

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE: THE WAY FORWARD IN AFGHANISTAN

HEARING BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC AND NONPROLIFERATION OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS SECOND SESSION

March 10, 2020

Serial No. 116-102

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Affairs



Available: <http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/>, <http://docs.house.gov>,
or <http://www.govinfo.gov>

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39-987PDF

WASHINGTON : 2021

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PROSPECTS FOR PEACE: THE WAY FORWARD IN AFGHANISTAN

Tuesday, March 10, 2020

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC, AND
NONPROLIFERATION
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC,

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 2 p.m., in room 2172, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Ami Bera (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. BERA. The subcommittee will come to order. Without objection, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions, extraneous materials for the record subject to the length limitations and the rules.

I will now make an opening statement and then turn it over to the ranking member for his opening statement. And I am going to guess we have votes around 3:30, so we will try to get through as much as we can.

First, I want to thank the Ranking Member Mr. Yoho, members of the subcommittee, and our witnesses for today's hearing. Obviously, a very, very timely hearing, this being March 10.

Our modern involvement in Afghanistan was born out of that brutally tragic day of 9/11. That was a turning point in American history. It was also a defining day in our relationship with Afghanistan and its people, which led to the entry of American and NATO troops in the country. A decision that I supported.

Nearly 20 years later, we are still there. According to some accounts, we have lost nearly 2,500 American lives, tens of thousands of Americans have been wounded, and we have spent over \$1 trillion on military and development assistance. The toll on the Afghan people has been great—even greater than the toll on Americans. U.N. Reports released last month documented over 100,000 civilians killed or injured in the last 10 years. This has complicated the Bush and Obama Administrations, and now the Trump Administration. Each tried to bring America's longest war to a close.

And President Trump has been particularly upfront about bringing troops back home. With that, he has empowered former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad to negotiate directly with the Taliban, which led us to the signing of the recent peace deal. The U.S. Taliban signed peace deal calls for complete U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, specifically with U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan within 14 months. That was in exchange for Taliban commitment to not provide safe harbor for those who attack the U.S. or our allies.

The next phase is negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan Government. But as we have seen, the Afghans have formed two governments. So, that clearly looks like it will be a difficult negotiation. And then the signing came after a successful 7-day reduction in violence. Thus far, it does indicate that neither the U.S., Taliban, and Afghan Government are not carrying out any offensive security processes which we have also seen is going to be very difficult.

Within a week, the Taliban launched an attack on Afghan Government and Helmand province. And then the U.S. launched an air strike on the Taliban. The week of peace has ended. Negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan Government are going to be even harder to carry out. As mentioned earlier, they were slated to begin today, but both President Ghani and CEO Abdullah declared themselves the winner of the Presidential election, and both are forming their own governments.

Yet, we have got distinguished witnesses here today who have gone through this process previously both in Republican and Democratic administrations and understand the complexity of where we go from here. I take at face value President Trump's desire to help bring to a close—and the ranking member and I have had conversations about this, and we do not see this as a partisan issue. I think there is an overwhelming sentiment in Congress that we would like to bring a close to America's longest war with an understanding in recognition that we do have security interest there. We do want to create an environment where we are not going back to Afghanistan 10 years from now, facing a new counterterrorism threat.

And I look forward to the testimony of the witnesses and the insight that they can offer as well as the members on this subcommittee on how Congress working with the administration can move forward in this process. And with that, let me recognize the Ranking Member Mr. Yoho for 5 minutes.

Mr. YOH. Thank you, chairman. And I appreciate you holding this hearing today and looking into a path forward for peace and stability. And I find it interesting that you are okay going into Afghanistan. I was not. I was a civilian and as I think you were. We are on different sides there. But I am glad we are at where we are at today.

I would like to welcome our witnesses today. Ms. Laurel Miller from the International Crisis Group. Mr. Douglas Lute from the Belfer Center. And Mr. Luke Coffey from the Heritage—I am sorry, Ambassador. I meant to say Ambassador. I look forward to hearing from all of you on the prospects of achieving lasting, and I am going to say it again, lasting peace in Afghanistan.

The peace deal signed between the representatives from the United States and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan known as the Taliban from here on out in this. A deal that was 18 months in the making, was a momentous step forward in paving the way for peace in a conflict that has lasted almost 2 decades and claimed the lives of thousands of Americans, along with tens of thousands of Afghanistan soldiers and civilians and trillions of dollars.

To the American men and women who have gave their lives in Afghanistan along with the many thousands who serve, we owe a

debt of gratitude. And, you know, we have to make sure they get taken care of from here on out. We can repay that debt now by ensuring their sacrifice was not in vain and secure a genuine and lasting peace for the people of Afghanistan.

Under the terms of the deal, our forces will withdraw during a 14-month timeframe with over 4,000 troops set to withdraw in the first 135 days. Prisoner exchanges are also part of the deal where a number of Taliban prisoners will be exchanged for Afghan security forces taken prisoner. This agreement is not an easy one to make, and I applaud the administration for arriving at a mutual acceptable term for a conflict that still breached an incredibility amount of hate and distrust.

However, the road ahead for peace is a long one. And the United States must remain vigilant in preserving the terms of the deal between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. Most importantly, this deal must ensure that Afghanistan will never again become a safe haven for terrorists again.

One of the major factors determining the stability of this deal lies in limiting the outbreaks of violence, like the episode we have seen in the weeks following the signing of the peace deal. Within days of signing the peace agreement, the Taliban resumed attacks against the Afghan Government forces. U.S. forces responded with the air strikes against the Taliban, soon after as a defensive strike to disrupt their advance on Afghan security forces.

If the Taliban is serious about maintaining peace in Afghanistan, this violence must end, it has to end. Should fighting be perpetuated by the Taliban, the administration must consider delay in the withdrawal of American forces as a measure of maintaining regional stability. And make no mistake, the wherewithal and the resolution of the American Government will follow through on that. And that is something the Taliban needs to keep in mind.

Many barriers stand in the way of peace in Afghanistan. It is the hopes of this subcommittee and Congress as a whole, that a peaceful end of America's involvement in Afghanistan can be reached without jeopardizing innocent Afghan lives living under the Democratically controlled areas of that country. America continues to stand for freedom and liberty abroad.

And I look forward to hearing from our experts today on how we can continue to responsibly export those values while avoiding unnecessary entanglement in bloody conflicts on foreign soils. And I yield back.

Mr. BERA. I am pleased to welcome our witnesses to today's hearing. Ms. Laurel Miller, our first witness, is currently the Director of the Asia Program at the International Crisis Group, and is a former acting State Department Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Ambassador Douglas Lute most recently served as the former U.S. Ambassador to NATO and as the White House adviser in the Bush and Obama Administrations on Afghanistan.

And Mr. Luke Coffey is the Director of the Allison Center for Foreign Policy studies at the Heritage Foundation and a former special senior adviser to the British Defense Secretary.

Please summarize your written statements to 5 minutes. And without objection, your prepared written statements will be made a part of the record.

Ms. Miller, if you could begin.

**STATEMENT OF LAUREL MILLER, DIRECTOR, ASIA PROGRAM,
INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, (FORMER STATE DEPART-
MENT ACTING SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR AFGHANI-
STAN AND PAKISTAN)**

Ms. MILLER. Good afternoon, Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Yoho, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify. I will summarize my written testimony focusing on what the U.S. Taliban deal means for U.S. policy looking ahead.

The essence of the bargain, as you noted, is a U.S. commitment to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan within 14 months in exchange for Taliban commitment to prevent al-Qaida and any other group or individual from using Afghan soil to threaten the U.S. and its allies. It also includes a Taliban commitment to enter into Afghan peace negotiations—a process that was supposed to start today.

The U.S. withdrawal timeline is conditioned on the Taliban's quote "commitment and action" closed quote on its antiterrorism obligations. That is all the publicly available agreement says about the drawdown conditionality. The vagueness leaves the U.S.-wide latitude to judge the sufficiency of Taliban action in ways that are not spelled out.

Debate about the agreement has raised the question whether it is a peace deal or just a withdrawal deal. In my view, this is the wrong question because the first characterization oversells the agreement, and the second one undervalues it. The deal is not a peace agreement. Even full implementation would not bring peace to Afghanistan because only a political settlement among the Afghans can do that. The deal does, however, create an opportunity for Afghans to reach a political settlement, because it commits the Taliban to negotiate with other Afghans, which previously they had not been willing to do.

The deal is unquestionably a withdrawal agreement in that it sets out terms for the complete pullout of foreign forces. But the withdrawal commitment is inextricably linked to the potential for a negotiated peace. Because of the Taliban's longstanding primary demand for the complete end of the foreign military presence, there is no realistic prospect of a negotiated end to the war that does not include the promise of a U.S. military withdrawal. For the war to end that way, sooner or later the U.S. would have to commit to pulling out. Making a withdrawal commitment prior to the start of the Afghan's peace negotiations was a concession to the Taliban, but it was one that U.S. had to make to jump start the talks.

Years of U.S. efforts to catalyze a peace process without making that concession had failed. The U.S. has a starker choice to make than some would prefer. Some who are uncomfortable with both endless war and the risk entailed by complete withdrawal have suggested the U.S. military should indefinitely maintain a small number of forces in Afghanistan. That idea fails to grapple with the

Taliban's refusal to countenance agreeing to a continued military presence no matter the size.

Either the U.S. can keep forces in Afghanistan or it can enable the possibility of a political settlement by agreeing to withdraw, but it cannot do both.

