going to abandon an ally to the Taliban. That would be the first and critical, I think, concrete thing we can do.

And then from that making it clear that anything we do further is going to be strictly all based on conditions. We will maintain our presence as long as the government wants and as long as we need to, to defend our own national security interests. We need, in short, to demonstrate some strategic patience and we need to do it now.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you, Ambassador.

Dr. Jones, as is well known, part of the U.S.-Taliban deal negotiated by the Trump administration was the Taliban's commitment to prevent al-Qaida and other terrorist groups from using Afghan soil to threaten the U.S. or its allies, including by preventing recruiting, training, and fundraising. There is a grave concern and apprehension that the Taliban are not and will not uphold that commitment.

Looking forward, how do we measure the extent to which the Taliban fulfills this part of the agreement?

Dr. JONES. It is a very good question, Congressman. I think the answer, in part, hinges on our intelligence collection and analysis capabilities. To what degree do we continue to see meetings, that is from human intelligence and signals intelligence, meetings between the Taliban and al-Qaida? To what degree do we see al-Qaida continue to operate in areas where there are Taliban commanders? And to what degree do we see al-Qaida and other camps operating in Afghanistan or along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border?

There are obviously a range of ways, including through geospatial intelligence, that we can monitor that. It does become harder the more we drop in forces, though. It makes it more difficult for NSA and CIA to put their important units in collection sites, because they use the military for those. So the more we withdraw, the harder it becomes to see that.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you.

I have limited time. Dr. Biddle, in your testimony you discuss how the Afghan National Defense and the Security Forces need to be professionalized to root out corruption. What can the United States do and our allies to support these efforts?

Dr. BIDDLE. There is a limited amount that we can do actually, because the corruption and cronyism we see is so deeply rooted in fundamental political features of the Afghan governing system.

What we can do, however, is to reach a low ceiling. And I think the key to that is conditionality in the aid that we provide. We need to tell the Afghans what we expect in exchange for our support that can move their incentives, albeit gradually, in the direction of professionalization. We should do that, but we should also be realistic about how much we can accomplish on that score.

Mr. CARBAJAL. Thank you very much. I am out of time.

I yield back.

Mrs. DAVIS. Thank you.

Mr. Kim, you have 5 minutes.

Mr. KIM. Thank you.

Dr. Jones, I am going to start with you. Thank you for taking some time to be able to come here.

And I was reading through an October interview that you conducted with now Acting Secretary of Defense Chris Miller just I guess in October, and he mentioned three lessons learned in the CT fight. One is that we have to maintain pressure on the terrorist organizations so that they cannot create sanctuaries. Number two, that you don't let states fail. And then three, bad policies do not get better with age.

And I wanted to just kind of think through. With these three counterterrorism lessons in mind, I wanted to get your reflections upon now the decision that he is taking part in with regards to Afghanistan, what your thoughts are on each of those three levels and whether or not those conditions have been met in Afghanistan.

Dr. JONES. Well, let me begin with the importance of maintaining pressure. I think the 2,500 does allow us to continue to pressure al-Qaida and some terrorist groups, including the Islamic State, in Afghanistan. So I do think a complete withdrawal would have eliminated our ability to maintain pressure against terrorist organizations. Having some special operations forces and some aircraft does allow us to keep pressure.

But I do think going down to the levels that we are does cause us to risk the broader counterinsurgency campaign. So I think we are taking risk. I am not sure I would have recommended that, to go down to 2,500. But I do think we still can maintain some pressure with the size force we have.

I don't think we want to let Afghanistan fail. And, again, part of the issue is not just the military footprint; part of it is also the aid that we need to provide. And one of the things that I recommended, Mr. Kim, in my testimony, in my written testimony, was also to make it very clear to the Afghan Government that we are going to provide sustained assistance to that government, like we do in other countries, and that we would be a supporting partner in the next several years.

So I think the issue is not to focus just on military forces but, what are we doing in terms of State Department and U.S. Agency

for International Development assistance? What are we doing on the intelligence aid side? That stuff has not been clear. So I would actually like to hear more clarity on what non-military types of assistance are happening.

Mr. KIM. Well, absolutely, and as would I. And as a former State Department official that worked in Afghanistan about 10 years ago—and then, also, I visited Afghanistan with a number of my colleagues in a bipartisan group a year ago—these are the exact same questions that were heard, which is: What is that comprehensive strategy? What is the actual way in which we work in this way in a civ-mil fashion here.

And I wanted to turn to Ambassador Crocker.

Ambassador, you were the Ambassador in Afghanistan when I was there in 2011, and I always appreciated your leadership out there.

And I wanted to focus in on what you said about NATO. You were talking about how NATO is coming up with a different approach. They have different opinions there. I wanted to ask you if you could give us a little bit more detail into any reflections you have, any communication you have with NATO partners or other countries about how they are seeing the situation. And why is it that they seem to have a longer horizon and approach to this?

And, also, just conclude: What is your assessment of the state of the NATO alliance and thoughts there in terms of how we need to repair?

Ambassador CROCKER. Thank you. Thank you, Congressman.

NATO made it clear during the time I was there—and I do remember your visit. Thank you for making that effort. It is so important to come out and see things on the ground for yourself, as you did.

Our NATO allies, as you know, stood up for us on Article 5. I have been pleasantly surprised of their willingness to make the long-term commitment they have in Afghanistan. They are ready to stay as long as we are staying.

But we would delude ourselves utterly to think they are going to stay if we are going. And I think that is the hinge point we are at right now after the President's drawdown decision that did not involve consultations with NATO.

I believe very strongly that the NATO alliance is critical for global security as well as America's security. We have all had frustrations with NATO, both in terms of financial commitments and capabilities. Here is one arena where they are ready to make a stand—

Mr. KIM. Ambassador, unfortunately, my time has expired here, so I am going to have to yield back to the chairman, but thank you for your assessments here.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

Ms. Horn is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. HORN. I will yield back my time. I have just walked in. Thank you, Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. At this point, I don't think we have anyone else seeking time.

I have one last question for Ambassador Crocker, and I think it is sort of the crux of the problem. And, certainly, we understand

the risks, and they have been very well explained, of what can happen in Afghanistan. And, you know, those risks go up, to some extent, if we aren't present, trying to contain them.

But when you talked about—and this is, you know, a very long-held belief by many people, that, after the Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan, our decision to not stay engaged and the impact of that—you know a lot more about Afghanistan than I do. I have been there eight or nine times but not for any length and certainly not in the depth that you have.

But if you were to take me, you know, back to that moment, and then, you know, knowing what we know now, I just don't think us staying would have solved the problem. And I think that is what a lot of people are, you know, wrestling with, is——

[Audio interruption.]

The CHAIRMAN. I am sorry. Ambassador Crocker, are you hearing me okay?

STAFF. He is having issues. We will work on that.

The CHAIRMAN. Yeah. I will take that as a “no.”

So I guess we have Dr. Jones and Dr. Biddle here, if you could answer this question.

My point is—and we have heard it described. And I forget, I think it was Dr. Jones who was making the points about, you have got all the warlords, and if the government gets too powerful, the warlords get upset and you have to appease them. You certainly have got the drug trade. You have got extremists. Everyone in Afghanistan owns 10 guns. And after the Soviets came in, it really blew up the existing government. You had the funding of the madrasas that came out of Saudi Arabia into Pakistan, which radicalized a large portion of the population.

Can we honestly say that there was something we could have done in 1989 that would have changed that? I think that is what concerns a lot of people, is, here we are saying, “Oh, there is a huge problem here, and if we show up, we will solve it.” That just doesn't seem to play out. There are certain things that U.S. military in foreign countries just can't come in and solve.

And the idea that, you know, “Gosh, if we leave, everything is going to go to hell”—it is an enormous cost, certainly, you know, in lives, in the risk of lives, in the disruption of lives of American service members and others who serve there. But it is also a global cost, in terms of our credibility and other—while we are doing that, what else can't we be doing? All right.

And, again, you know, we have got U.S. troops killing Afghans, all right? There is going to be a certain amount of resentment amongst the Afghan people for that.

So, I guess, how can you answer the question of, are we as Americans and the military really able to solve these incredibly complex problems that exist in Afghanistan? Because I think most people's impression is, that is the folly, is thinking that, somehow, oh, if we were just there in greater numbers and if we were just there a little bit smarter, we could achieve some sort of peace deal.

So I don't know what the connectivity stuff is that is going on here, so, Dr. Jones, you are sitting in front of me. I am going to let you take a stab at that.

Dr. JONES. Very good questions. And I do think it is important to look at the history of the country, including the 1980s. I would say, the U.S. position today is very different than what it was in the 1980s, where we were actually in Pakistan—we were not in Afghanistan—where we were providing assistance to the Mujahedeen. So I don't—

The CHAIRMAN. But what I am really talking about—actually, sir, I garbled that because I got confused in terms of what was going on with the connectivity there. I am talking about when it was done. And that is, you know, Charlie Wilson's war. That was the great lament of it. Gosh, you know, we pulled out and everything went to hell; you know, if only we had gone in, it would have been fixed. And that is what I don't believe, to be honest with you.

Dr. JONES. Well, I would take the one lesson that we did not do that we could have done, is kept a close intelligence and probably a special operations presence embedded with Northern Alliance forces which were still surviving at the end of the 1990s. And we could have—and I think the 9/11 Commission report highlights this—we could have conducted attacks against bin Laden at that point.

We did not pull the trigger. The Clinton administration had bin Laden within its sights. So I think we could—having a presence there would have allowed us to conduct some action. I think—

The CHAIRMAN. Just on that one quick point, though, there are risks in doing what you just described. Okay? Because that is the risk of inaction. Okay?

We have taken actions before. You know, we bombed that, you know, pharmaceutical plant in Sudan, which, you know, blew up in our face. You know, we did launch a bunch of cruise missiles in to try to take out bin Laden.

So I think there is a tendency to say “inaction, bad; action, good” or “action, bad”—I mean, it is more of a balance depending on the circumstances, and there are risks either way.

Dr. JONES. Yes, I think there are risks either way. And I think that is where we are at today. Do we take the risk of leaving and seeing what happens afterwards? Or can we accept some small military presence, some aid, and keep the Afghan Government and the Taliban talking and prevent the overthrow, at least for the next couple years, and see where this goes? And that is what my advice is to consider.

The CHAIRMAN. Understood.

And, you know, just to conclude, I mean, I believe that there is still a transnational terrorist threat. And when we talk about the shift to great power competition, “we need to get out of this stuff” and everything, I know the challenges that are presented by Russia and China, but I think it is important that we all keep in mind that there is still only one group of people that gets up every morning hoping to kill as many Americans and Westerners as they possibly can. And the only thing that is stopping them is the ability to do it; it is not a lack of will. And that is al-Qaida and ISIS and various affiliated groups all over the world.

We will have to do something, in my view, to contain that threat. And I think those who wish it away and say, “Gosh, if we just

weren't fighting them, they would just stop hating us," that is not going to work. Something needs to be done to contain that threat.

And I think what the American people are trying to figure out is, how can we do that in a way that is less costly and places fewer troops at risk? And I think that is what we have to work towards.

This is horribly unfair, but, believe it or not, Mac, we are wrapping up. And——

Mr. THORNBERRY. Well, Mr. Chairman, I did have one——

The CHAIRMAN. I say that because Mr. Thornberry just walked back into the room, by the way.

Mr. Thornberry, you have the floor. Go ahead.

Mr. THORNBERRY. I just had a brief question based on some earlier conversation.

Ms. Stefanik was asking you, Dr. Jones, about force protection. And I know that Dr. Biddle had talked about two sources of leverage. One is the presence of our troops; the other is our financial commitment.