The agreement includes a timeline for complete withdrawal. So it seems that this choice has been made, but the fuzziness of the withdrawal conditionality might indicate the U.S. has not fully resolved its internal policy struggle over whether it really intends to pull out despite President Trump being clear about his preference and despite diminished public support for the deal—sorry, for the war, that is.

If Afghan talks get going and produce a peace agreement, there will be no basis for the U.S. to keep any forces in Afghanistan including for a counter-terrorism mission. The Taliban would have to change its viewpoint on the presence of foreign forces, 180 degrees to accept that.

The U.S. would, however, be able to maintain and secure its embassy and provide necessary diplomatic and financial support for implementation of an agreement. If the peace process collapses, however, the war will persist. In that scenario, if the U.S. decides to keep troops in Afghanistan, it is doubtful the numbers could dip very far.

The Afghan Government would not likely consent to a force presence focused only on serving U.S. counter-terrorism interests and not postured to back up the government in its existential fight against the insurgency.

If the U.S. withdraws fully in the absence of a settlement, the conflict would spiral into an intensified multisided civil war. The embassy would probably have to be evacuated and assistance would be greatly reduced. It is also possible the Afghans will negotiate just long enough for the U.S. to finish its withdrawal. That risk can be mitigated but not eliminated. Another unavoidable risk is that they conclude a peace agreement, but it later falls apart as many do.

The next stage of talks is going to be much tougher than the one just finished. The Taliban have not had to make any difficult compromises yet. So their willingness and ability to do so has not been tested. And on the other side of the table. Political disunity among factions in ethnic groups is a grave problem. It is not clear yet whether the maximalists or those more amenable to compromise will be dominant on either side. Even with these and other likely problems, pushing for the best use of what chance there is for a peace process to work is better than any of the alternatives. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Miller follows:]

WRITTEN STATEMENT

**Laurel E. Miller
Director, Asia Program
International Crisis Group**

**Hearing Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation
“Prospects for Peace: The Way Forward in Afghanistan”**

March 10, 2020

Good afternoon, Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Yoho, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the invitation to testify at this important hearing on the prospects for peace in Afghanistan in light of the February 29 conclusion of an agreement between the United States and the Taliban.

I will provide an overview and analysis of the main elements of the agreement; discuss what the agreement means for U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, particularly the continuation or not of a military presence in the country; sketch several scenarios for the outcome of the peace process; and identify several problems to watch for that could thwart a political settlement.

Founded in 1995, International Crisis Group is a field-based organization that conducts research and advocacy on preventing and resolving deadly conflict. We operate in dozens of countries around the world and have worked on Afghanistan for almost two decades. Our fieldwork gives us insight into the perspectives on all sides of conflicts and crises and on the dynamics that shape them on the ground.¹

Key Terms of the U.S.-Taliban Deal and Early Implementation Challenges

On February 29, 2020, in Doha, Qatar, the United States and the Taliban signed a four-page “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan.”² The agreement reportedly has two non-disclosed annexes regarding implementation measures that have been made available to Members of Congress for review. References in my testimony to the agreement concern only the publicly-available main portion.

The agreement centers on a U.S. commitment to withdraw all military forces and other non-diplomatic personnel from Afghanistan within 14 months from the signature date of the agreement, in exchange for a Taliban commitment to prevent al-Qa’ida or any other group or individual from using Afghan soil to threaten the security of the United States or its allies. Importantly, it also includes a Taliban commitment to enter into “intra-Afghan negotiations” – a process that the text indicated was set to commence on March 10. The agreement makes clear that the forces of U.S. allies and partners in Afghanistan would be drawn down in parallel with U.S. forces.

Two paragraphs of the agreement lay out the withdrawal timeline and conditions. The first of those states simply that, within 135 days, the U.S. will reduce its number of troops to 8,600 (and allies and Coalition forces will reduce proportionately), and that all forces will be withdrawn from five bases. This paragraph states no conditions for this first phase of withdrawal – meaning, on the agreement’s face at least, that this phase will proceed regardless of the Taliban’s conduct.

¹ A fuller description of Crisis Group’s mission and methodology can be found – together with our publications on Afghanistan and other regions – at [CrisisGroup.org](https://www.crisisgroup.org).

² Available at <https://www.state.gov/agreement-for-bringing-peace-to-afghanistan/>.

The second of the withdrawal paragraphs states that “complete withdrawal” of all remaining forces from remaining bases will occur within the subsequent nine and half months. This paragraph does include conditionality, the entirety of which is stated as a preface to the withdrawal language, i.e., “[w]ith the commitment and action on the obligations” of the Taliban, the withdrawal will proceed. Those obligations are that the Taliban “will not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including al-Qa’ida, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies” and will “not host” such individuals or groups. The Taliban also agree to “instruct” their members not to cooperate with such groups or individuals, and to “prevent” such groups or individuals from recruiting, training, and fundraising.

The agreement’s only other indication of conditionality is a statement that four elements – the Taliban’s antiterrorism assurances, the withdrawal timeline for foreign forces, the Taliban commitment to “start” negotiations with other Afghans, and the Taliban’s commitment to include permanent ceasefire as “an item on the agenda” in those negotiations – are “interrelated.” The intended meaning of the interrelationship is ambiguous, however, because the agreement also says that the “four elements each will be implemented in accordance with its own agreed timeline and agreed terms,” a provision that seems potentially contradictory to interrelation.

In a concession to the Taliban, the agreement also includes an aggressive timeline for removal of United Nations sanctions (by May 29, 2020) and U.S. sanctions (by August 27, 2020) imposed on members of the Taliban, though these are stated as goals. Attracting greater controversy so far, the agreement includes, as another concession, a U.S. commitment to achieve the release of “up to” 5,000 Taliban prisoners and “up to” 1,000 prisoners “of the other side” prior to the start of intra-Afghan negotiations, and all remaining prisoners over the course of the subsequent three months. Taliban prisoners are held by the Afghan government, not the United States. Afghan government authorities have so far balked at this timeline for prisoner releases.

Two complications quickly beset implementation of the agreement; the lasting significance of these is not yet clear. First was the dissension over prisoner releases. Differences between the U.S.-Taliban agreement and a “Joint Declaration” the United States and Afghan government signed in Kabul the same day created ambiguity as to whether there were shared understandings on whether and when releases would occur.³ Regarding prisoners, the declaration states only that the Afghan government will “participate in a U.S.-facilitated discussion with Taliban representatives on confidence building measures, to include determining the feasibility of releasing significant numbers of prisoners on both sides.” As of the time this testimony was submitted, U.S. discussions with the Afghan government and Taliban aimed at reaching an accommodation on this issue appeared to be underway.

The second complication stemmed from a separate ambiguity, concerning expectations of the extent to which violence would persist after February 29. The U.S., Afghan government, and Taliban had mutually agreed upon and implemented a seven-day

³ Available at <https://www.state.gov/agreement-for-bringing-peace-to-afghanistan/>.

period of “reduction in violence” beginning on February 22 that was intended to improve the atmosphere for concluding the agreement. U.S. officials had pointedly expressed their expectation that the Taliban would keep violence subdued even after signing of the agreement, but the Taliban did not publicly confirm their concurrence in such expectations. The text of the agreement does not require the Taliban to abjure violence at this stage. Since February 29, Taliban violence has somewhat increased over the reduced level of preceding days, drawing U.S. and Afghan government complaints and military actions in response. The Taliban does not technically appear to be in violation of the agreement, however.

What Kind of Deal Has the U.S. Made With the Taliban?

Public debate about the U.S.-Taliban agreement has surfaced the question whether it is a peace deal or ‘just’ a withdrawal deal. This is the wrong question to ask because the former characterization oversells the agreement and the latter undervalues it.

The deal is not a peace agreement. Even full implementation of the terms that are within the four corners of the four-page agreement would not alone bring peace to Afghanistan. Only a political settlement among the Afghan parties to the conflict can do that. The U.S.-Taliban deal does, however, create an opportunity for that political settlement to be achieved by committing the Taliban to enter into intra-Afghan negotiations – but it is so far only an opportunity.

The deal is unquestionably a withdrawal agreement, in that it sets out terms for the complete withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. But the withdrawal commitment is inextricably linked to the potential for a negotiated peace. In light of the Taliban’s long-standing primary demand for the complete end of the foreign military presence in Afghanistan, there is no prospect of a political settlement of the war that does not include the promise of a U.S. military withdrawal. If there was ever to be such a settlement, sooner or later the U.S. would have to commit to pulling out. Making that commitment *prior* to the start of peace negotiations among Afghans, rather than in connection with the outcome, was a U.S. concession to the Taliban, but it was one the U.S. probably had to make to jump-start talks. Years of U.S. efforts to catalyze peace negotiations *without* making that sequencing concession had failed precisely for that reason.

The U.S. has a starker choice to make than some would prefer. Either it can keep military forces in Afghanistan indefinitely or it can enable the possibility of a political settlement by agreeing to withdraw its forces; it cannot do both. Some who are uncomfortable with both perpetuation of “endless war” *and* the risk entailed by complete withdrawal have suggested that the U.S. military should draw down but maintain a small number of forces in Afghanistan. These suggestions fail, however, to grapple with the Taliban’s refusal to countenance agreeing to a continued foreign military presence no matter the size.

Because the agreement calls for a complete military withdrawal within 14 months, it appears to signify that the U.S. has now made this choice. But this is another respect in which the agreement contains some ambiguity. U.S. officials have emphasized repeatedly that the withdrawal commitment is conditions-based. As already noted, the condition (there is only one) – Taliban “commitment and action” on its antiterrorism “obligations” – is very briefly stated. The U.S. appears to have left itself wide latitude to judge the specific nature and sufficiency of Taliban “action.” The Taliban may dispute U.S. judgments in this regard but it will not be able to compel the U.S. to accept an interpretation at variance with an American one.