The concern has been expressed to me that, if we unilaterally make significant cuts to our financial commitment, it could endanger our forces who are there in some way, because that leverage, that incentive would be reduced. Do you have an opinion about that?

Dr. JONES. Yeah. I think the answer to that depends, Mr. Thornberry, on what types of assistance were cut. But I certainly think training to local forces, particularly if it starts to trigger some animosity—we have seen attacks against U.S. forces from Afghans as the situation deteriorates—that would be a concern.

But I also think, are we cutting key resources that protect our forces on the bases where we operate? And I think that needs to be looked at very closely.

Mr. THORNBERRY. Yeah. Well, whatever the number—25, 45—it is not many folks. And we depend upon the Afghans to protect our folks, by and large. And it just seems to me to be a key consideration.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would just say, I really appreciate all three witnesses and their testimony and their bearing with us today. I think it has been very helpful.

I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

We did have a couple more members who came back in since we concluded this. So we will go with Ms. Speier first and then Ms. Torres Small. And then we will adjourn.

Ms. Speier, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. SPEIER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you especially for this hearing. It has been very insightful.

To all of the witnesses, extraordinary testimony.

To Ambassador Crocker, what a lifetime of contributions you have made to our country.

I am not sure if it was you, Ambassador, or someone else, but someone said, "We are going to pay for it if we leave abruptly." And I would like for someone, whoever said that, to define, what does "paying for it" mean?

The CHAIRMAN. Ms. Speier.

Ms. SPEIER. Yes?

The CHAIRMAN. I am sorry.

Ambassador Crocker, are you still with us?

It sounds like we have lost our connection to Ambassador Crocker.

Ms. SPEIER. Okay.

So maybe to Dr. Biddle and Dr. Jones. An abrupt withdrawal—I mean, we have seen what has happened, certainly, in Iraq. I worry about the reinstatement of Sharia law and the impacts on women and children. And I worry that we have to calibrate what a presence, and a presence that will be relevant, is.

Is 2,500 enough, or do we need 4,000? Can we reinstate the other 2,000 after the Biden administration comes into operation, if that is where he is inclined to go? If you could just kind of, in your own words, kind of answer those two or three questions.

And let's start with you, Dr. Biddle.

Dr. BIDDLE. I would personally like to see the withdrawal order remanded, and I would like our current troop level to remain at least through the beginning of the Biden administration, in part for the political issue of bargaining leverage and the talks, but in part because our Afghan allies do continue to depend especially on the air strikes that the U.S. presence provides.

If we were to totally withdraw—which I think is a defensible view if you think the talks are hopeless. But if we were to totally withdraw, I think it is very likely that the Afghan National Security Forces would break.

They are taking heavy casualties in combat already. There are serious strains on the organization. If we were to leave, that would signal them that the future is very negative, and the combat motivation of the remaining troops would be affected in a very dangerous way by a perception that this is now a hopeless enterprise and that, sooner or later, they are looking at failure and defeat in the absence of U.S. support.

I think the signal that would send to the Afghan Security Forces is likely to cause them to be unable to sustain the stalemate that we now see.

Ms. SPEIER. Thank you.

Dr. Jones.

Dr. JONES. Yes. I did not make the—or I did not use the words “pay for it,” but what I would say is that, at the moment, we have something close to a military stalemate in Afghanistan and a rough balance of power, the Afghan Government on the one side, with some support from the U.S. and other NATO countries, and on the other, we have the Taliban with some support from Pakistan, from Iran, from Russia, and from some other outside donors. You break that balance by a complete withdrawal, so you shift the balance in favor of the Taliban.

And I think, as all of us have noted during this hearing, that the Taliban continues to have relations with al-Qaida. I think it becomes only a matter of time before the Taliban starts to overrun major cities in Kandahar, Helmand, Farah, and other provinces. And I think then the concern is that we start to see—

[Audio interruption.]

The CHAIRMAN. I apologize for that.

Ms. Speier, you still have time. Go ahead.

Ms. SPEIER. Was that Dr. Jones speaking or Ambassador Crocker?

The CHAIRMAN. That was Dr. Jones speaking.

Ms. SPEIER. Okay. And I guess Ambassador Crocker cannot connect.

All right. I guess my final question, if I still have time, Mr. Chairman, is: Is there anything that hasn't been asked this morning that any of you would like to inform us about that we should be looking at that maybe has not been discussed?

The CHAIRMAN. I am getting a head shake.

Dr. BIDDLE. Well, I—

The CHAIRMAN. And it is going to have to be quick. I apologize. Almost out of time. Go ahead.

Dr. BIDDLE. I will just take the opportunity then.

What I would suggest is, this whole exercise tells us that it is very important to think of the termination of a war when you begin a war. If we engage in any of these kinds of interventions in the future, we need from the beginning to assume not that the war just ends when you conquer the capital but that there is going to be some subsequent process that we need to think through in advance.

If we had understood that in 2001 to 2002 and negotiated the Taliban when we had the opportunity and the advantage, rather than assuming that we had won the war because the capital had fallen, I don't think we would now be in this situation.

The easiest way to prevent the kind of dilemmas we face now is to solve them at the beginning. When we get involved and we understand what our war aims are and when we accept the idea that negotiation is a way to realize our war aims at the beginning, it is a better solution than waging a 20-year war and then finding yourself with no good options in the end.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Ms. Torres Small—

Ms. SPEIER. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN [continuing]. Is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. TORRES SMALL. Thank you, Chairman Smith.

I wanted follow up on Congressman Kim's question regarding the impact that this scaled withdraw would impact on our allies.

So could you just—Dr. Jones, I would love to hear your sense about how our allies—what position our allies would be put in, both NATO and non-NATO, given this reduction in forces.

Dr. JONES. Well, I think there were two challenges.

One is—and I think we saw it with the reaction of the NATO Secretary General. They were not given sufficient advance warning, so that what it didn't include was a broader U.S., NATO, and other forces—what are their objectives, combined objectives? What are the force postures, collectively, that they need? And how does this affect all of that? So I did not see a lot of strategic planning with our allies.

The second issue is: Remember, there is pressure, and there should be pressure, in all of our allies' capitals and among their populations with people that are asking, why do we still—why do the Germans still have forces? The Italians, the British, and others, why do they still have forces in Afghanistan?

So I think the recognition here is, if we want those countries to continue to train and to continue to engage in combat operations, we have to treat them as allies, plan with them as allies. And that is the only way, I think, we are able to keep it. Because I think they actually—they provide advantages. They have forces on the ground. They can train Afghan forces. And I think that, at the end of the day, this shows that it is not just us.

Ms. TORRES SMALL. Earlier in discussions, we talked about the potential impact that the removal of troops or the drawdown of troops would have on negotiations for peace. And I wanted to link those two discussions together—the need for us to strategically plan with our allies and the potential domino effect that our reduction of troops could have on other presence, our allies' presence, on the ground and how that might impact negotiations, especially given changing relationships, perhaps heightened tensions, with our allies.

Dr. JONES. Is that directed at me?

Ms. TORRES SMALL. Yes. Sorry.

Dr. JONES. Okay. I think it is a very good question.

I think when you look at this from the Taliban's perspective, they agreed to start negotiations in September. Those negotiations have gone nowhere. They have dragged their feet. And now they have—they perceive they have been rewarded for dragging their feet by further U.S. drawdown that was not connected in any way to progress on the peace settlement.

So I think the issue here is, if we want an actual peace agreement, then no one can be rewarded for this.

Ms. TORRES SMALL. Just specifically on the point of a relationship with NATO and non-NATO allies, is there anything more you would say in terms of that impact on potential collaboration and strategy, as you mentioned, for the peace negotiations?

Dr. JONES. Well, I think the addition of international forces is also an important bargaining chip in the negotiations. It is not just U.S. forces leaving, as we have talked about; it is also other international forces leaving. That is an important note here.

Ms. TORRES SMALL. Thank you.

And I don't know if we still have Ambassador Crocker, but if he wanted to weigh in on this, I would appreciate it.

Ambassador CROCKER. Thank you. I think I am reconnected.

The CHAIRMAN. You are.

Ambassador CROCKER. Ultimately, this is not about force levels. It is about American resolve. And that resolve has been, very sadly, wanting, going all the way back to the inception of these talks that excluded the Afghan Government. That is the decision we need to make as a country.

All of us, in different ways, all three of us, have said we are in a very dangerous situation right now and that further unlinked troop withdrawal is going to make it worse. Our great strength as a nation has been based on many things. One of them are our alliances. NATO is crucial.

We have an opportunity here. We need seize it. But, first, we need to stop [inaudible] literally. And, second, we have to have a conversation among ourselves and with our allies. This is not a lost cause if we demonstrate that resolve.

Ms. TORRES SMALL. Thank you.

I yield the remainder of my time.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

We do have one more member who has returned, and then that is it, no matter who comes back.

Ms. Houlahan, you will have the last 5 minutes of the hearing. You are up.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Thank you.

And I hope that you all can hear me.

My question is for Dr. Biddle.

The United States has committed to a conditions-based draw-down, as we have just heard from several people asking questions. And your written testimony says that the expectations on the part of the Afghanis for U.S. engagement were central to the ability to negotiate an acceptable settlement.

I was just wondering, in your view, what would moving away from our publicly touted conditions-based approach, especially on the eve of a transition of government here in the United States, signal to the Afghan people? And what does it mean for our ability to credibly facilitate inter-Afghan negotiations in the future?

Dr. BIDDLE. I think, during the Trump administration, the view of many Afghans was that we were simply headed out regardless of what happened; the conditions-based language wasn't to be taken seriously and wasn't to be trusted.

And that, in turn, made it very, very difficult for the Afghan Government to persuade members of its own political coalition that they should accept compromises in order to get a deal, because it looked like the half-life of the entire Afghan Government was going to be very, very limited. And, hence, asking power brokers within the Afghan elite at large to make near-term sacrifices for a long-term better Afghanistan, when total U.S. cut-and-run looked like it was going to create a long term in Afghanistan measured in minutes, months, years at most, didn't look like a good bargain. That, in turn, made it very, very difficult for them to organize any kind of consistent bargaining position vis-a-vis the Taliban.

Now, an incoming Biden administration is going to have an opportunity to make its own decisions about how seriously it takes these talks, to what degree they are prepared to use the leverage we have remaining to bring about successful talks.

Among the many difficulties in these talks is that there are so many parties. I mean, we tend to think of it as the Taliban and the U.S. It is actually the Taliban and the Afghan Government, but the Afghan Government is not a unified actor. And in terms of the Afghan Government's ability to get a consistent position among all of the different actors internally to its side of these talks, some degree of understood consistency and U.S. support for the Afghan Government is critical for enabling the Afghan leadership to persuade elements of its own political coalition that it makes sense for them to be in this for the long haul.

If we signal to them that we are not in it for the long haul, the stability of their own government goes way down, the ability of that unstable government to command enough loyalty and cooperation from its own power brokers to make concessions in compromise talks goes way down.

These are issues that the Biden administration now has an opportunity to recast. I hope they will take that opportunity.

Ms. HOULAHAN. My next question is somewhat related to that. Assuming that the Biden administration gets that opportunity, what kind of conditions, if any, do you think need to be met before the U.S. would consider reducing or withdrawing troops further, assuming that it were a Biden administration or even what remains of this administration?

Dr. BIDDLE. I would like to see further withdrawals conditioned on an end to the war. I mean, if that is our strategy for getting out of this with an acceptable outcome, the way we use our resources needs to be tied to that outcome.

If an end to the war is what we want—and that is what we should want—then we should be prepared to leave the small number of troops that are there now—I mean, this isn't the almost 100,000-soldier presence of 2011 anymore. This is a rather small footprint to begin with. I think we should be prepared to say we are going to leave it there until we get what we want, which is an end to the war through a negotiated settlement.

Ms. HOULAHAN. And that actually is—you must be kind of reading my mind. My next question is, what kind of troops should remain, and what kind of troops would you recommend that we remain in terms of personnel? And I have about a minute left, sir.

Dr. BIDDLE. I would recommend leaving every single American soldier who is there now there until the war ends.

Now, in terms of the configuration of what is there, I suspect it is pretty close to optimized now, because I have confidence in General Miller and his ability to design his force structure to be optimal with respect to the cap that he is given.

In terms of the military capabilities that go along with the political role of driving us towards a settlement, the critical military capability at the moment is air strikes. Our ability to do air strikes effectively rests, in turn, on how many bases we can maintain in the country and how much cooperation we can get with Afghan corps headquarters to enable us to know where Afghan forces are, what they are doing, what they are seeing, and, thus, how we can support them with our air power.

The way I would evaluate in military terms that the size and configuration of a posture which, in my view, is primarily valued for political purposes would be, centrally, how does it affect our ability to deliver air power to keep our Afghan allies militarily effective in the field, to the extent that we can do it? That is the criterion I would use in evaluating the makeup of that posture.

Ms. HOULAHAN. Perfect. I very much appreciate your time.

And I yield back.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

And I want to join the ranking member in thanking our witnesses for this discussion. Appreciate you being here. Appreciate you sharing your knowledge with us.

And, with that, we are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:30 a.m., the committee was adjourned.]



---

---

# **A P P E N D I X**

NOVEMBER 20, 2020

---

---



---

---

**PREPARED STATEMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD**

NOVEMBER 20, 2020

---

---



Testimony of Ryan Crocker  
House Committee on Armed Services  
Hearing on Afghanistan  
November 20, 2020

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Thornberry, it is an honor to appear before you today to discuss the critical issue of the US military mission in Afghanistan and the peace process.

Our military has been in Afghanistan almost two decades. After this length of time, it is important to recall the reasons for our intervention. It was in response to the most devastating attacks on US soil since Pearl Harbor. Those attacks came out of Afghanistan, perpetrated by al-Qaida which was hosted and sheltered there by the Taliban. We gave the Taliban a choice: give up al-Qaida. and we will take no action against you. The Taliban chose a swift military defeat and exile over abandoning their ally. Why is this of any significance today? Because, after nearly two decades, the Taliban leadership remains in exile. And its links to al-Qaida remain very strong.

Mr. Chairman, I appear before you today not as a scholar but as a practitioner. At the beginning of January 2002, I had the privilege of reopening our Embassy in Kabul. It was a shattered city in a devastated country. The Kabul airport was closed, its runways cratered and littered with destroyed aircraft. The drive to Kabul from our military base at Bagram was through a wasteland of mud, strewn with mines. Nothing grew. Kabul itself resembled Berlin in 1945 with entire city blocks reduced to rubble. Over two decades of constant war had left a terrible legacy. The damage was not only to the physical infrastructure. The Afghan people had suffered enormously through the civil war and the tyranny of the Taliban. None had suffered more than Afghan women and girls. In those early days, it seemed that an investment in the people of Afghanistan. especially females, could be the best antidote to the pernicious ideology of the Taliban. So we opened girls' schools. Our first Congressional visitor in January 2002 was Joe Biden, then Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. We visited a newly established girls' school in Kabul, and observed a first grade class. The girls ranged in age from six years old to twelve since the older girls had come of school age after the Taliban closed their schools. I

asked one of the older girls if it bothered her that she was in a class with girls literally half her age. She just beamed and said that she didn't care who else was in the class. The important thing for her was that she was there.

As this Committee knows well, there is often a degree of tension between our national security interests and our values as Americans. For me on that freezing January day it was an epiphany. Our core national security interest in preventing another attack on the homeland from Afghan soil was in complete harmony with our core value of gender equity. We expanded those efforts, encouraging Afghan women to step forward in politics including representation in the Afghan Parliament, as military officers, as entrepreneurs. Our implicit message was that if you step forward, we've got your backs. When I arrived in Afghanistan in 2002, there were about 900,000 students in Afghan schools, all of them boys. When I left Afghanistan at the end of my tenure as ambassador 2011 – 2012, there were eight million students, over 35 % girls. I believed then, and I believe now, that there is no better bulwark against a return of Taliban rule than an educated Afghan society that rejects its evil ideology.

But it will require continued US engagement, including military presence. When I left Kabul in 2012, it was at the height of the Afghan surge with about 100,000 troops on the ground. Under the extraordinary leadership of GEN John Allen whose initiative in moving swiftly to place night operations in the hands of the Afghans removed a huge political irritation in our bilateral relationship and expanded Afghan military capabilities which enabled a responsible drawdown of our own forces. After my departure, the pace and depth of the drawdown accelerated sharply, no doubt encouraging the Taliban to step up their military pressure. It is worth noting that President Obama, like President Trump, also wanted the withdrawal of all US combat forces by the end of his presidency. He was eventually persuaded to leave a force level of about 10,000 troops. President Trump initially signaled that he understood the need for a long term presence, stating in the summer of 2017 that decisions on US force levels would be made on the basis of conditions, not calendars. But it appears that he soon ran out of patience, leading to a decision in early 2019 to accept a long-standing condition of the Taliban that it would be prepared to negotiate with the United States, but not with the Afghan government which it labeled an American puppet. I argued at the time that by bowing to the Taliban demand which previous

presidents had resisted, we had delegitimized the Afghan government we had pledged to support. This was not the beginning of a peace process. It was the first step in an American capitulation to the Taliban. As such, it bears a sad resemblance to the Paris talks on Vietnam. We came to the table waving a white flag: we surrender. We are here to negotiate the terms of that surrender. There are, of course, also important differences between that time and this. Neither North Vietnam nor the Viet Cong had launched an attack on the American homeland. Al-Qaida, sheltered by the Taliban, has. And they will be back.

Developments since then have only strengthened my view that these negotiations are a cynical sell out of the Afghan government and its people, especially women and girls. We accepted Taliban demands on the withdrawal of our forces in return for Taliban commitments on other issues that they had no intention of meeting. Violence against the Afghan government and its forces has increased. That should come as no surprise as we continue our own withdrawals while the Taliban openly disregard their own promises. A recent OIG report states that the Taliban has continued to stage attacks on US led coalition forces. In response, President Trump has announced that he will cut almost in half our remaining forces, and that he will do so in less than two months. This is not a carefully and responsibly executed reduction. It is a rout.

Our allies and our adversaries are taking note. NATO has played a significant role in Afghanistan since 2001. More than half the forces involved in Operation Resolute Support are non-US. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has warned that premature withdrawal could again turn Afghanistan into a platform “for international terrorists to plan and organize attacks on our homelands.” It is a reminder that this is not a theoretical threat. 9/11 happened. Thanks largely to our own impatience and the bad decisions it has fostered, the architects of 9/11 are on the verge of a return. The Taliban chose defeat and exile over surrendering al-Qaida. That exile has now lasted almost 20 years. The Taliban has not become kinder and gentler in the process. It is a movie we have seen before, unfortunately. After the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan, the US also made a precipitate withdrawal from the region. A vicious civil war ensued in Afghanistan followed by the rise of the Taliban. That’s how the road to 9/11 was paved.

Then there is the issue of Pakistan, a country in which I served as ambassador from 2004 to 2007. Much of the Taliban leadership had sanctuary in Pakistan, a major source of friction in our bilateral relationship. The Pakistani narrative on the Taliban ran like this: We were close allies during the anti-Soviet jihad. But once we prevailed, you went home. And once you no longer needed us, you stopped getting waivers for the Pressler Amendment which stipulates the withholding of all US economic and security assistance to any country pursuing a nuclear weapons program. So almost overnight we went from being the most allied of allies to the most sanctioned of adversaries. And we were left with a vicious Afghan civil war on our borders, threatening our own fragile stability. So when the Taliban emerged as a force that could stabilize most of Afghanistan, they had our backing. Then 9/11 happened and you're back. We are happy to see you, and we will take whatever is on offer while the taking is good. Because we know that at some point, you will be leaving again – it's what you do. So if you think we're going to turn the Taliban into a mortal enemy, you are completely crazy. Because one day you will get tired of all this and go home. We can't go home – this is home. And the Taliban will still be here, long after you are gone. There is much to challenge in this narrative from an American perspective, but it is widely believed in Pakistan. And as they watch our rush for the exits now in Afghanistan, Pakistanis feel completely vindicated in their actions.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Thornberry, our lack of strategic patience is a consistent feature in our international relations. Our allies have come to fear it while our adversaries count on it. Nowhere has this been more clear than in Afghanistan. We need to take a collective deep breath and consider our equities and our options. The cost for the US in blood and treasure is a small fraction of what it was at the height of the troop surge. I look at it as a very reasonable insurance premium against the return of the perpetrators of 9/11. This ill-considered and highly dangerous troop withdrawal should be suspended, as should any further concessions in this disastrous negotiation with the Taliban. The American people have chosen as President Elect an individual with deep experience and knowledge in international affairs, including in this region. His options should not be limited by precipitate actions now. We need a longer view, both forward and back. Looking back, in the roughly 100 year history of the modern Afghan state, Afghanistan has always needed some level of international support – this is not a new phenomenon, and as I have argued, the price tag need not be prohibitive. This is a time and a

place for longer term thinking. Beginning next month, I will be part of an initiative that seeks to do just that. The Atlantic Council and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund are launching a strategic dialog aimed at developing a long-term transatlantic framework for peace and security in Afghanistan. I continue to believe that a way forward is possible in Afghanistan that will advance our critical national security interests while upholding our most cherished American principles. Sadly, the current actions of the Administration betray both.

Finally, I want to take a moment on a very special group of Afghans who will feel the impact of whatever is decided on with respect to our commitment in Afghanistan. These are the interpreters and some others who offered critical support to our mission. Mr. Chairman, you recently received a letter from Senators Shaheen and Wicker asking that the necessary steps be taken to authorize 4000 additional visas for these brave individuals and their immediate families. There is a backlog of almost 18000 cases, and these individuals are at enormous risk.

No One Left Behind, a group dedicated to bringing our interpreters and others here to safety, calculates that about 300 of the individuals and family members have been killed while waiting for the visas we promised them and have delivered very slowly and in disappointingly small numbers. I urge this committee to do the right thing – the thing we promised. Bring these brave people here. Bring them home, to their new home. We will never regret having done so.

If we fail in this endeavor, we will damage our own core values, and our national security interests. The nature of war has changed. There is no more total war – we can be grateful for that. Conflicts of the future are going to require interpreters. And the world is watching this case. I commend this committee for its support of the Special Immigrant Visa program. I urge you to take the necessary steps to see that these brave people are able to leave danger behind and come here to us. They earned it, They paid for it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**Ryan Crocker****Career Ambassador, Retired, US Foreign Service;****Nonresident Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**

Ryan Crocker is a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Other academic appointments have included Diplomat in Residence at Princeton University, inaugural Kissinger Fellow at Yale University, the James Schlesinger Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of Virginia, and Texas A&M where he was Dean of the Bush School of Government. He was a career Foreign Service Officer who served six times as an American Ambassador: Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait and Lebanon. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, in 2009. Other recent awards include the inaugural Bancroft Award, presented by the Naval Academy in 2016. Also in 2016, he was named an Honorary Fellow of the Literary and Historical Society at University College, Dublin where he was presented the annual James Joyce Award. In February, the West Point Association of Graduates announced his selection for the 2020 Thayer Award. He is an Honorary Marine.