Secretary of Defense Mark Esper added to the uncertainty by asserting an additional condition not in the text of the agreement in an opinion piece published on February 29.⁴ He stated that the U.S. troop presence would be reduced “to a goal of zero in 2021” if “progress on the political front between the Taliban and the current Afghan government continues,” and that stalled progress probably would translate into suspension of the drawdown. This suggestion of conditionality outside the actual text muddies the deal.

The Next Stage, and the Next Main Hurdles

If the initial complications regarding prisoner releases and expectations regarding violence are resolved and intra-Afghan talks commence, then even tougher issues await negotiators than those addressed in U.S.-Taliban talks. A peace settlement among Afghans will have to determine how to share power and security responsibilities, and how to modify state structures to satisfy both the current government’s interest in maintaining the current system and the Taliban’s desire for a system they would regard as more Islamic.⁵

This next stage of talks appears to be, as yet, woefully under-prepared. Even with the negotiations possibly imminent there is still much left to be decided and done: the parties have yet to name a venue for the talks, at least publicly; agree on an agenda (save for the Taliban’s commitment to include ceasefire as a topic); or designate the members of negotiating teams. Putting together the negotiating team is a problem particularly on the Afghan government’s side, due to the recent high-stakes political tensions over presidential election results. In addition, U.S. intentions regarding its role in shaping or participating in the next-stage negotiations are unclear – nor is it apparent what sort of U.S. involvement the Afghan negotiating sides would welcome.

⁴ “Defense Secretary Mark Esper: This is Our Chance to Bring Troops Home From Afghanistan for Good,” *The Washington Post*, February 29, 2020.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/02/29/defense-secretary-mark-esper-this-is-our-chance-bring-troops-home-afghanistan-good/>.

⁵ Regarding substantive issues that will likely have to be addressed in intra-Afghan negotiations, see Laurel E. Miller and Jonathan S. Blake, “Envisioning a Comprehensive Peace Agreement for Afghanistan,” RAND Corporation, 2019, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2937.html.

A process as difficult as peace talks aimed at ending decades of war in Afghanistan is unlikely to get off to a productive start without thorough and urgent preparation. International Crisis Group has proposed practical steps that can be taken to bolster the prospects for sustaining intra-Afghan talks beyond an opening round and eventually producing a political settlement to the conflict.⁶ These include designating a neutral mediator, selecting a location for talks based on the host government's ability to organize and facilitate them effectively, and clarifying the format and structure for talks.

Scenarios for Plausible Outcomes

If the Afghan parties, with support and pressure from the U.S. and other interested governments, overcome both the political and organizational challenges to starting an Afghan peace process, that process is not likely to produce results quickly. A timeline of a year or more would not be surprising given the complexity of the issues and other experiences with peace processes around the world. If the talks extend beyond the 14-month timeline for a U.S. military withdrawal, Washington will have to face the decision whether to proceed with the withdrawal regardless. If the talks fail to gain traction and the peace process collapses, the U.S. also will have to face that same decision.

Setting aside the question of the timeline, in a scenario in which the Afghan parties succeed in reaching a political settlement there will be no basis (in accordance with the February 29 U.S.-Taliban agreement) for the U.S. to keep any forces in Afghanistan, including for a counter-terrorism mission. Unless the Taliban dramatically changes its viewpoint on the question of a foreign military presence, zero will have to mean zero or else the Taliban will not concur in a settlement. In this scenario, the U.S. would be able to maintain its embassy (and appropriate security personnel for the embassy), and thus would be in a position to provide both diplomatic and necessary financial support for implementation of the settlement. There is a theoretical possibility that a future Afghan government that includes the Taliban might agree to some form of counter-terrorism security cooperation with the United States, but the plausibility of that is quite uncertain.

In an alternative scenario in which the peace process collapses and there is no political settlement, the war will persist. In those conditions, if the U.S. decides to maintain troops in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that their numbers could dip much below the level anticipated in the first phase of withdrawal. Some have suggested that the U.S. military might be able to scale down its mission to one focused only on counter-terrorism. That is an implausible outcome because Afghan government forces would continue to be reliant on the U.S. in their existential fight against the Taliban insurgency, and the Afghan government would not likely consent to a U.S. force presence that aims to serve only U.S. counter-terrorism interests while declining to back up the government in its fight. Moreover, any U.S. forces remaining in the country would have to maintain sufficient capabilities to continue protecting themselves from Taliban attacks.

⁶ International Crisis Group, "Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work," 2 March 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/b160-making-intra-afghan-negotiations-work-twelve-ideas>.

In the peace process collapse scenario, if the U.S. maintains more or less the status quo level of forces, it probably could prevent the defeat of the Afghan government for the foreseeable future – at more or less status quo levels of financial support. The ongoing conflict would continue to severely constrain Afghan economic growth and limit improvements in governance capacity. On the other hand, if the U.S. in this scenario proceeded with military withdrawal, the conflict would likely worsen, perhaps even rapidly spiraling into intensified and multi-sided civil war. In that context, the U.S. embassy would be in jeopardy and probably would have to be evacuated; civilian assistance would be reduced to humanitarian-only; and security assistance would become difficult to deliver unless the U.S. were prepared to forego oversight. The implications for the Afghan population – which last year suffered over 10,000 civilian casualties alone – would be grave.

An especially difficult scenario for the U.S. to navigate would involve the Afghan parties sustaining peace negotiations for most or all of the 14-month drawdown period but collapsing around that point in time. If the U.S., in fact, adheres to the 14-month timeline, the drawdown will have to be well underway close to the final deadline. Notably, the February 29 agreement – again, in the public portions – says nothing about the pace and slope of drawdown during the period after the first 135 days, so it is uncertain what current U.S. military plans are in this regard.

The possibility of one or more parties to the talks negotiating in good faith just long enough for the U.S. to implement its withdrawal commitment cannot be excluded. This risk can be mitigated only imperfectly through measures such as assessing the parties' negotiating behavior as talks proceed; encouraging a process that produces a series of interim agreements that build on each other rather than one that withholds any agreement until the end; and working diplomatically with other governments that have influence with the parties to sustain external pressure in favor of conflict resolution. It should be noted that even if the parties do negotiate in good faith and finalize a political settlement, that settlement – like many peace agreements – could still fall apart at any time during implementation. This is a risk that an indefinite U.S. military presence (leaving aside the implausibility of the Taliban agreeing to such) is not likely to mitigate successfully given that the last 18 years of U.S. experience in Afghanistan shows the limits of Washington's ability to compel its preferred outcomes through force.

The more-positive *and* the more-negative scenarios sketched out here are plausible and therefore should equally inform contingency planning.

Problems to Watch Out For

As and when the currently unsettled state of the peace process begins to clarify, there are several problems that may come to the foreground.

First, the fuzziness of the withdrawal conditions in the February 29 agreement may indicate that the U.S. has not resolved its internal policy struggle over whether it really

intends to withdraw militarily from Afghanistan. President Trump has been clear about his preference to pull out and public support for the war has dimmed. But the commitment of elements of the national security bureaucracy appears uneven.

Second, even if Kabul manages to quickly pull together an inclusive negotiating team for the intra-Afghan talks, ongoing political disunity among factions and ethnic groups may bedevil the team's ability to reach consensus on its negotiating positions. Furthermore, is not yet clear whether the maximalists or those more amenable to compromise with the Taliban will be dominant on Kabul's side of the negotiating table.

Third, as for the Taliban, they have not yet had to make any very difficult choices. Consequently, the nascent peace process has not yet seriously tested their ability to do so. Because their cohesion has been one of their comparative advantages and because they diligently, and sometimes ruthlessly, protect it, it is not yet clear whether they will be willing and able to make controversial compromises that might strain cohesion.

These are not the only problems the peace process is likely to encounter – I have not, for instance, touched on the capabilities of Pakistan and Iran to make a successful process more or less likely – but these problems alone could be enough to scuttle it. Because the U.S. can only be a supporting player in the next, intra-Afghan stage, it cannot guarantee a successful outcome. As it becomes clearer what the actual outcome will be, and if that outcome is failure of the peace process, the U.S. will need to weigh the known costs and risks of maintaining its military presence against the less certain risks of pulling out.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Ms. Miller. Ambassador Lute.

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE DOUGLAS LUTE LIEUTENANT GENERAL, U.S. ARMY, RETIRED, SENIOR FELLOW, THE BELFER CENTER, HARVARD UNIVERSITY, (FORMER U.S. AMBASSADOR TO NATO)

Mr. LUTE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, ranking member. Thanks for this opportunity to appear today to discuss Afghanistan.

In this statement, I will briefly outline my views on the vital U.S. interest at stake. The recent agreement between the United States and the Taliban, and some thoughts on the way forward.

As background, I served for 6 years in the White House under Presidents Bush and Obama, hoping to coordinate our efforts in Afghanistan and the region. More specifically, I was involved in 2010, so nearly 10 years ago exactly, in our first direct diplomatic contact with the Taliban. This was based on the political commission that was at that time located in Doha, Qatar. And I helped oversee with others our continued outreach to the Taliban through 2013 when I moved out of the White House and became the U.S. Ambassador to NATO.

Let me begin my statement today where all U.S. policy discussions should begin. American national interests. In my view, the only vital American interest at stake in Afghanistan is to counter-terrorist groups that have the potential to strike the United States, its citizens and our treaty allies. Indeed, this purpose mirrors the original purpose of our intervention just weeks after 9/11 in 2,001. And it remains the core reason for our effort over the last 18 years.

Of course we have other less than vital interests in Afghanistan as well, and this committee may wish to discuss these. But the essential purpose for the United States is to counter terrorism. In my estimation, we have largely achieved our counterterrorism objective today.

Al-Qaida is much diminished in Afghanistan and Pakistan with most of its senior leaders killed, and those who remain marginalized. The threat from al-Qaida and its affiliates is greater elsewhere, including Yemen, Somalia, and Syria.

There is a branch of the so-called Islamic State in Afghanistan, but I have seen no evidence that that branch represents a threat to the United States today. And it is actually under pressure from the Afghans, including ironically from the Taliban. This potential Islamic State threat should be monitored.

I begin with this point about America's vital interest because that interest is at the heart of the recent agreement with the Taliban. The agreement could actually be retitled, an agreement on countering terrorism, because that is what it actually promises. In return for the gradual withdrawal of American and allied forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban have agreed to take steps to ensure that transnational terrorists will not operate from Afghanistan. On these points the agreement is the most significant step forward in the past decade.

The agreement, however, does not deliver peace. And here I agree with Laurel Miller's comments. While it is a step in the right direction, the path to peace will be long and extremely difficult. We are likely years away from the agreement among all Afghans, in-

cluding the Taliban, on how Afghanistan will be governed and when violent conflict will end.

While the United States and other international players can set the stage for such progress, only Afghans can deliver compromises required to bring to an end the past 40 years of conflict. As Americans we get sort of fixated on our involvement. But for Afghans, this actually goes back two decades earlier. So a total of nearly 40 years of conflict. It is up to Afghans to decide if they wish to compromised and step forward together, or to continue to fight in a winner take all struggle.

In the near term, several questions arise that will signal the prospects for peace. First, is the withdrawal of American forces really conditions-based. As some of the public statements reveal, or will it follow the letter of the agreement on a 14-month timeline? So is this really conditions-based?

Second, today, March 10th, the agreement calls for release of prisoners on both sides, but the Afghan Government clearly has not agreed to that release. So here we have the very first milestone mentioned in the agreement, and as we talked today, it is not being met. What impact does this early disconnect between the agreement and the arrangement with the Afghan Government? What does this early disconnect say about longer term prospects?

Third, and perhaps most difficult, can the Afghan Government form a coherent inclusive negotiating team that is capable of engaging seriously the Taliban.

Here, Mr. Chairman, you mentioned in your opening comments, the dueling inauguration ceremonies that we had in Kabul does not bode well for some sort of coherent Afghan approach to dealing with the Taliban. Again, the agreement calls for such inter-Afghan talks, that is, the Afghan Government, broader Afghan society and the Taliban to begin today. Well, they did not begin today. So we have missed the first two deadlines, if you will, marked in the agreement.

These three questions are early sign posts as to whether the recent agreement will lead to deeper, more durable solutions to the Afghan war. In short, whether the current agreement will be a catalyst, a precursor to a true peace agreement.

Now, in closing, what can the United States do to influence events going forward? First, we must test the Taliban's commitment to fulfill the recent agreement. Our ranking member, I think you mentioned this in your comments. We must hold them to their obligations, especially with regard to counterterrorism.

Second, we need to press the Afghan Government urgently to form an inclusive team and move into negotiations with the Taliban as the agreement suggests. This means the political elite in Kabul must come together despite the continued disputes surrounding last year's Presidential elections, and further broaden the team to represent all major elements of Afghan society, including Afghan women.

We have influence with the Afghan Government, and we must use it, including our providing about 75 percent of the Afghan national budget every year. We will need to sustain this economic support to sustain our influence.

And, finally, in my view, it is time to internationalize the diplomacy and surge of peace in Afghanistan. It is right that the United States took the lead up to now in crafting the initial agreement with the Taliban. Now is the time, however, to bring our allies and partners more prominently into play. For example, there are reports that Norway has agreed or has offered to host the inter-Afghan talks. That is progress.

The international community will need to continue to support Afghanistan financially. We should seek a United Nations Security Council resolution in support of the peace process, bringing both Russia and China prominently on board and in line with the progress.

And, finally, the likely long and difficult path toward peace requires a U.N. appointed senior diplomat to guide the parties to peace. These steps can significantly improve the prospects for an overall agreement.

Thank you, and I am ready to respond to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Lute follows:]

Statement of Ambassador Douglas Lute
Hearing: "Prospects for Peace: The Way Forward in Afghanistan"
Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation
Foreign Affairs Committee
United States House of Representatives
March 10, 2020

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, thank you for this opportunity to appear today to discuss Afghanistan. In this statement I will briefly outline my views on the vital U.S. interests at stake, the recent agreement between the United States and the Taliban, and some thoughts on way forward.

As background, I served for six years in the White House under Presidents Bush and Obama, helping to coordinate our efforts in Afghanistan and the region. More specifically, I was involved in 2010 in our first direct diplomatic contact with the Taliban Political Commission based in Doha, Qatar, and oversaw with others our continued outreach to the Taliban through 2013 when I moved out of the White House and became the U.S. Ambassador to NATO.

Let me begin my statement today where all U.S. policy discussions should begin: American national interests. In my view, the only vital American interest at stake in Afghanistan is to counter terrorist groups that have the potential to strike the United States, its citizens and its treaty allies. Indeed, this purpose mirrors the original purpose of our intervention just weeks after 9-11 in 2001, and it remains the core reason for our effort over the past 18 years. Of course, we have other, less than vital interests in Afghanistan which this committee may wish to discuss, but the essential purpose for the United States is to counter terrorism.

In my estimation, we have largely achieved our counter-terrorism objective today. Al-Qa'ida is much diminished in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with most of its senior leaders killed and those who remain marginalized. The threat from al-Qa'ida and its affiliates is greater elsewhere, including Yemen, Somalia, and Syria. There is a branch of the so-called Islamic State in Afghanistan, but I have seen no evidence that it presents a threat to the U.S. today and it is under pressure from the Afghans, including from the Taliban. This potential threat should be monitored.

I begin with this point about America's vital interest because that interest is at the heart of the recent agreement with the Taliban. The agreement could be retitled "an agreement on countering terrorism" because that is what is actually promised. In return for the gradual withdrawal of American and allied forces from Afghanistan the Taliban agree to take steps to ensure that transnational terrorists will not operate from Afghanistan. On these points the agreement is the most significant step forward in the past decade.

The agreement, however, does not deliver peace. While it is a step in the right direction, the path to peace will be long and extremely difficult. We are likely years away from an agreement among all Afghans, including the Taliban, on how Afghanistan will be governed and when violent conflict will end. While the United States and other international players can set the stage for such progress, only Afghans can deliver the compromises required to bring to an end to the past 40 years of conflict. It is up to Afghans to decide if they wish to compromise and step forward together or to continue to fight in a winner-take-all struggle.

In the near-term several questions arise that will signal the prospects for peace. First, is the withdrawal of American forces really “conditions-based,” or will it follow the letter of the agreement on a 14-month timeline? Second, today, March 10th, the agreement calls for release of prisoners on both sides, but the Afghan government has not agreed to this release. What impact does this early disconnect have on the longer-term prospects? Third, and perhaps most difficult, can the Afghan government form a coherent, inclusive negotiating team that is capable of engaging seriously the Taliban? Again, the agreement calls for such intra-Afghan talks to begin today, the 10th. These three questions are early signposts for whether the recent agreement will lead to deeper, more durable solutions to the Afghan War; in short, whether the current agreement will be a catalyst, a precursor to a true peace agreement.

What can the United States do to influence events going forward? First, we must test the Taliban’s commitment to fulfill the recent agreement. We have must hold them to their obligations, especially in regard to counter-terrorism. Second, we need to press the Afghan government urgently to form an inclusive team and move into negotiations with the Taliban as the agreement suggests. This means the political elite must come together despite the continued disputes surrounding last year’s presidential elections and further broaden a team to represent all major elements of Afghan society, including women. We have influence with the Afghan government and we must use it -- including providing about 75% of the Afghan national budget. We will need to sustain this economic support to sustain our influence. Finally, it is time to internationalize the diplomacy in search of peace in Afghanistan. It is right that the United States took the lead in crafting the initial agreement with the Taliban. Now is the time to bring our allies and partners more prominently into play. For example, there are reports that Norway will host intra-Afghan talks. The international community will need to continue to support Afghanistan financially. We should seek a United Nations Security Council resolution in support of the peace process, bringing both Russia and China onboard. Finally, the likely long and difficult path toward peace requires a UN-appointed senior diplomat to guide the parties. These steps can improve significantly the prospects for peace.

Thank you. I am ready to respond to your questions.

Mr. BERA. Thank you, Ambassador Lute.
Mr. COFFEY.

STATEMENT OF LUKE COFFEY, DIRECTOR, DOUGLAS AND SARAH ALLISON CENTER FOR FOREIGN POLICY, THE HERITAGE FOUNDATION

Mr. COFFEY. Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Yoho, and distinguished members of this committee, I am honored to speak here today before this esteemed committee about Afghanistan. With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I will summarize my prepared statement that has been submitted for the record.

To examine the prospects for peace in Afghanistan, we have to first understand how we got to where we are today. Just after 9/11, there were two main goals for Afghanistan. The first was to deny al-Qaida a safe haven. The second was to remove the Taliban from power as punishment for not cooperating. Both were accomplished with relative speed.