**DISCLOSURE FORM FOR WITNESSES  
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**INSTRUCTION TO WITNESSES:** Rule 11, clause 2(g)(5), of the Rules of the U.S. House of Representatives for the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress requires nongovernmental witnesses appearing before House committees to include in their written statements a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source of any federal contracts or grants (including subcontracts and subgrants), or contracts or payments originating with a foreign government, received during the current and two previous calendar years either by the witness or by an entity represented by the witness and related to the subject matter of the hearing. As a matter of committee policy, the House Committee on Armed Services further requires nongovernmental witnesses to disclose whether they are a fiduciary (including, but not limited to, directors, officers, advisors, or resident agents) of any organization or entity that may have an interest in the subject matter of the hearing. Committee policy also requires nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of any contracts or grants (including subcontracts and subgrants), or payments originating with any organization or entity, whether public or private, that has a material interest in the subject matter of the hearing, received during the current and two previous calendar years either by the witness or by an entity represented by the witness.

Please note that a copy of these statements, with appropriate redactions to protect the witness's personal privacy (including home address and phone number), will be made publicly available in electronic form not later than one day after the witness's appearance before the committee. Witnesses may list additional grants, contracts, or payments on additional sheets, if necessary. Please complete this form electronically.

**Hearing Date:** 11/20/2020

**Hearing Subject:** Afghanistan

**Witness name:** Ryan Crocker

**Position/Title:** Nonresident Senior Fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

**Capacity in which appearing:** (check one)

☒ Individual Representative

**If appearing in a representative capacity, name of the organization or entity represented:**

1

**Federal Contract or Grant Information:** If you or the entity you represent before the Committee on Armed Services has contracts (including subcontracts) or grants (including subgrants) with the federal government, received during the current and two previous calendar years and related to the subject matter of the hearing, please provide the following information:

**2020 NONE**

Federal grant/

contract Federal agency Dollar value Subject of contract or grant

**2019 NONE**

Federal grant/

contract Federal agency Dollar value Subject of contract or grant

**2018**

Federal grant/

contract Federal agency Dollar value Subject of contract or grant

2

**Foreign Government Contract or Payment Information:** If you or the entity you represent before the Committee on Armed Services has contracts (including subcontracts or subgrants) or payments originating from a foreign government, received during the current and two previous calendar years and related to the subject matter of the hearing, please provide the following information:

2020 NONE

Foreign contract/

payment Foreign government Dollar value Subject of contract or payment

2019 NONE

of contract or payment

Foreign contract/ payment

2018 NONE

Foreign government Dollar value Subject  
of contract or payment

Foreign contract/ payment

Foreign government Dollar value Subject



2019 NONE

Contract/grant/

payment Entity Dollar value Subject of contract, grant or payment

4

2018 NONE

Contract/grant/

payment Entity Dollar value Subject of contract, grant or payment

Ryan Crocker

11/10/2020

## **Evaluating the U.S. Military Contribution in Afghanistan**

*Prepared statement by*

***Dr. Stephen Biddle***

Adjunct Senior Fellow for Defense Policy,  
Council on Foreign Relations;  
Professor of International and Public Affairs,  
Columbia University

*Before the*

***Armed Services Committee***

United States House of Representatives  
*2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 116<sup>th</sup> Congress*

U.S. forces make a variety of contributions in Afghanistan, but the most important of these are political, not military. In military terms, the war is a slowly decaying stalemate. The U.S. presence can slow the rate of decay at the margin, but we cannot reverse it absent a major reinforcement that seems highly unlikely. This means that if the war continues, the Taliban will eventually prevail regardless of plausible variations in the size or nature of the U.S. troop commitment. Afghanistan is not Korea or Germany; even indefinite U.S. support will not preserve our Afghan ally's independence forever. But neither can the Taliban win a stalemated war quickly. Eventually they will prevail if the fighting continues, but this could require years of grinding attrition warfare as long as the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) remain funded and in the field. This gives us an opportunity, and it gives both sides an incentive, to negotiate a compromise settlement in the meantime. For us, this averts eventual defeat; for the Taliban, it averts many more years of costly attrition. Such a settlement will require painful compromise, but it is the only plausible alternative to outright failure and thus U.S. strategy should focus on facilitating successful negotiations. This in turn implies that the most important contribution U.S. forces can make is to help enable successful talks. And the most important way U.S. forces can do this is as a bargaining chip – our forces perform many missions, but it is their presence per se that is now most important. The military capabilities they provide are now secondary to their political role as potential leverage for negotiating a compromise settlement to the war. To maximize that leverage, we should avoid further unilateral drawdowns in the absence of a settlement. We should be prepared to withdraw completely, but only in exchange for an acceptable deal to end the war.

*The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained herein are the sole responsibility of the author.*

### Stalemate

The Operation Resolute Support command stopped issuing regular updates on ANDSF casualties and the span of Taliban and GiRoA (the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) control in the country in 2018. But violence has clearly risen since then. And the trends in official data prior to the blackout were not favorable. From May 2016 through October 2018, the fraction of Afghan districts controlled by the government fell from 66 to 54 percent; the fraction of the Afghan population living in government-controlled districts fell from 69 to 64 percent over roughly the same interval. The Foundation for the Defense of Democracy has estimated that a wave of Taliban offensives following the beginning of U.S.-Taliban talks in August 2018 then caused a sharper decline in government control to about 35 percent of districts and 48 percent of population by June 2019.

Since then, while violence has continued to rise, the rate of decline in GiRoA control appears to have slowed again after a short-term acceleration that roughly paralleled the beginning of bilateral negotiations, with perhaps 33 percent of districts and 46 percent of the population now remaining in government control. And the decline in government control has not been accompanied by a proportionate increase in Taliban control: most areas where the GiRoA has lost control are now contested, not Taliban controlled.

Nor have the Taliban proven able to sustain command of any major urban area in the country. The Taliban can mount bombings and seize buildings temporarily even in downtown Kabul, and occasional brief sallies can threaten cities such as Konduz. But in no case have they been able to retain control for more than a few hours or days. None of these attacks have catalyzed broader popular uprisings. And few of the attackers have survived to continue sustained operations in city centers afterwards.

Overall, this pattern suggests a slowly decaying long term stalemate that neither side can break militarily at acceptable cost any time soon. The GiRoA clearly cannot: its span of control has been shrinking, not growing, since the U.S. drawdown began in 2011. But neither can the Taliban: the recent slowing of their rate of territorial expansion is suggestive of an inability to sustain indefinitely the casualty rate they suffered in their 2019 offensives, coupled with the increasing difficulty of expanding their influence into more strongly-held districts after taking easier, lower-hanging fruit in 2019.

Of course this could change dramatically if the ANDSF leaves the field. Government casualties have been very high, and U.S. commanders have periodically voiced concern with the morale of government troops and their ability to continue to replace losses with continued recruitment. If losses continue to increase, eventually the institution will break – it would be risky to assume that the ANDSF can sustain itself indefinitely in the face of ongoing heavy casualties and a morale-sapping gradual loss of territory with the associated gradual shrinkage of the population base the ANDSF needs for recruitment. This is not an institution that can continue this way forever.

Yet there are few indications that the stalemate will end soon. So far, the ANDSF is holding together, perhaps aided in this by a weak civilian economy that makes even dangerous military employment attractive to many. And the rate of Taliban expansion, while progressive, has been slow: it is now almost a decade since the U.S. began withdrawing our troops, yet after nine years of continuous warfare the Taliban still control less than 20 percent of the country's population. At this rate, it will be a very long time before they march into Kabul.

### Why Can't We Do Better?

Though defeat is thus unlikely in the near term, this is still a deeply unsatisfying prognosis for a war in which the United States has invested so much. How can the prospects be so bleak? The Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction reports that we have now spent more than \$80 billion to build an ANDSF that now fields more than 280,000 combatants; how can continued U.S. military support not enable this force to defeat a Taliban insurgency a fraction of its size, or even to hold its own indefinitely?

The problem is not a lack of some critical U.S. enabling capability, or a failure to advise ANDSF forces at a low-enough level of command, or an insufficiency of U.S. funding. More U.S. airstrikes, or more U.S. intelligence cooperation, or advising at the battalion level, or increased pay or equipment for the ANDSF would all surely help; they would all tend to reduce at the margin the pace of decay in Afghan government control. But none will enable a decisive military victory. And none are even likely to reverse the key trend lines.

This is because the underlying problem with the ANDSF is much deeper, and derives ultimately from the structure of the political system in which Afghan forces are embedded. In weakly institutionalized political systems like Afghanistan's, state militaries are often riven with corruption that saps combat motivation, undermines equipment availability, and interferes with the development of technical military expertise. Without a judicial system or legislature that can adjudicate conflict among armed elites, regimes in places like Afghanistan commonly rely on an internal balance of power to create political order and prevent factionalism from spilling over into armed violence between warlord militias. In such settings, the primary purpose of the army and police is not to defend the borders or defeat an insurgency – it is to maintain this internal balance within the political elite. And classically, to do this requires a mixture of cronyism and corruption in the armed forces. Corruption buys the loyalty of the largest armed militia in the country: the army. Cronyism reinforces the armed forces' loyalty by installing as senior commanders not trained technocrats but relatives, co-ethnics, political supporters, or representatives of allied political factions. Together such techniques bind the armed forces to the civilian leadership; just as important, they limit the threat a powerful, technically proficient, politically disinterested army would pose to every other armed body in the country – most of which are in the hands of warlords and other elites. If an army like Afghanistan's really did professionalize by replacing cronies with technocrats, rooting out corruption, and promoting based on merit rather than political alignment, this would pose an existential threat to dozens of warlord militias who now extract resources from society for the benefit of their followers and see this as their due given the strength of their armed following. Even worse, the first wave of new military technocrats would threaten their own corrupt, cronyist superiors in the army itself. In a political system where order is the product of the internal balance of armed power and not judicial or legislative institutions, the very process of reform itself is dangerously destabilizing. And the result is classically a military that is actually very good at its primary purpose – maintaining internal political stability among armed elites – but very poor at what Americans mistakenly suppose is its purpose: defeating an insurgency.

The unsurprising result of this is that U.S. training, advising, and assistance has deeply disappointing effects in the absence of a large-scale U.S. ground combat presence. U.S. equipment and logistical support is commonly redirected into the black market for the financial benefit of officers; training is used as a form of largesse to reward loyalists; U.S. financial aid underwrites ghost soldiers who exist on the payroll but not in the field. There are exceptions: elite ANDSF commando units too small to be a threat to the internal balance of power, for example, can be allowed to professionalize and often perform well in combat. Such units have often taken the lead in defeating Taliban sorties into cities such as Konduz. But

the ANDSF as a whole is not a force that can defeat an entrenched insurgency – and it will not become one with the right U.S. advisers or more air strikes or a bit more U.S. aid. Against an outnumbered insurgency, a quarter-million-strong ANDSF can probably sustain today's slowly-decaying stalemate for years to come – but we should not expect it to do much more, regardless of the way we configure today's small U.S. military presence.

#### **What Can U.S. Forces Do?**

In this context, what good can U.S. forces do? What do they contribute if they cannot transform the ANDSF into a force that can defeat the Taliban? Their military contribution is not irrelevant even so. But their political, rather than military, role is now what matters most.

Militarily, a small U.S. presence can contribute a variety of capabilities, including air strikes, training, advising, surveillance, and counter-terrorist operations. U.S. air strikes, in particular, offer valuable firepower for defending threatened ANDSF troops and protecting American personnel. U.S. training and advising can help improve Afghan proficiency in planning and executing combat missions. U.S. airborne surveillance and other intelligence assets can provide warning of attack and assist Afghan forces in responding. U.S. special forces and air power can kill or capture terrorist leaders, and drive others into hiding in ways that reduce their lethality. These are helpful capabilities, and surely improve the military prognosis at the margin.