As the years went by, the explanation for what we were doing in Afghanistan shifted from America's national security needs to more vague notions of Nation building. With the lofty goals of Nation building, defining our success in the earlier days of the campaign, it is only natural that all most people see today in Afghanistan is failure.

But what we need in Afghanistan is actually a reality check. Success is not when a hundred percent of the country is controlled by the Afghan Government or when there is no more suicide bombings. Nor is success achieved when every road is paved, everyone goes to school, or everyone gets the right to vote. These are noble objectives, and we should aspire to them. Now, these are neither the reasons why we went to Afghanistan, nor are they the reasons why we should remain.

Success is achieved when there is a stable enough Afghanistan able to manage its own internal security so it does not become a base for international terrorism once again. Nothing more and nothing less.

For the Afghan people who have suffered more than 40 years of war, and for the American family and the American taxpayer, that has sacrificed so much over the past 19 years, the current peace plan, in my opinion, is a realistic, responsible, and reasonable approach to take. The Afghan Government with the help of the U.S. and international community has been fighting a Taliban-led insurgency. The goal of any counterinsurgency campaign is to allow those who have political grievances the ability to address these grievances through a political process and not through violence. History shows that most insurgencies are successfully brought to an end through some sort of political settlement. And this is why you can no more kill your way out of an insurgency than you can drink yourself out of alcoholism.

Mr. Chairman, this is why the inter-Afghan talks are the crucial stage in this peace process. It will be no meaningful deal whatsoever unless there is an agreement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. But for the U.S. Taliban agreement, there are three key issues that warrant further intention.

First, the contentious issue of prisoner swaps. Thankfully, President Gani's recent comments have helped to clarify this matter. And as I mentioned in my prepared statement, I think most of the original confusion is down to the inconsistent wording that is used in the U.S.-Taliban and the U.S.-Afghan Government statements.

Second, the so-called quote "guarantees and enforcement mechanism," unquote to ensure that the Taliban once again does not harbor transnational terrorists. Since preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for transnational terrorism is our No. 1 priority, it is important to know what these enforcement mechanisms will be and how they will work.

Finally, more details on how the U.S. can continue to support the Afghan security forces, if indeed all U.S. and foreign troops are withdrawn. This should include a possible commitment to fund the Afghan security forces and the possibility of training them in a neighboring country.

Over the years, the focus on Nation building resulted in expectations set so high that even the obvious successes on the security front were never considered good enough. You often hear that the Taliban are on the front foot. Or that the past 19 years were for nothing. This is nonsense. The Taliban today is nothing like the group in the mid-1990's when it seized the major cities like Kandahar and Kabul using tanks and military aircraft.

On September 10, 2001, the Taliban controlled 90 percent of the country, including every major urban center and every major road network. Today, according to my open-source analysis, the Taliban probably controls about 11 percent of Afghanistan's districts. Since being ousted from power in December 2001, the Taliban has never genuinely threatened the capital of Kabul.

In the past 19 years, the Taliban has only seized the provincial capital twice, and each time for only a few days at a time. No transnational terrorist group, including al-Qaida, operating from Afghanistan has successfully attacked our homeland since 9/11.

Mr. Chairman, after almost 20 years in military involvements, maybe we should come to terms with the fact that until there is a political settlement, what we see in Afghanistan might be as good as it is going to get. And this is not defeat, this is reality.

As a young Winston Churchill said in 1897 when he was fighting as a young British Army officer on what is today the modern and Afghan-Pakistan border and I quote, "There are no general actions on a great scale, no brilliant successes, no important surrenders, and no chance for a coup de theatre. It is just a rough, hard job which must be carried through. The war is one of small incidents. The victory must be looked for in the results."

What was true in 1897 is true in 2020. Our involvements in Afghanistan has not always been perfect, and there will be setbacks in the coming months regarding the inter-Afghan talks. But as Churchill reminds us, "it is a rough, hard job."

As long as America and its allies remain safe, and as long as the Afghan people get to experience some peace, then this process is worth a shot. I look forward to your questions. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Coffey follows:]



"Prospects for Peace: The Way Forward in Afghanistan."

March 10, 2020

Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and Nonproliferation

Committee on Foreign Affairs

U.S. House of Representatives

Luke Coffey

**Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy in the Kathryn and
Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at The Heritage
Foundation**

Chairman Bera, Ranking, Member Yoho, and distinguished Members of the Committee. I am honored to speak before this esteemed Committee about Afghanistan.

My name is Luke Coffey. I am the Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own, and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

Most of my adult and professional life has had a connection to Afghanistan. As a junior U.S. Army officer I served in Afghanistan for one year in 2005 conducting detainee operations as part of an integrated military police and military intelligence brigade. When I worked for the British Conservative Party, and later as a top aid to the British Defense Secretary, I worked on Afghan policy issues from a British point of view. During this time I made regular visits to the country—primarily to Helmand and Kandahar provinces and to Kabul. At The Heritage Foundation I have led much of the organization's research and publications on Afghanistan. I love Afghanistan: its people, its history, its food, and its very complex and different cultures. So it is a great privilege to be here today to talk about Afghanistan.

The situation regarding the peace deal between the U.S. government and the Taliban is a fast-moving issue. Therefore, it is important that I point out that the analysis and opinions expressed in the prepared statement are based on the events that have occurred, and the information publically available, as of March 7, 2020.

I would also like to state at the outset that I have not read or seen, in full or in part, any of the so-called secret annexes to the recent peace agreement. Therefore, my testimony is based on publically available information, off-the-record information from government officials, and years of experience dealing with Afghanistan.

The title of this hearing is very appropriate. It is important to look at the future of U.S. policy in Afghanistan in light of the recent agreement with the Taliban. But to examine the prospects for peace in Afghanistan, we have to first understand why and how we got to where we are today.

In late 2001, just after the 9/11 attacks, there were two main goals in Afghanistan. First, to deny al-Qaeda a safe haven from which to plan, train, and launch terrorist attacks on a global scale. Secondly, to remove the Taliban regime from power as punishment for not cooperating with the international community and for harboring terrorism—a sort of twenty-first-century version of a nineteenth-century British punitive raid on India's frontier. Both were accomplished with relative speed—it can even be argued that this was achieved by the spring of 2002.

As the years went by, the explanation for what U.S. forces were doing in Afghanistan shifted from America's raw national security needs to vague notions of nation-building and "bringing democracy." Since 2002, the U.S. has focused on the quixotic goals of creating "a strong central government" and a "pluralistic society" in Afghanistan. We have tried accomplishing these goals by "holding free and fair" elections, "tackling corruption," and building the "institutions of democracy." If we fail to achieve these goals, we are presented with doomsday scenarios of

“ungoverned spaces,” the Taliban “back in power,” and the establishment of new terrorist “safe havens.”

But this black-and-white view of the situation does not work in a place like Afghanistan. It is a place with many shades of gray. There is a complex middle ground in Afghanistan somewhere between Afghanistan becoming a Jeffersonian democracy or the Taliban ruling over the country like it did before 2001. This is where we are today—and where we will likely be for the foreseeable future. As long as America and its allies remain safe, this middle ground should be accepted.

For years, especially in the earlier days of the war, successive U.S. commanders rotating in and out of the country on an annual basis thought that if just one more road could be paved, one more school built, or one more hospital constructed, America could leave Afghanistan just that much better. Over the years, this focus on nation-building—however well intended it might have been—resulted in expectations set so high in Afghanistan that even obvious successes on the security front were not considered good enough.

This created an impossible situation for the U.S. military. With the lofty goals of nation-building defining our success in the early days, the only thing most people see today in Afghanistan is failure.

Few in the United States believe that we have been defeated in Afghanistan. They just think we have not met the objectives they expected to be achieved—and that what we have achieved has taken too long and cost too much.

This is not an unreasonable view. We have been fighting in Afghanistan for almost 20 years and will likely have some form of involvement there for at least 20 more. This is a long time. It is possible that an eighteen-year-old soldier serving in Afghanistan today was not even born at the time of the 9/11 attacks.

As of the time of this hearing, 2,315 soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and Department of Defense civilians have been killed, more than 20,000 have been wounded, and just shy of \$1 trillion has been spent. Like many veterans of the Afghan war, I have felt the impact personally. Over the course of the past 19 years I have lost classmates, colleagues, and friends in Afghanistan. On August 16, 2009, my sister-in-law's brother, U.S. Army Sergeant First Class Brian Woods from my hometown of Catawissa, Missouri, died from wounds he sustained fighting in Afghanistan. The price to the American family and the price to the American taxpayer has been great. We should not forget this.

Has America Succeeded?

You often hear that it was all for nothing or that the Taliban are on the front foot. Or that they are making huge advancements across the country. But the reality shows us that this is not the case. The Taliban today is nothing like the group was in the mid-1990s when it was seizing major cities like Kandahar in Kabul with tanks and military aircraft. On September 10, 2001, outside a small rump of territory run by the Northern Alliance in northeast Afghanistan, the Taliban

controlled the entire country. At this time the Taliban controlled every major population center including the capital city and all major road networks.

After being ousted from power in December 2001 the Taliban has never genuinely threatened the capital city of Kabul. The group has never held a provincial capital.

The situation in Afghanistan is often described as a “stalemate.” But a stalemate means gridlock—it does not mean parity. Only twice has it seized a provincial capital (Kunduz in 2015,¹ and Ghazni in 2018²), and in each case it was incapable of holding the city for more than a few days. Ever since the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction stopped releasing their assessment on how much territory and what percentage of the population in Afghanistan is controlled by the government, the Taliban, or is contested, it has been difficult to assess who controls what in the country.