But there is only so much that a tiny U.S. presence can accomplish militarily. The United States deployed almost 100,000 troops in Afghanistan in 2011, alongside more than 320,000 Afghan soldiers and police. This massive presence reversed once-negative security trends, but even it could not promptly defeat the Taliban and end the war. The U.S. presence is now less than ten percent of this, and it supports an ANDSF that is also smaller than its 2011 strength. If 100,000 U.S. troops could make only slow progress, then it is hard to imagine how fewer than 10,000 could make a decisive military difference against an insurgency that is probably stronger now than it was then.

Nor is a small U.S. presence likely to catalyze better performance from the ANDSF today than our larger presence could for the ANDSF of 2011. The limiter on ANDSF military effectiveness is not a lack of close air support, or a shortage of American officers to help plan patrol routes or to run rifle ranges on training grounds. The central issue here is the corruption and cronyism that suffuses the ANDSF and which stems from deep, structural features of the Afghan political system and its weak institutions for adjudicating conflict between armed elites. Neither U.S. airstrikes nor a tiny U.S. training and advising force are going to affect this to any meaningful degree. In principle, conditionality in assistance programs can create incentives for reform; conditionality was rare in 2011, but could be made more central to our policy going forward.\* But the incentives conditionality can create are rarely enough to outweigh the domestic pressures on the indigenous officer corps, and for conditionality to transform an institution like the ANDSF would require sticks and carrots far larger than anything plausibly on offer from the United States in today's environment. The ANDSF is very unlikely to defeat the Taliban, and we have little to no prospect for changing this through training and advising.

The real value of the U.S. presence is instead in its political role. This role has several dimensions. First, it signals to Afghans an ongoing U.S. commitment. Afghan expectations for U.S. engagement are central to

\* On conditionality in this context, see, esp., Stephen Biddle, Julia MacDonald and Ryan Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Utility of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Winter 2018), pp. 89-142; Biddle, "Policy Implications for the United States," in David Lake and Eli Berman, eds., *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 264-287.

the country's political stability and its ability to negotiate an acceptable settlement to the war. Many Afghans assume that if the U.S. disengages, the Kabul government will collapse and the Taliban will take over. This is not an unreasonable expectation, whatever one thinks of the military value of the U.S. troops. The lions share of the funds needed to keep the ANDSF in the field come from the U.S. Treasury (the ANDSF operating budget in FY 2013 was twice the GIRA's entire domestic revenue). If the United States withdraws this funding, the ANDSF would collapse and the Taliban then really could overrun the capital quickly. Among the indicators Afghans use to assess this prospect is the U.S. troop presence: reinforcements signal reassurance, whereas withdrawals imply a weakening of U.S. resolve, a diminished prospect for stable funding of Afghan security forces, and a greater risk of a Taliban takeover. Fears of a government collapse undermine both Afghan political stability generally and, in particular, the Afghan government's ability to persuade elites to accept sacrifices in a compromise settlement. Political cooperation among Afghan power brokers is always tenuous – this is why internal balancing is so important for stability in such systems. But cooperation is much harder when all expect an imminent collapse of the state: this gives all an incentive to steal what they can at the expense of the others while they still have the opportunity.<sup>22</sup> A settlement with the Taliban will require painful compromise, and will take years to negotiate if it is possible at all – if Afghan elites decide that the U.S. is leaving, the resulting incentive for near-term profiteering would hamstring the government's ability to wring cooperation from fractious elites for the sake of a long-term future that would look very uncertain indeed.

Second, the U.S. troop presence plays a similar signaling role for at least some Americans. With American troops on the ground, it is easier for some to justify spending the multiple billions of U.S. dollars needed to keep Afghan troops in the field alongside them. There is no particular military logic that would justify withdrawing ANDSF funding simply because U.S. troops leave Afghanistan; on the contrary, it is vastly cheaper to fund Afghan soldiers than American ones. (In fact, the entire ANDSF can be funded for the cost of maintaining a few thousand U.S. troops in the war zone.) Yet it is likely that a complete withdrawal would signal to at least some American citizens that the war is over and the cause is no longer important enough to warrant American financial sacrifice.

The most important political function of the U.S. troop presence, however, is its role in the ongoing negotiations to end the war. A negotiated settlement is the only plausible alternative to eventual defeat, hence an acceptable settlement must be our strategic priority. Successful negotiations, however, require bargaining leverage, and we now have only two chief sources of such leverage remaining: the promise of post-settlement aid, and the foreign troop presence. The Taliban want us out – this has been among their most consistent and oft-expressed aims. In a negotiation where we are radically leverage-poor, troop withdrawal is thus a crucial bargaining chip. This political role as a bargaining chip for negotiation is now the most important contribution U.S. forces make to the war.

---

<sup>22</sup> This dynamic is analogous to the Stag Hunt problem in game theory. In the Stag Hunt game, if each member of a stone age hunting party cooperates and holds their position, they can encircle and kill a stag, enabling the whole village to eat well. If anyone defects, however, and departs to hunt a rabbit on their own, the defector gets a rabbit (less food than a stag but enough to survive) but the others all starve to death when the stag escapes. There are two equilibrium solutions to the game. If all trust the others, then cooperation is in everyone's self interest and the village gets a stag. But if *anyone* distrusts anyone else, *everyone's* best choice is to defect. In today's Afghanistan, a game theorist would expect mutually distrustful warlords to seek the equivalent of assured rabbits in accelerated resource extraction, rather than the equivalent of a risky prospect of a stag in the form of long-term mutual cooperation to create a stable, economically developed Afghanistan in the aftermath of an early U.S. withdrawal. On the Stag Hunt game, see, e.g., Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167-214; Kenneth Oye, "Explaining Cooperation under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies," in Kenneth Oye, ed., *Cooperation under Anarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 1-24; Dipali Mukhopadhyay, "The Afghan Stag Hunt," *lawfare*, February 25, 2019 (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/afghan-stag-hunt>).

The bilateral U.S.-Taliban agreement of February 2020 appeared to give away this leverage: the agreement promised a total foreign troop withdrawal by April 2021, in exchange for very little. This agreement has been described by some (including the Afghan government) as a sellout for this reason, and a strong case can be made for this view. But the Taliban did make some, modest, promises in return: they agreed to begin talks with the GfRoA on March 10, 2020, to prevent any of their members or any members of al Qaeda from using Afghan soil to threaten the United States or its allies, and to prevent any anti-American terrorist group from recruiting, training, or fundraising in Afghanistan. It is far from clear that these terms have been met. Talks did not begin on March 10. And many U.S. officials have argued that the Taliban continue to cooperate with al Qaeda. These apparent violations offer potential grounds for withholding the promised U.S. withdrawal, and reestablishing its potential as a source of leverage for the ongoing talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

It is in our interest to claw back as much of this leverage as possible. But this requires not just an interpretation of the February agreement to permit this. It also requires that the U.S. avoid any further promises of troop withdrawals until and unless we receive compensating compromises from the Taliban in the ongoing talks – whether the actual, concrete military capabilities these troops provide are militarily important or not.

#### **Is a Settlement Possible?**

But is an acceptable settlement possible anyway? Many think not. And if not, then it merely wastes money and lives to keep several thousand troops in a war zone just to pursue fruitless talks. Certainly there are many barriers to a successful negotiation here, and reasonable people could certainly argue that the prospects are too dim to warrant the investment. To date, the talks have made very little progress, and this lack of movement is an important argument against further sacrifice.

Yet there are also reasons to think the prospects may not yet be hopeless. And the scale of continued sacrifice needed to take a chance on a possible settlement is now so much smaller than those the United States invested at the war's peak that a case can still be made for taking the chance.

This is because a rational Taliban leadership has incentives to negotiate a settlement even if they can eventually win the war without a deal. Winning a long war is expensive even for the winner. If current trends continue, a fight to the finish on the battlefield could take another decade or more to conclude. While the Taliban would probably emerge the victor in the end, this would only be after many more years of grinding attrition warfare that imposes heavy costs on them as well as the government, that further impoverishes the country they would inherit, and that increases the odds of predation by regional neighbors who would have growing incentives to intervene in the war to protect their own interests. A near term settlement would avert all of these costs, and this is surely worth something to the Taliban. That opens the possibility of a bargaining space wherein mutual compromise could leave both the Taliban, and the government, better off than if the Taliban fights this out to a finish instead.

Another decade of war also exposes the Taliban leadership to another decade of U.S. counter-leadership targeting. These strikes have complex pros and cons, but one clear upside is that they reduce the benefits of protraction for the Taliban: with every passing year, every Taliban leader incurs some risk of being killed in a U.S. drone strike or SOF raid. These strikes have a track record of killing multiple senior leaders in the Taliban and al Qaeda, including not just bin Laden but also Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who led the Taliban from July 2015 until May 2016 when he was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan. An earlier end to the war ends this ongoing threat of death in similar attacks.

Another decade of war also means another decade of exile for the Taliban leadership. Afghans are famously nationalist, and Afghan-Pakistani rivalry is old and deep – yet the Taliban leadership has mostly been living as expatriates in Pakistan for almost 20 years now. They have been raising children in Pakistan, and living under surveillance by Pakistani intelligence, perhaps with Pakistani restrictions on their movements and activities. This surely grates on them, and they presumably want to go home.

And simply the fact that the Taliban are now negotiating with hated Westerners and a government their allies see as illegitimate poses risks to them in continued protracted warfare. Negotiations in civil warfare pose important political risks to insurgents – schism and factional conflict are common when splinter groups reject talks. The Taliban now face violent opposition from the Islamic State, which opposes negotiation. Progress in negotiation leading to settlement would allow the Taliban to make quiet common cause with the government and even the United States against this rival; by contrast, another decade of chronic warfare while fruitless talks drag on would expose the Taliban to a potentially growing threat from groups even more extreme than themselves, who view the Taliban as sellouts simply by virtue of Taliban participation in the talks.

None of this means the Taliban will accept whatever terms we offer – they are certainly not going to sign a surrender instrument in Doha. We will have to offer important concessions to get a deal. But it may be possible to get a deal in which both sides compromise to at least some degree. The cost to the Taliban of fighting the war out to a finish means there may be some set of terms they would prefer to continued fighting as a way of ending the war sooner. And this makes it potentially worthwhile for the United States to incur some degree of sacrifice – and especially, to consider leaving the remaining U.S. troops in place – as a means of moving those terms in our favor and reaching an acceptable settlement.

#### **Where From Here?**

This analysis suggests two key implications for the future of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

First, we should avoid any further unilateral troop withdrawals. If we want a negotiated settlement on acceptable terms then we will need to husband our limited leverage carefully. The U.S. troop presence is a major fraction of that leverage, hence it should be used strategically as a tool to further our negotiating aims. Unrequited unilateral withdrawals both reduce the value of the remaining presence as a negotiating incentive and encourage the Taliban to withhold further concessions and wait to see whether we will simply give them for free the rest of what they want. We should make it clear that any further drawdowns will require verifiable Taliban concessions.

The February bilateral agreement constrains our freedom of action on this, but some maneuver room remains and we should try to use it. We cannot simply ignore our February commitment, mistaken though it was. If we lose our credibility as a negotiating partner then our ability to facilitate a Taliban-GIRoA deal will be undermined, hence we must demonstrate that we bargain in good faith. But Taliban failure to observe the February terms opens some space for renegotiation, and we should take advantage of this to press for as much real progress as possible in the Taliban-GIRoA talks before we withdraw any more troops.

Second, we should be prepared to withdraw the entire U.S. presence – including all U.S. counterterrorism forces in the country – if the Taliban does make meaningful concessions toward a final settlement of the war in exchange. The U.S. presence is not an end in itself, and its preservation in perpetuity is not a vital U.S. national security interest. A negotiated end to the war would remove the military rationale for much of today's presence (though we should offer to maintain a training mission if a post-settlement Afghan

government requests this as a means of protecting the national borders). The counterterrorism (CT) mission would remain, but it is more important to end the war than to retain a handful of small CT bases in Afghanistan. Defeat in the war would create a far larger terrorism threat to the United States and our allies than a total withdrawal in the context of a negotiated settlement of the war. We should be willing to accept the latter to avert the former.

**Dr. Stephen Biddle** is Professor of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, and Adjunct Senior Fellow for Defense Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. He has served on the Defense Department's Defense Policy Board, on General David Petraeus' Joint Strategic Assessment Team in Baghdad in 2007, as a Senior Advisor to the Central Command Assessment Team in Washington in 2008-9, as a member of General Stanley McChrystal's Initial Strategic Assessment Team in Kabul in 2009, and on a variety of other government advisory panels and analytical teams. He lectures regularly at the U.S. Army War College and other military schools, and has presented testimony before congressional committees on issues relating to the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria; force planning; conventional net assessment; and European arms control. His book *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton University Press, 2004) won four prizes, including the Council on Foreign Relations Arthur Ross Award Silver Medal for 2005, and the 2005 Huntington Prize from the Harvard University Olin Institute for Strategic Studies. His other publications include articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *International Security*, *Survival*, *The Journal of Politics*, *Security Studies*, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *The New Republic*, *The American Interest*, *The National Interest*, *Orbis*, *The Washington Quarterly*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, *Defense Analysis*, *Joint Force Quarterly*, and *Military Operations Research*; shorter pieces on military topics in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and other news outlets; various chapters in edited volumes; and 31 NATO and U.S. government sponsored reports and monographs. He has held the Elihu Root chair in military studies at the U.S. Army War College, the Roger Hertog Senior Fellowship at the Council on Foreign Relations, and other teaching and research positions at George Washington University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), and Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (BCSIA). He co-directs the Columbia University Summer Workshop on the Analysis of Military Operations and Strategy (SWAMOS), and his research has won Barchi, Rist, and Impact Prizes from the Military Operations Research Society. He was awarded the U.S. Army Superior Civilian Service Medal in 2003 and again in 2006, and was presented with the US Army Commander's Award for Public Service in Baghdad in 2007. He holds AB (1981), MPP (1985), and Ph.D. (Public Policy, 1992) degrees, all from Harvard University.

**DISCLOSURE FORM FOR WITNESSES  
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**INSTRUCTION TO WITNESSES:** Rule 11, clause 2(g)(5), of the Rules of the U.S. House of Representatives for the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress requires nongovernmental witnesses appearing before House committees to include in their written statements a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source of any federal contracts or grants (including subcontracts and subgrants), or contracts or payments originating with a foreign government, received during the current and two previous calendar years either by the witness or by an entity represented by the witness and related to the subject matter of the hearing. As a matter of committee policy, the House Committee on Armed Services further requires nongovernmental witnesses to disclose whether they are a fiduciary (including, but not limited to, directors, officers, advisors, or resident agents) of any organization or entity that may have an interest in the subject matter of the hearing. Committee policy also requires nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of any contracts or grants (including subcontracts and subgrants), or payments originating with any organization or entity, whether public or private, that has a material interest in the subject matter of the hearing, received during the current and two previous calendar years either by the witness or by an entity represented by the witness.

Please note that a copy of these statements, with appropriate redactions to protect the witness's personal privacy (including home address and phone number), will be made publicly available in electronic form not later than one day after the witness's appearance before the committee. Witnesses may list additional grants, contracts, or payments on additional sheets, if necessary. Please complete this form electronically.

**Hearing Date:** November 20, 2020

**Hearing Subject:**

Afghanistan

**Witness name:** Stephen Biddle

**Position/Title:** Professor of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University

**Capacity in which appearing:** (check one)

☒ Individual ☐ Representative

**If appearing in a representative capacity, name of the organization or entity represented:**

**Federal Contract or Grant Information:** If you or the entity you represent before the Committee on Armed Services has contracts (including subcontracts) or grants (including subgrants) with the federal government, received during the current and two previous calendar years and related to the subject matter of the hearing, please provide the following information:

**2020**

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant
N00014-19-1-2466	Dept. of Defense	\$990,998	Minerva grant to Columbia University for research
			on Empirical Analysis for Responding to Great Power Challenges
			for which I am principal investigator, 2019-2022
	US Army War College	under \$10,000	lecturing

**2019**

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant
N00014-19-1-2466	Dept. of Defense	\$990,998	Minerva grant to Columbia University for research
			on Empirical Analysis for Responding to Great Power Challenges
			for which I am principal investigator, 2019-2022
	US Army War College	under \$10,000	lecturing

**2018**

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant
	US Army War College	under \$10,000	lecturing

**Foreign Government Contract or Payment Information:** If you or the entity you represent before the Committee on Armed Services has contracts (including subcontracts or subgrants) or payments originating from a foreign government, received during the current and two previous calendar years and related to the subject matter of the hearing, please provide the following information:

**2020**

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract or payment
none			

**2019**

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract or payment
none			

**2018**

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract or payment
none			

**Fiduciary Relationships:** If you are a fiduciary of any organization or entity that may have an interest in the subject matter of the hearing, please provide the following information:

Organization or entity	Brief description of the fiduciary relationship
none	

**Organization or Entity Contract, Grant or Payment Information:** If you or the entity you represent before the Committee on Armed Services has contracts or grants (including subcontracts or subgrants) or payments originating from an organization or entity, whether public or private, that has a material interest in the subject matter of the hearing, received during the current and two previous calendar years, please provide the following information:

**2020**

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant or payment
none			

**2019**

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant or payment
none			

2018

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant or payment
none			

**Statement before the  
House Armed Services Committee**

***“War and Peace in Afghanistan.”***

A Testimony by:

**Seth G. Jones**

Harold Brown Chair and Director of Transnational Threats, CSIS

**November 20, 2020**

**2118 Rayburn Office Building**

### War and Peace in Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Thornberry, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House Armed Services Committee on “The U.S. Military Mission in Afghanistan and Implications of the Peace Process on U.S. Involvement.” With the transition to a Biden Administration, this is an important subject and an opportune time to discuss a way forward in Afghanistan. U.S. national security interests have evolved since 9/11. The United States is engaged in competition with countries like China and Russia, and it has to deal with the implications of Covid-19, a struggling U.S. and global economy, and numerous other national security issues. Nevertheless, the United States still has some interests in Afghanistan, such as preventing the country from becoming a sanctuary for international terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Khorasan Province; averting regional instability as Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and India compete for influence in Afghanistan; and minimizing the likelihood of a major humanitarian crisis.

U.S. policy options in Afghanistan are sub-optimal. But absent a peace deal, the further withdrawal of U.S. forces—as highlighted in the November 17, 2020, announcement to cut U.S. forces from 4,500 to 2,500 troops—will likely shift the balance-of-power in favor of the Taliban, other militant groups like al-Qaeda, and the Taliban’s outside supporters in Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and other countries. The U.S. decision was essentially a victory for the Taliban. The United States is withdrawing forces not because of successful peace talks—but in spite of them. The peace talks have stalled in Doha, Qatar. In addition, the United States did not coordinate in any meaningful way with its NATO allies, who have served alongside U.S. forces in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. The drawdown will impact the U.S.’s ability to train, advise, and assist Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in the middle of a war against the Taliban, an Islamic militant group whose goal is to establish an extreme Islamic Emirate in the country.

The rest of this testimony is divided into several sections. The first provides an overview of U.S. interests in Afghanistan, which have evolved over the past two decades. The second section highlights challenges with the current peace negotiations. The third examines the state of the war. The fourth section outlines implications for the United States.

#### I. U.S. Interests in Afghanistan and South Asia

The United States has more important national security priorities than Afghanistan—including competing with a rising China and an aggressive Russia. But it still has some interests in Afghanistan and South Asia, a region that includes three of the U.S.’s main competitors—China, Russia, and Iran.

First, al-Qaeda is still located in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, though it has been weakened by persistent U.S. strikes. Al-Qaeda’s local affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, continues

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of this testimony draws on the author’s publication, *A Failed Afghan Peace Deal: Contingency Planning Memorandum No. 37* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, July 1, 2020). Seth G. Jones holds the Harold Brown Chair, is director of the Transnational Threats Project, and is a senior adviser to the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He is the author of *In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan* (W.W. Norton).

to support the Taliban's insurgency and retains close links with senior and lower-level Taliban leaders. As a 2020 United Nations report concluded, "Relations between the Taliban, especially the Haqqani Network, and Al-Qaida remain close, based on friendship, a history of shared struggle, ideological sympathy and intermarriage."<sup>2</sup> A successful Taliban-led insurgency would likely allow al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups—such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Islamic State Khorasan—to increase their presence in Afghanistan.

Second, a burgeoning war could increase regional instability as India, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia support a mix of Afghan central government forces, substate militias, and insurgent groups. In addition, an intensified war—particularly if the United States withdrew its military forces without a peace deal—would likely increase the already tense balance-of-power competition between India and Pakistan. Tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad have risen recently, in part following the Indian government's 2019 decision to revoke Kashmir's autonomy under Article 370 of the Indian constitution and at least temporarily impose tight security measures across the Kashmir Valley.

Third, the United States has an interest in preventing a worsening humanitarian crisis. Pakistan, in particular, would likely experience increasing violence and refugee flows if the war in Afghanistan spills over its border, as it did in the 1980s and 1990s. A precipitous U.S. withdrawal without a peace settlement would almost certainly increase refugee flows to neighboring countries and other regions, such as Europe. With almost 2.5 million registered refugees, Afghanistan already has the second-largest refugee population in the world behind Syria, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.<sup>3</sup>

Fourth, a U.S. military departure from Afghanistan would likely foster a perception, however misplaced, that the United States is not a reliable ally. Al-Qaeda and other jihadists would likely view a withdrawal of U.S. military forces as their most important victory since the departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989.

## II. The Challenges of Peace Talks

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement intended to be a first step toward an intra-Afghan peace deal. Important provisions of the deal included a U.S. commitment to eventually withdraw all U.S. and foreign troops from Afghanistan, a Taliban pledge to prevent al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups from using Afghan territory to threaten the United States and its partners, and a promise by both sides to support intra-Afghan peace negotiations. There were notable problems with the agreement, such as its failure to include the Afghan government in the negotiations. It was an attempt to make the best of a bad situation. In addition, peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban formally began on September 15, 2020, in Doha, Qatar.

<sup>2</sup> "Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan," United Nations Security Council, S/2020/415, May 27, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> "Afghanistan," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed November 18, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/afghanistan.html>

A peace agreement that prevents Afghanistan from once again becoming a haven for international terrorism would allow the United States to withdraw its forces and reduce its security and development assistance, which exceeded \$800 billion between 2001 and 2019.<sup>4</sup> Achieving an acceptable peace agreement, however, will not be easy. Significant issues still need to be resolved. Examples include the possibility of future elections, political power-sharing arrangements (including at the national, provincial, and district levels), changes to the Afghan constitution, the role of Islam, women's rights, and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration.

Peace talks between the Afghan government and Taliban have stalled—and never really got going. It is unclear whether the Taliban is serious about reaching a deal or whether its leaders are negotiating simply to get U.S. troops to withdraw so that Taliban forces can overthrow the Afghan government. The Taliban—whose leadership council (or Rahbari Shura) remains in Pakistan with support from the government's premier spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate—has an extreme ideology rooted in the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>5</sup> Taliban leaders support the creation of a government by sharia (Islamic law) and the establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Some Taliban leaders claim they have moderated their views on some issues, such as the education of girls.<sup>7</sup> But the Taliban has a well-documented record of repression, intolerance, and human rights abuses against aid workers, women, and ethnic minorities.<sup>8</sup>

In negotiating a peace deal, the Taliban could also face difficulties convincing skeptics in the Rahbari Shura, such as Abdul Qayyum Zakir, Mullah Ibrahim Sadar, Mullah Yaqub, and even leader Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada. Lower-level Taliban commanders or partner groups like al-Qaeda could also oppose a deal or object to how one is implemented.