However, one can get a reasonable idea through various open-source reporting. On the more optimistic end of the scale, the Afghan government claims that the Taliban is in full control of 22 districts. On the more pessimistic end of the scale, The Foundation for Defense of Democracies’ *Long War Journal* claims that 74 districts are under the full control of the Taliban.³

These figures are a matter of considerable debate, but if we split this down the middle we can assume that around 48 districts are under the Taliban’s full control. This represents only 11 percent of Afghanistan’s 421 districts. Considering that the Taliban controlled 90 percent of the country when the U.S. invaded, and at best now controls just over 11 percent of the total districts, it is unclear to me how this is not anything but a success. When will the critics be happy? When the Taliban only controls 5 percent of the districts? 3 percent? Or no districts at all?

It is also worth pointing out that no transnational terrorists group, including al-Qaeda, operating from Afghanistan has successfully attacked the United States since September 11, 2001.

After almost 20 years of military involvement, maybe we should come to terms with the fact that until there is a genuine political settlement between all warring parties, and until Pakistan stops providing succor to the Taliban, what we see in Afghanistan might be as good as it is going to get. This is not defeat. It is the cold reality.

What the Taliban *has* proven adept at is killing civilians and security forces with suicide attacks and roadside bombs. But just because a suicide bomber detonates himself in a crowded market place does not mean America has failed in Afghanistan. As a nation we have to recalibrate our expectations on what is achievable in Afghanistan and we need to stop treating every tactical victory of the Taliban as symbolic of America’s strategic defeat.

¹Joseph Goldstein and Mujib Mashal, “Taliban Fighters Capture Kunduz City as Afghan Forces Retreat,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/29/world/asia/taliban-fighters-enter-city-of-kunduz-in-northern-afghanistan.html> (accessed March 5, 2020).

²W. J. Hennigan, “Exclusive: Inside the U.S. Fight to Save Ghazni from the Taliban,” *TIME*, August 23, 2018, <https://time.com/longform/ghazni-fight-taliban/> (accessed March 5, 2020).

³Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, “Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan> (accessed March 5, 2020).

Understanding the Mission Today

Most of the criticism of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan today derives from a misunderstanding about the current mission there. Terms like “America’s longest war” do not accurately describe the U.S. mission in Afghanistan or take into account how it has evolved over the years. The international military mission in Afghanistan is no longer a major U.S.-led combat operation, but a mission designed to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).

The situation today in Afghanistan bears little resemblance to 2001, when the U.S. invaded and ousted the Taliban, or to 2009, when President Barack Obama announced a surge in force levels, which peaked at more than 100,000 troops.

Today, there is a relatively small contingent of about 13,000 U.S. troops—the vast majority of whom are training and mentoring the ANDSF. (This total will soon be 8,600 troops in accordance to the peace agreement recently signed.) A small number of these troops conduct high-end special operations to target senior Taliban leadership, remnants of al-Qaeda, and the nascent Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K), but these missions are the exception rather than the rule.

There is also a major difference in America’s financial commitment. At the peak of U.S. involvement in 2011, the U.S. government was spending \$120 billion a year.⁴ In its fiscal year 2020 budget request, the Department of Defense “identified \$18.6 billion in direct war costs”⁵ in Afghanistan. That is less than two months of spending at 2011 levels.

Analyzing the Deal

It is right and proper that the Trump Administration pushed for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. The Afghan government, with the help of the U.S. and international community, has been fighting a Taliban-led insurgency. History shows that most insurgencies are successfully brought to an end through some sort of political settlement. After all, the most basic goal of any counterinsurgency campaign is to allow those who have political grievances the ability to express these grievances through a political process rather than through violence.

After a seven-day “reduction in violence” period in Afghanistan, primarily between U.S./international forces and the Taliban (and to a lesser extent the Taliban and Afghan forces), U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and Taliban co-founder and chief negotiator Abdul Ghani Baradar signed a peace agreement in Doha, Qatar, that resulted from more than a year of on-and-off formal talks.

In my opinion, the comprehensive agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban is built on three main points.

⁴ David Rogers, “Pentagon Seeks \$120B in War Funds,” *Politico*, January 7, 2011, <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/01/pentagon-seeks-120b-in-war-funds-047206> (accessed August 2, 2019).
⁵ Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, updated January 31, 2020, p.11, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf> (accessed August 2, 2019).

First, the Taliban agreed that it will not allow al-Qaeda or any other transnational terrorist group to use Afghan soil. To this end, the Taliban agreed to “guarantees and enforcement mechanisms” to make sure this remains the case. However, it remains unclear how the so-called guarantees and enforcement mechanisms will work in practice.

Second, the United States and its allies agreed to a timeline to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan. Within 135 days, U.S. forces will drop to 8,600—roughly the number of troops in Afghanistan when Trump entered office. About 13,000 U.S. troops are there now.

International forces will reduce their troop presence proportionately. Then, if the U.S. assesses that the Taliban is living up to its end of the bargain, the remaining U.S. and international forces will withdraw nine and a half months later.

Third, and most importantly, talks within Afghanistan between the government and the Taliban will take place sometime later this month.

This is the most crucial stage in the peace process. **There will be no enduring and meaningful deal unless there is an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In the long term it matters less what the U.S. agrees to with the Taliban; what matters most is what the Afghan government agrees to with the Taliban.**

During intra-Afghan talks the U.S. needs to let Afghans (including the Taliban) decide their country’s future. However tempting it might be for U.S. policymakers to weigh in on any future power-sharing arrangement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, it must leave the most contentious issues—such as prisoner exchanges, social issues, and possible amnesty—to the Afghan parties, and the Afghan people, to resolve peacefully.

Many questions about the peace agreement remain unanswered. And healthy skepticism is only natural under the circumstances. But, ultimately, it is for all Afghans—those who support the government in Kabul and those who identify as Taliban—to settle their differences.

In my opinion there are three key issues resulting from the agreement with the Taliban that need attention.

The first issue that needs to be addressed immediately is the contentious issue of prisoner swaps between the Afghan government and the Taliban. There has been much written about this issue in the media. And there has also been a lot of misunderstanding. Both the U.S.–Taliban peace agreement and the U.S.–Afghan government joint statement, mention a possible prisoner swap. However, the former agreement mentions a possible prisoner swap in more detail than the latter agreement.

The U.S.–Taliban agreement states that “up to”⁶ 5,000 prisoners could be released by the Afghan government to the Taliban and that the Taliban will release 1,000 prisoners to the Afghan government. Whereas the U.S.–Afghan government agreement only states that there will be a

⁶U.S. Department of State, *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf> (accessed March 5, 2020).

determination to assess “the feasibility of releasing significant numbers of prisoners on both sides.”⁷ This difference in verbiage has resulted into a lot of confusion.

The releasing of prisoners under Afghan control is not a competency of the U.S. government. Therefore, the U.S. government is in no position to make a commitment to have these prisoners released. But a careful reading of the U.S.–Taliban peace agreement shows that the U.S. is only promising to facilitate “a discussion” on the issue of prisoner swaps as part of a confidence-building effort. Considering that the mention of prisoner swap is made in the U.S.–Afghan government joint statement, it is only logical to assume that the government in Kabul is aware of this matter.

The United States needs to work with the Afghan government to clear up any confusion about the issue of a possible prisoner swap with the Taliban. Prisoner swaps are as old as warfare itself. In conflicts throughout history prisoner swaps have been used as useful confidence-building measures. Ultimately, it is up to the Afghan government and the Taliban to determine how many, if any at all, prisoners they wish to swap.

The second issue that needs addressing in more detail is how the so called guarantees and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the Taliban does not reestablish links with al-Qaeda or other transnational terrorist groups will work in practice. Since the prevention of Afghanistan becoming a safe zone for transnational terrorism is the number one U.S. priority in the country, it is important that the United States government explains what the guarantees and enforcement mechanisms will be as soon as possible.

The third issue that needs addressing in more detail is how the United States can continue to support the Afghan security forces after the 14-month deadline expires and all U.S. and international troops withdrawal from Afghanistan. The U.S. government should remain committed to the financial assistance it provides the Afghan government for its security forces. Compared to what the United States has been spending to conduct military operations in Afghanistan, the cost to the U.S. taxpayer of funding the Afghan security forces is miniscule.

When Russia stopped funding Najibullah’s regime in 1992, the Afghan air force was grounded due to lack of fuel, and Afghan army desertions increased by 60 percent due to lack of pay and food shortages. This established the chaotic conditions in Afghanistan that, in part, helped to bring the Taliban into power in 1994. NATO should learn the lessons of Afghanistan’s recent history and ensure that the Afghan National Security Forces are fully funded and capable.

Also, if American and foreign troops are not allowed in the country, the United States should be working with neighboring countries, most likely in Central Asia, to find a way to train Afghan soldiers in the region. A best-case scenario would be a good idea for the Afghan government to negotiate with the Taliban some sort of continued international military presence to continue the training of the Afghan security forces during the intra-Afghan talks.

⁷U.S. Embassy in Qatar, *Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, U.S. Embassy Doha, February 29, 2020, https://qa.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/136/02_29_20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf.pdf (accessed March 5, 2020).

U.S. Goals Looking Forward

U.S. long-term goals in Afghanistan can be summed up with four “S”s:

- **A sovereign Afghanistan.** In South and Central Asia, sovereignty equals stability and peace. This means respecting the sovereignty of others while begin able to defend and enforce one’s own sovereignty. Today, outside countries like China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia are eroding the sovereignty of Afghanistan by meddling in Afghanistan’s internal affairs.
- **A stable Afghanistan.** The main goal of the international community in Afghanistan, if nothing else is achieved there, should be to create a stable enough Afghanistan that is able to maintain its own internal security, in order to prevent the country from becoming a safe haven for terrorism in the way it was in the 1990s, without the help of thousands of foreign troops.
- **A self-reliant Afghanistan.** Afghanistan has been the recipient of hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars in international aid. While this is necessary, and in some form or another Afghanistan will need some international assistance for the near future, providing the current levels of support for Afghanistan is unsustainable in the long term. Whether it is with security or the economy, the international community must find ways to help Afghanistan become more self-reliant.
- **A settled Afghanistan.** Successful intra-Afghan talks are important to the country’s long-term success. The goal of any counterinsurgency is to allow those who have legitimate political grievances to address these grievances through a political process and not through violence. If the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan ever ends, it will be through a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Going forward another important aspect of the enforcement of the deal will be transparency. The Administration received a lot of criticism during the earlier stages of the talks with the Taliban for failing to engage with our Afghan partners and our NATO allies. This resulted in quite public criticism from senior members of the Afghan government. However, it seems that the U.S. has learned from this experience and over the course of the past several months has done a great deal to engage with our Afghan partners and our NATO allies. Going forward, it is important that the U.S. continues with this interaction with our partners both in Afghanistan and around the world and makes the process as transparent as possible.

Conclusion

So what does success look like in Afghanistan? Success in Afghanistan is not when 100 percent of its districts are under the complete control of the Afghan government or when there are no more suicide bombings. Nor is success in Afghanistan achieved when every road is paved, every girl goes to school, or everyone gets the right to vote. These things are very important in themselves, and we should aspire to them, but they are neither the reasons why we went to

Afghanistan nor the reasons why we should remain there. While these Noble objectives are very much part of the campaign they are not the reason for the campaign.

Success is achieved when there is a stable enough Afghanistan—when it is able to manage its own internal and external security to a degree that stops interference from outside powers, allowing the country to resist the establishment of terror bases that were there before. Nothing more and nothing less.

The American public has every reason to be proud of what the U.S. military has accomplished under very challenging circumstances in Afghanistan. It is time that we have a dose of realism of what to expect in Afghanistan and lower our expectations on what is achievable for the future. Afghanistan will not be perfect or suddenly become some Switzerland in the Hindu Kush. Unless you are some idealistic dreamer who has never stepped foot in the country, this was never the goal.

For the rest of my life, there will be an insurgency in some form in the Pashtun heartland of the country. This does not mean that the United States has failed. It is simply a reflection of the reality on the ground and in the region. India, arguably the world's largest democracy, fights insurgencies inside its borders today. The British fought an insurgency in Northern Ireland until the mid-1990s. In January three men were arrested in Northern Ireland linked to an attempted car bomb⁸ and another was arrested for plotting to blow up a ferry traveling between Northern Ireland and Scotland on Brexit Day (January 31, 2020).⁹

The Afghan military is far from being perfect, but that was never the goal. The goal is to get the forces to a capability where they can manage the insurgency themselves, without tens of thousands of western troops on the ground. Paraphrasing Lawrence of Arabia on the Arabs in his famous *Twenty-Seven Articles* of 1917: it is better that the Afghans do it tolerably than we do it perfectly. This is why it is important that the U.S. works with the Afghan government to ensure that training and financial assistance remains available even if all international forces depart Afghanistan.

The United States needs to make crystal clear that if the Taliban backtracks on any part of the agreement, there will be consequences.

The U.S. also needs to make clear to the Taliban, and to the international community, that the legitimate government of Afghanistan is an important partner for the U.S. and that we will not abandon them.

Many ups and downs will follow in the next few months. Progress will not be made quickly, at times it will look like the talks will break down, and it is possible that the negotiations will get

⁸“Three Northern Ireland Men Arrested after Driver Travels with Bomb on Front of Car,” *Belfast Telegraph*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/three-northern-ireland-men-arrested-after-driver-travels-with-bomb-on-front-of-car-38999382.html> (accessed March 5, 2020).

⁹Rory Carroll, Henry McDonald, and Matthew Weaver, “Dissident Republicans Suspected of Brexit Day Plot to Blow up Ferry,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/feb/06/northern-irish-dissident-republicans-suspected-of-brexit-day-plot-to-blow-up-ferry-belfast-docks> (accessed March 5, 2020).

nowhere. A great example of this was the defensive airstrike the U.S. conducted last week in Helmand province after the agreement was signed with the Taliban.¹⁰

With each successful Taliban attack, the inevitable headlines immediately appear about America's failures in Afghanistan. But we cannot start seeing every tactical victory of the Taliban as America's strategic defeat. The U.S. must be strategic and must show patience during the next several months.

For the Afghan people who have suffered more than 40 years of war, and for the American family and taxpayer that has sacrificed so much over the past 19 years, this peace plan is a realistic, responsible, and reasonable approach.

As a young Winston Churchill said in 1897, when he was fighting as a British army officer on what is the modern-day Afghan–Pakistan border:

There are no general actions on a great scale, no brilliant successes, no important surrenders, no chance for a coup de theatre. It is just a rough, hard job, which must be carried through. The war is one of small incidents. The victory must be looked for in the results.

Some things never change. What was true in 1897 is as true in 2020.

Our involvement in Afghanistan has not been pretty and there will be setbacks in the coming months regarding the intra-Afghan talks—as Churchill reminds us: “It is a rough, hard job.”

As long as America and its allies remain safe, and as long as the Afghan people are at peace, this process is well worth a shot.

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¹⁰Samantha Beech and Devan Cole, “US Conducted Airstrike on Taliban Fighters Following Attack on Afghan Checkpoint,” CNN, March 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/04/politics/taliban-airstrikes-afghanistan-us/index.html> (accessed March 5, 2020).

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Mr. BERA. Thank you, Mr. Coffey. I will now recognize myself for questions, and then I will recognize the ranking member and our other members for 5 minutes for the purpose of questioning the witnesses.

You have all laid out the complexity of this issue and how difficult this is.

Ambassador Lute, you have had a long career. First, 35 years in the military, and then working at the highest levels of the Bush and Obama Administrations working on these very issues that we are talking about, and directly negotiating with the Taliban.

I think you have outlined our national interest and objectives, which I think all the members up here would agree with, especially with regard to counterterrorism. Due to the fact that we have missed the first two milestones, that there is a higher probability of Afghanistan falling to disarray than there is reaching a political solution.

I would be curious to know what you see the U.S. Taliban relationship being like moving forward. We know that—if Afghanistan were to fall into a civil war, we have got our interest on the counterterrorism side. I do not think there would be an appetite to get involved in the conflict, if we withdraw fully of our troops. And let's say Kabul is under siege, and there is pressure to now ramp up and send another 100,000 troops into Afghanistan to try to save it. I do not think the public world will be there, and I am not certain the congressional world will be there. How do we balance this from your military experience as well as your understanding of this situation as a whole, because I would hate to see that situation where we are watching the country fall apart into a civil war, Kabul under attack, and trying to decide what we do.

Mr. LUTE. So, Mr. Chairman, I think of the three potential options. So continued stalemate, a peace agreement of some sort among the Afghans and civil war. The worse possible outcome is civil war. We are better off staying where we are despite the cost at stalemate than we are letting this slip into civil war. And the reason for that is that it would risk our vital national interest. It will be uncontrollable in terms of monitoring and contending with transnational terrorists if there is complete chaos in Afghanistan.

So the one thing we certainly want to avoid is worsening the situation and that would be civil war. But there is a risk of that. If we draw—if we withdraw precipitously and just leave this to the Afghans and not stay involved politically and not continue to finance the Afghan Government and their security forces, there is a real risk that we could realize that worst possible outcome.

Mr. BERA. If you were to put forward your best guess on these three possible outcomes—I agree with you, the worst possible outcome is a full-blown civil war. I will not ask you to put percentages on there. But that means we have got to put our full effort in trying to find an inter-Afghan peace deal.

I will ask Ms. Miller this next question because you have been in the middle of this. What are the things that we should be doing at the congressional level, and the administration certainly as well, to assist the Afghans in finding a solution with the Taliban that does not devolve into kind of a civil war? What are the prospects of the inter-Afghan peace coming together?

Ms. MILLER. Yes, I mean in terms of bolstering the prospects of the peace process to work, unfortunately, the U.S. has more leverage over our Afghan Government partner than we do over the Taliban in terms of their conduct in the peace process. But there are problems on the Afghan Government side, and Doug alluded to them, that they are not organized for the talks, they do not have a coherent negotiating team, they have not been able to develop consensus positions on their side. So there is a need to be exerting leverage on the Afghan Government side to get them to be willing to negotiate in good faith.

I mean, there has been a lot of discussion of the concern about the maximalists on the Taliban side and those who may not be ready to make peace. But there are also maximalists on the Afghan Government side, those who really are not genuinely interested in any kind of agreement that incorporates compromise.

The U.S. also needs to be engaged intensively, diplomatically with the countries of the region. With Pakistan, that continues to have—continues to have influence over the Taliban, and although not directly with Iran, indirectly through other governments that do have relationships with Iran. And so that has to be an ongoing feature, even if the peace process gets going, not just to get it to launch. So there has to be very active diplomacy.

There are also a number of practical steps that the U.S. can take including to ensure that a mediator is appointed. I do not think it has to be a U.N. person. It could be another individual. But to structure the—to ensure that the peace process itself is structured in a way that maximizes the potential for it to operate effectively. And there are a lot of lessons learned around the world from peace processes that can be applied to that.