Given these challenges, the risk of the peace process collapsing or stalling indefinitely is significant. After all, a peace agreement or stalemate has occurred in only one quarter of insurgencies since World War II, while three quarters of insurgencies ended because the government or insurgents won on the battlefield.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Cost estimates are from "Afghanistan War: What Has the Conflict Cost the United States?" BBC, February 28, 2020. Estimates on the number of U.S. military deaths come from "Casualty Status," U.S. Department of Defense, September 21, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> On the Taliban's religious and other views, see the primary source Taliban documents in Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, eds., *The Taliban Reader: War, Islam and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> On the importance of an Islamic Emirate, see, for example, "Weekly Comment," Voice of Jihad, September 19, 2020, available at "Afghan Taliban Alleges Islamic Governance is Desired by All Afghans, Not Just Itself," SITE Intelligence Group, September 21, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> See the primary source interviews with the Taliban in Clarissa Ward, Najibullah Quraishi, and Salma Abdelaziz, "36 Hours with the Taliban," CNN, February 2019; *Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, August 11, 2020), p. 8; Sirajuddin Haqqani, "What We, the Taliban, Want," *New York Times*, February 20, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, "You Have No Right to Complain": *Education, Social Restrictions, and Justice in Taliban-Held Afghanistan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, June 30, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> The data comes from Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 9.

### III. The State of the War

The war in Afghanistan is one of nearly 200 insurgencies since World War II. Based on both the Taliban and Afghan government's need to mobilize the local population and govern territory, there are several indicators that provide a useful gauge of the war today. These indicators—population control, local support, and levels of violence—suggest that the war is roughly a stalemate. But further U.S. and international military withdrawals will likely shift the military balance-of-power in the Taliban's favor.

**A. Population Control or Influence:** The first indicator is changes over time in population control or influence.<sup>10</sup> Data on territorial control—including control of districts—is less helpful, since it can't distinguish between unpopulated mountain ranges or deserts and heavily-populated urban areas. Yet the Taliban gains have been almost entirely in rural areas of the country, where it enjoys some support among Afghans that have become disillusioned with the Afghan government, endorse the Taliban's religious zealotry, need a job, or support a tribe or community allied with the Taliban. The Taliban controls no major urban areas. While the Islamic State swept through Iraq in 2014, seizing key cities like Mosul, Fallujah, and Ramadi, the Taliban has done nothing of the sort in Afghanistan. In fact, the number of districts under Taliban control slightly decreased between 2019 and mid-2020.<sup>11</sup>

After briefly seizing the northern city of Kunduz in September 2015, the Taliban quickly lost control of it within days. In 2017, the Taliban failed to mount a sustained threat against any provincial capital and instead engaged in high-profile attacks in Kabul and other populated areas. Even in Helmand Province, where the Taliban have made advances in rural areas, local commanders have repeatedly failed to seize and hold such cities as Lashkar Gah. In 2018, the Taliban temporarily seized the eastern city of Ghazni, though again failed to hold it. Still, Taliban and other insurgent groups have succeeded in overrunning Afghan checkpoints, destroying military bases, and—at least temporarily—seizing district centers. There are also concerns that cities like Kandahar will face a growing threat as the U.S. withdraws its military forces. As Hayatullah, a street vendor in Kandahar city, remarked in November 2020: “The city condition is bad, people are worried, the fighting is on-going in several directions of the city and the districts are falling,” he said. “We are afraid that Americans leaving will only intensify it.”<sup>12</sup>

**B. Local Support:** A second set of indicators includes analyzing changes over time in local support since both the government and Taliban need to hold and expand territorial control. The Taliban's ideology may be amenable to some Afghans, such as those living in conservative rural pockets of the south and east. But it is generally too extreme for many Afghans who adhere to a much less conservative form of Islam that permits most modern technology, sports, elections, and some women's rights. The Taliban and its ideology are deeply unpopular, even compared to the current government and its security forces. The number of Afghans with sympathy for the Taliban

<sup>10</sup> I use “control or influence” since neither the government nor insurgents controls populations 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in all areas. In some cases, they rely on allies to coerce or co-opt locals, which is closer to “influencing” a village or city than “controlling” it.

<sup>11</sup> “Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019),” p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Najim Rahim, and Fatima Faizi, “Americans Troops are Packing Up, Ready or Not,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2020.

has significantly declined over the past decade, according to data from the Asia Foundation.<sup>13</sup> Most support for the Taliban is concentrated in parts of southern, eastern, and western Afghanistan.

**C. Levels of Violence:** Violence data is not a particularly useful outcome measure since it does not explain how—if at all—violence translates into control or influence. Indeed, low levels of violence in some areas may indicate Afghan government or Taliban control, while high levels may indicate contested areas where the government and insurgents are fighting to control territory. But since violence impacts the local population, data over time is still useful to track. In 2020, the Taliban have conducted attacks in urban and rural areas across the country, including cities like Kabul, Kunduz, and Kandahar.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Taliban fighters orchestrated attacks against Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police fixed positions, established checkpoints on major highways, and overrun district centers like Yamgan District in Badakhshan Province in March 2020.<sup>15</sup> The Taliban are responsible for most civilian casualties, primarily because of their use of improvised explosive devices.<sup>16</sup>

The Afghan war is, at best, a draw today. But further U.S. withdrawals will continue to shift the balance-of-power in favor of the Taliban, its partner militant groups, and state backers such as Pakistan, Russia, and Iran. Afghanistan would likely become a sanctuary for international terrorist groups. In addition, the United States cannot focus solely on counterterrorism. Terrorism and insurgency are deeply intertwined in Afghanistan. The Taliban is an active host for al-Qaeda and other groups, so Taliban battlefield successes in the insurgency undermine the U.S.'s counterterrorism interests.

#### IV. Implications for the United States

The U.S.'s announcement on November 17, 2020, to cut U.S. forces in Afghanistan by nearly half—from 4,500 to 2,500 troops—was problematic in several ways. First, it did not occur because of successful peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban—but in spite of them. The Taliban has dragged its feet on negotiations in Qatar, which have stalled, and now appears to be rewarded with a declining U.S. footprint. The U.S. military presence should be a function, in part, of conditions on the ground and the outcome of negotiations. Second, the United States did not coordinate in any significant way with its NATO allies, who have served with the United States in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. A frustrated NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, lamented after the U.S. announcement: “The price for leaving too soon or in an uncoordinated way could be very high. Afghanistan risks becoming once again a platform for international terrorists to plan and organize attacks on our homelands. And ISIS could rebuild in Afghanistan the terror caliphate it lost in Syria and Iraq.”<sup>17</sup> Third, the U.S. drawdown impacts its ability to train, advise, and assist Afghan National Defense and Security Forces in the middle of a war—particularly at

<sup>13</sup> Asia Foundation, *A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2019* (Kabul: Asia Foundation, 2019), pp. 68-70.

<sup>14</sup> On Taliban attacks in Afghan cities and other locations, see the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).

<sup>15</sup> *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, June 2020), pp. 18-19.

<sup>16</sup> *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Midyear Report: 1 January-30 June 2020* (Kabul: United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, “Pentagon Details Plan to Withdraw Troops,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2020.

the Army Corps and Afghan Air Force regional locations. Fourth, a reduced U.S. military footprint impacts U.S. intelligence collection efforts in Afghanistan, especially from the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency. In sum, the impact of the U.S. decision will likely be to continue shifting the battlefield initiative to the Taliban—an extreme Islamic militant group that continues to work with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

A final peace agreement and the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces remain important priorities. The United States has deployed combat forces to Afghanistan for nearly two decades and has pressing interests at home and overseas. But Americans should be aware that peace negotiations will likely be long and difficult. As tempting as it may be to withdraw U.S. forces without a deal, doing so would be a mistake—especially if the Taliban is at fault. A U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan without a peace deal would significantly increase the level of violence in Afghanistan, risk a growing regional war, trigger a humanitarian crisis, allow an extremist Islamic group to overrun Kabul, and raise serious questions among allies about U.S. reliability.

Moving forward, the United States' primary goals should be to build political consensus within Afghanistan, support intra-Afghan peace negotiations with the help of regional and international partners, and bolster Afghan security forces so that they can handle threats with limited outside involvement. To advance these goals, U.S. policymakers should take the following steps.

First, the United States should announce an agreement to provide long-term economic, military, and intelligence assistance to the Afghan government. This step should include financial support and aid to Afghan security agencies. An agreement between the United States and the Afghan government would constitute a hedge against the possibility that the Taliban's pledges are primarily designed to bring about U.S. military withdrawal. A commitment to the Afghan government would reassure its leaders and population that they were not being abandoned. Such an announcement would also be well received by U.S. partners, who have become concerned about the United States' multilateral commitments. A U.S. commitment to provide long-term military aid would also help mitigate against the possibility that the Afghan government and Taliban reach an agreement, the United States withdraws its forces, and then the Taliban reneges on the deal and attempts to overthrow the government.

Second, the United States should shape the structure and other aspects of intra-Afghan negotiations in ways that decrease the possibility of stalled negotiations. Examples include choosing a third-party mediator, agreeing on an approximate timeline and structure for the negotiations, and establishing a "Friends of the Peace Process" forum that includes major donors and neighbors of Afghanistan.

Third, the United States should maintain forces in Afghanistan if Taliban leaders renege on their commitment to a peace deal. The United States should keep several thousand U.S. military forces and CIA personnel in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future if Taliban intransigence is a major cause of collapsed or stalled intra-Afghan negotiations. A U.S. presence would be important as long as there are serious threats to U.S. national security, such as the presence of international terrorist groups. The United States should also be prepared to temporarily halt the withdrawal of forces if the implementation of a deal breaks down.

Fourth, the United States should develop credible threats to punish the Taliban from reneging on its commitment to a peace deal. A weakness of some past negotiated settlements has been the lack of a credible guarantee to punish parties that repudiate their pledges. If the Taliban reneges on its commitments to support a peace deal, the United States should reimpose sanctions against the Taliban and its members; ramp up the targeting of Taliban leaders in Afghanistan and possibly in Pakistan; and enlist Pakistan to pressure Taliban leaders who undermine the peace process, including by possibly banishing Taliban leaders (and their families) from Pakistan who have undermined the prospects for peace. Research on the end of civil wars and insurgencies indicates that the absence of a credible threat of punishment leaves settlements vulnerable either to outright cheating or to tactical cease-fires in which one or all parties simply use the respite to rearm.

Fifth, the United States should provide incentives to both sides to reach a final settlement. The United States and its partners should offer concrete benefits to achieving a peace deal. For example, the United States should consider an amnesty to most Taliban leaders and fighters—except those involved in major human rights abuses—who lay down their arms, provide long-term assistance to the government after a peace deal, and help integrate the Taliban and Afghan army and police forces into a new national security structure. The United States and its partners should also make a portion of international assistance contingent on the parties reaching a final settlement.

The United States should have learned a lesson from Iraq in 2011 when it pulled forces out, even though the war continued and terrorist groups remained in Iraq and neighboring countries, such as Syria. By 2014, U.S. forces were back in Iraq to fight an Islamic State that eventually controlled territory the size of England, attracting foreign fighters from across the globe. The United States is now inching closer to making the same mistake in Afghanistan.

**Seth G. Jones**  
**Harold Brown Chair; Director, Transnational Threats Project; and**  
**Senior Adviser, International Security Program**

Seth G. Jones holds the Harold Brown Chair, is director of the Transnational Threats Project, and is a senior adviser to the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He teaches at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. Prior to joining CSIS, Dr. Jones was the director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation. He also served as representative for the commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, to the assistant secretary of defense for special operations. Before that, he was a plans officer and adviser to the commanding general, U.S. Special Operations Forces, in Afghanistan (Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan). In 2014, Dr. Jones served on a congressionally mandated panel that reviewed the FBI's implementation of counterterrorism recommendations contained in the 9/11 Commission Report. Dr. Jones specializes in counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, and covert action, including a focus on al Qaeda and ISIS. He is the author of *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (W.W. Norton, 2018), *Waging Insurgent Warfare* (Oxford University Press, 2016), *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of al Qa'ida after 9/11* (W.W. Norton, 2012), and *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (W.W. Norton, 2009). Dr. Jones has published articles in a range of journals, such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *International Security*, as well as newspapers and magazines like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*. Dr. Jones is a graduate of Bowdoin College and received his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

**DISCLOSURE FORM FOR WITNESSES  
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**INSTRUCTION TO WITNESSES:** Rule 11, clause 2(g)(5), of the Rules of the U.S. House of Representatives for the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress requires nongovernmental witnesses appearing before House committees to include in their written statements a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source of any federal contracts or grants (including subcontracts and subgrants), or contracts or payments originating with a foreign government, received during the current and two previous calendar years either by the witness or by an entity represented by the witness and related to the subject matter of the hearing. As a matter of committee policy, the House Committee on Armed Services further requires nongovernmental witnesses to disclose whether they are a fiduciary (including, but not limited to, directors, officers, advisors, or resident agents) of any organization or entity that may have an interest in the subject matter of the hearing. Committee policy also requires nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of any contracts or grants (including subcontracts and subgrants), or payments originating with any organization or entity, whether public or private, that has a material interest in the subject matter of the hearing, received during the current and two previous calendar years either by the witness or by an entity represented by the witness.

Please note that a copy of these statements, with appropriate redactions to protect the witness's personal privacy (including home address and phone number), will be made publicly available in electronic form not later than one day after the witness's appearance before the committee. Witnesses may list additional grants, contracts, or payments on additional sheets, if necessary. Please complete this form electronically.

**Hearing Date:** November 20, 2020

**Hearing Subject:**

The U.S. military mission in Afghanistan and implications of the peace process on U.S. involvement

**Witness name:** Seth G. Jones

**Position/Title:** Harold Brown Chair; Director, Transnational Threats Project; and Senior Adviser, International Security Program

**Capacity in which appearing:** (check one)



Individual



Representative

**If appearing in a representative capacity, name of the organization or entity represented:**

Center for Strategic and International Studies

**Federal Contract or Grant Information:** If you or the entity you represent before the Committee on Armed Services has contracts (including subcontracts) or grants (including subgrants) with the federal government, received during the current and two previous calendar years and related to the subject matter of the hearing, please provide the following information:

**2020**

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant
Contract	Defense Threat Reduction Agency	\$141,944.00	Scenarios on the Future Threat Environment
Donation	Defense Threat Reduction Agency	\$209,918.50	Allies, Partners, and Non-Traditional Partners

**2019**

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant
Contract	Department of Defense	\$200,832.82	Cold War Historical Lessons, U.S. Unconventional Operations During the 1990s
Contract	Naval Postgraduate School	\$120,000.00	Industrial Mobilization: Assessing Surge Capabilities, Wartime Risks, and Systemic

**2018**

Federal grant/ contract	Federal agency	Dollar value	Subject of contract or grant
Contract	Department of Defense	\$348,892.00	Grey Zone Interagency Task Force

**Foreign Government Contract or Payment Information:** If you or the entity you represent before the Committee on Armed Services has contracts (including subcontracts or subgrants) or payments originating from a foreign government, received during the current and two previous calendar years and related to the subject matter of the hearing, please provide the following information:

**2020**

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract or payment

**2019**

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract or payment
Grant	Government Of Canada	\$36,011.86	Principled approaches to hybrid warfare

**2018**

Foreign contract/ payment	Foreign government	Dollar value	Subject of contract or payment

**Fiduciary Relationships:** If you are a fiduciary of any organization or entity that may have an interest in the subject matter of the hearing, please provide the following information:

Organization or entity	Brief description of the fiduciary relationship

**Organization or Entity Contract, Grant or Payment Information:** If you or the entity you represent before the Committee on Armed Services has contracts or grants (including subcontracts or subgrants) or payments originating from an organization or entity, whether public or private, that has a material interest in the subject matter of the hearing, received during the current and two previous calendar years, please provide the following information:

**2020**

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant or payment

**2019**

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant or payment

2018

Contract/grant/ payment	Entity	Dollar value	Subject of contract, grant or payment



---

---

**WITNESS RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ASKED DURING  
THE HEARING**

NOVEMBER 20, 2020

---

---



#### RESPONSE TO QUESTION SUBMITTED BY MR. SMITH

Dr. BIDDLE. This letter is in response to the question you posed in the Committee's November 20 hearing on Afghanistan, where you asked whether a U.S. force of 2,500 would be a sufficient counterterrorism (CT) force in that country.

[In] the short term, a force of this size could provide useful CT capability. It would facilitate drone or piloted airstrikes by providing bases near their targets. It could enable a small special operations presence to carry out raids. It could provide modest in-country intelligence capability to assist in targeting such raids and air strikes, and to hasten exploitation of material captured in special operations raids.

But a very small presence in a hostile warzone can be an inefficient way to provide such capabilities. Bases must be protected, maintained, and resupplied. Some of this overhead can safely be assigned to local nationals, but not all. There are irreducible minima to sustain secure bases in a war zone, especially inland bases far from supply sources. Very small troop counts thus tend to increase the ratio of support and infrastructure costs (and personnel) to those of the combat forces and intelligence functions that provide the actual capability we seek.

Perhaps more important, the long-term sustainability of such a posture is far from clear. Its viability depends on the Afghan government's ability to keep the Taliban and Islamic State at bay. But a U.S. drawdown to a 2,500-person CT force would undermine the negotiations that are our only realistic way to preserve the Afghan government. As I argued in my testimony, the U.S. troop presence constitutes much of our remaining, limited, leverage in the settlement talks. Unrequited unilateral drawdowns attenuate that leverage, and worsen the prospects for settlement. Without a settlement, the Afghan government will eventually lose the war. And if that happens, U.S. CT capability in Afghanistan will become radically less viable regardless of how we try to configure a tiny rump posture. A government collapse would create a far more hazardous security environment than today's, in which it would be much more difficult for a 2,500-person U.S. contingent to protect and resupply itself once isolated far inland amidst a chaotic multi-sided civil war in which few actors will find much reason to support an unpopular U.S. rump presence dedicated to killing terrorists who threaten only Americans. (I see chaotic civil warfare as likelier than a simple Taliban restoration if the Kabul government collapses, but a Taliban restoration would be even worse for U.S. CT prospects: a restored Taliban government would oppose such a presence with the resources of a state military.) I have long believed that it is thus a false dichotomy to separate counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. The counterinsurgency mission of sustaining the government in Kabul is necessary to enable the counterterrorism capability it accompanies. A posture limited to CT risks a government collapse that would undermine the viability of the CT mission.

This is why I see the most important contribution of U.S. forces today as their political role in facilitating negotiations to end the war, rather than in their military contribution to counterterrorism. Failure in the settlement talks risks greater damage to U.S. counterterrorism capability than the withdrawal or retention of a small U.S. CT presence. For this reason, we should be willing to offer a total withdrawal of all U.S. forces—including U.S. CT forces—if this is part of a settlement that ends the war. But we should be willing to keep as much of today's presence as possible, in excess of just the 2,500 figure, for as long as there is a reasonable chance that this could help reach a settlement and end the fighting. [See page 14.]



---

---

**QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS POST HEARING**

NOVEMBER 20, 2020

---

---



### QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MS. SPEIER

Ms. SPEIER. Ambassador Crocker, in light of the Taliban's recent comments which have demonstrated little to no shift from their previous draconian and violent position on women, what should the United States do to ensure that women's rights are not traded away at the negotiating table? What has the United States done to ensure that women and members of civil society are present and able to participate in the negotiations, for example as monitors and observers? If no steps have been taken, why not?

Ambassador CROCKER. Thank you for this very important question.

There are several women and civil society representatives on the Afghan government delegation to the Taliban talks. That is important, but the critical issue is the structure and progression of the talks themselves. By agreeing to meet with the Taliban without the Afghan government present, a long standing Taliban demand, the U.S. effectively delegitimized the Afghan government and signaled that the U.S. was finished in Afghanistan. Subsequent developments have only reinforced that analysis. The U.S. has withdrawn forces without requiring the Taliban to live up to its commitments. The latest decision by President Trump to reduce our dangerously small force by 2500 before he leaves office is tantamount to a declaration of surrender.

In my view, Trump is putting American national security and core American values at risk. The Taliban seeks to retake power in Afghanistan by force. If they are successful, they will bring al-Qaida with them. They chose military defeat and exile rather than give up al-Qaida in 2001. There is no reason to think they would abandon them now. This is the combination that brought us 9/11, and they have not become kinder and gentler over the last two decades. Similarly, there is no reason to expect that once the Taliban return, they will take a different approach toward Afghan females. In our absence, they will pursue the same pernicious policies they did prior to 9/11. That would be a betrayal of our most fundamental values. When I reopened our Embassy in Kabul after the defeat of the Taliban, Senator Biden was our first Congressional visitor. We went to see a girls school we had just opened. In a first grade class we saw girls ranging in age from six to twelve. The older girls had been deprived of education under the Taliban. Our message to girls and women was that as you step forward, we have your back. I hope President-elect Biden remembers that.

Ms. SPEIER. Dr. Jones, can the extraordinary gains that Afghan women and girls have made since 2001 be preserved? Should we be trusting the Taliban with women's rights, human rights, and minorities rights? What assurances can we seek from the Taliban that it will recognize women's and human rights in the constitution and according to international law?

Dr. JONES. Representative Speier, thanks for your important questions. As you are aware, the Taliban's ideology is deeply rooted in the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. While the Taliban's ideology has been evolving since the movement's establishment in the 1990s, Taliban leaders today generally support the establishment of an extreme government by Islamic law (sharia) and the creation of an "Islamic Emirate" in Afghanistan. The Taliban elevate the role of Islamic scholars (ulema) that issue legal rulings (fatwas) on all aspects of daily life. The ulema play a particularly important role in monitoring society's conformity with their view of Islam and in conservatively interpreting religious doctrine. Taliban officials claim they have moderated their views on some issues, such as women's rights. Taliban deputy leader Sirajuddin Haqqani wrote in February 2020 that the Taliban would "build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam—from the right to education to the right to work—are protected." But the Taliban has a well-documented record of repression, intolerance, and human rights abuses against women, foreigners, ethnic minorities, and journalists. The Taliban's persecution of women is particularly concerning. Women that are victims of domestic violence have little recourse to justice in Taliban courts, and the Taliban discourages women from working, denies women access to modern health care, prohibits women from participating in politics, and supports such punishments against women as stoning and public lashing.

In short, the United States should not trust the Taliban with women's rights, human rights, and minority rights. Nor should the United States trust a Taliban government to sincerely abide by any promises to recognize women's and human rights. This reality leads to two conclusions. First, the United States and its partners (including in Europe) need to use diplomatic, military, intelligence, economic, and other instruments to prevent a Taliban overthrow of the government. A Taliban overthrow would undermine U.S. interests in a range of areas, from international terrorism to women's rights. Second, any peace deal between the Afghan government and the Taliban should recognize women's and human rights in any revised Afghan constitution, according to international law. This includes universal suffrage and the right to run for office.