In terms of Congress' role, I do think at some stage if there is a peace process going, that if the U.S. is in a position to signal that it will continue to provide some financial support, if there is a peace agreement for its implementation, it is something that can be useful in enabling the administration to exert what leverage the U.S. has.

Mr. BERA. Thank you for that. I am out of time. Let me recognize the Ranking Member Mr. Yoho.

Mr. YOHIO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you all for testifying. And I am not sure where to start here.

I am going to start with you, Ambassador Lute. You were talking about all discussions should focus and begin with national security. And I you know I agree with that. And then we were talking about peace in Afghanistan. How do you define that because if you look at the history? I mean, there has been corruption, there has been all of this stuff going on—you know, I am doing a quick search on that—for a long time.

And then prior to the war, as Mr. Coffey, you said Taliban controlled roughly 90 percent of that territory. So it was kind of a tribal type of organization, right, as far as the cohesiveness of any kind of structure in there.

So what do we define as peace? Because I agree we need to back out of there. We want to make sure that there is not a safe haven for terrorist groups. What is an acceptable level of conflict that we know is probably going to be there.

Mr. LUTE. Well, I think peace would involve on the conflict spectrum essentially an end to this insurgency. So the Taliban and the Afghan Government would have to come to compromise terms that undoubtedly given the Taliban's position will feature some sort of compromises that share power between the Afghan Government and, by the way, the other Afghan political lead. Because as we have seen, the Afghan Government itself is not coherent—

Mr. YOHO. Right.

Mr. LUTE [continuing]. But among those parties, and the Taliban.

So peace would fundamentally mean that the fighting ends because the Taliban believe that they are sufficiently represented in a new power-sharing arrangement, perhaps a geographically bifurcated arrangement where the Taliban, for example, would have more control over rural Pashtun areas, while the political—the standing political lead in Kabul more control over the large urban areas. But some sort of geographic power-sharing arrangement that allows the Taliban to set down their arms. And that will be as we at one time said, Afghan good enough.

Mr. YOHO. Is that something that you all feel like Norway, the Norwegians can broker? Because when we sat with our negotiator, and he was saying they came to kind of a consensus with the people of the Taliban that they would accept some of these negotiations on the peace deals, not all the factions of the Taliban had agreed to who was in charge.

And so if we are not actively negotiating, is that going to fall apart in how strong are the Norwegians going to be able to kind of broker that and possibly help on that?

Mr. COFFEY. Actually, I think that is a very good point, and it is a reminder of why we need to manage our expectations. Even if there is some sort of inter-Afghan agreements, it will take a very long time, it will be a very messy process. And at the end of it, I do believe that there will be some sort of insurgency remaining in the country.

India, the world's largest democracy, fights two major insurgencies against Maoist rebels and Assam separatists in their country today. Great Britain until the mid-90's fought an insurgency in northern Ireland. Even on—in January, there are two cases of attempted car bombings in northern Ireland.

Mr. YOHO. Right.

Mr. COFFEY. So there will be a insurgency remaining in some parts, in some fashion for the foreseeable future. But the goal is to find a political settlement that brings peace to most of the country that denies the chaotic space that facilitates and allows for transnational terrorism to operate and take root.

Mr. YOHO. You know, sitting on this committee, I have had the privilege to talk to a lot of different countries around. And one of the things that was brought up by a country, and I will not name it, is they would be willing to negotiate a peace deal. They are a Muslim country because they understand that—and with us trying to negotiate and not understanding tribal cultures and things like that, and then the things that we recommend, women going to school, all of those things we believe here, you know, how hard is that for us to move our agenda forward being a Western democracy

versus a Muslim country willing to step up and help negotiate that. Any thoughts on that, Ms. Miller.

Ms. MILLER. I do not expect the U.S. to be very involved in the substance of what a peace agreement is.

Mr. YOHO. That is what I see.

Ms. MILLER. I mean, frankly, I do not think it is realistic.

Mr. YOHO. I do not either.

Ms. MILLER. And I do not see at this stage in time this administration or even a future administration being terribly interested and insisting on particular substance for the deal.

I think the role that a mediator would play is truly that, mediating and trying to help the two sides to bridge some differences. But I do think there is a reality that we should be clear about, which is a peace agreement means the Taliban being in some substantial degree of power in Afghanistan. And the extent to which that means changes to the way that Afghanistan looks today is something that will have to be determined during the course of—during the course of a peace negotiation.

But that is what making a peace deal means. There is not some magical reality that there is a peace agreement and the Taliban do not continue to—

Mr. YOHO. I am going to have to cut you off because I am out of time.

Ms. MILLER. Sure.

Mr. YOHO. I appreciate what you are saying. And I hope as we back out that peace stays and that we do not see a resurgence of radical groups. Thank you.

Mr. BERA. Let me recognize the gentleman from Virginia, Mr. Connolly.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Thank you. I share the sentiment of my friend from Florida, and that is what I am worried about.

Mr. Coffey, you talked about the security of Kabul and Kandahar, that Taliban had not got their claws on those cities since 2001. Have you been to Kabul and Kandahar?

Mr. COFFEY. Yes, I have. Both.

Mr. CONNOLLY. And did you walk around freely not worried about security?

Mr. COFFEY. Well, I served in the capacity of the U.S. Army in 2005—

Mr. CONNOLLY. Right.

Mr. COFFEY [continuing]. And then I served as an aide to the British Defense Secretary.

Mr. CONNOLLY. I can assure you and I am sure you will recall there are hardly secure places in terms of individual mobility. So I think you overstayed. The fact that the Taliban does not control it hardly means they are secure places and that they have secured them. We have not.

And it might also have something to do with the fact that you and your colleagues bravely served in those cities which prevented the Taliban from retaking them. Just spitballing here. And once we withdraw, which we apparently are doing without conditions, as Ambassador Lute warns us about, the security of those places may very well collapse. We will have to see. So I just caution you, we

cannot facile about security in Afghanistan, especially once there is a U.S. withdrawal.

Ambassador Lute, were there clear conditions with metrics on the initial so-called peace agreement Ambassador Khalilzad signed with the Taliban?

Mr. LUTE. So my reading of the agreement, which is public, and I know of no other annexes and so forth. I am only reading what is public. The conditionality is very vague. And ambiguous—

Mr. CONNOLLY. It is what?

Mr. LUTE. It is very vague—

Mr. CONNOLLY. It is very what?

Mr. LUTE [continuing]. And ambiguous. It suggests that—for example, on the exchange of prisoners that it would actually take place today, but yet the counterpart agreement, U.S.-Afghan Government does not make that assurance. And as we have seen, that has broken down.

Mr. CONNOLLY. It has also been made clear by President Ghani that he did not agree to the prisoner exchange.

Mr. LUTE. Exactly. So the conditions I think are ambiguous.

Mr. CONNOLLY. God this sounds—I am of an age and maybe you are too. This has a eerie resemblance to some other peace agreement where the United States sought to withdraw almost at any price. Yes, that is right.

The Paris Agreement between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho that led to the collapse of the South Vietnamese Government. It seemed at that time and certainly in history, that that was a fig leaf for the United States to justify its getting out at the expense of an awful lot of people who collaborated and cooperated with the U.S. Government. And I am a little worried about that.

Mr. Coffey says forthrightly that the only goal that the United States had or has in Afghanistan is the fight against terrorism. Now I would argue that was absolutely an accurate statement for 2001, 2002. But you cannot pretend, as Mr. Coffey apparently wants us to do, that the intervening 20 years have not occurred. Half the population of Afghanistan are called women. And we have led the liberation of women. We have insisted they be educated, that they be allowed outside of the home. And every one of those women is at risk if the Taliban takes over. Let alone government officials, let alone government officials, let alone intellectuals, all of whom were targeted the last time the Taliban was in charge.

Now the question is Mr. Coffey says it is not the same Taliban as 2001. Do we know that? Ms. Miller, am I right to be concerned that there are people at risk if we simply withdraw precipitately?

Ms. MILLER. Yes, you are. I mean, we do not really know to what extent the Taliban has evolved. They may have to some extent. They claim to have. But they are extremely vague themselves about what their political vision is for Afghanistan. And if there was a withdrawal without a peace agreement, I do think you would see an intensified multisided civil war, probably reminiscent of what we saw in the 1990's.

On the question of the conditions, I agree with Doug that they are extremely vague. You could read that 1 of 2 ways. You could think—if you do not think the U.S. should withdraw, you could think that is a good thing because it gives the U.S. wide policy lati-

tude to decide that conditions—unspecified conditions are not met. On the other hand, it also gives the U.S. the policy latitude to simply abruptly withdraw whenever it chooses.

Mr. CONNOLLY. Yes. My concern is that there are unwitting victims who trusted the United States and its allies for 20 years. We may be tired of the war. We have reason to be tired of it. But we are where we are now. We are not back in 2001. And we created these circumstances domestically in terms of higher expectations. And every one of those people with those expectations is at risk of a Taliban takeover if we withdraw precipitately without conditions that are clear with metrics and with the consent of the Afghan Government.

Otherwise, this looks like a cut and run kind of deal to protect the United States and only the United States.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. BERA. Thanks. Let me recognize the gentleman from Pennsylvania, Mr. Perry.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am going to be the last guy up here to blame the United States for the problems in Afghanistan. We might have contributed to them with good intentions that went wrong, but they were good intentions nonetheless. And it is up to the Afghan—the problems of Afghanistan are born in Afghanistan. Let me just say that. And just to continue the record regarding Vietnam, let's remember that there was a Congress that removed all funding from the military in Vietnam and left a Republican President no choice but to as, some people say, abandon our friends there.

With that having been said, maybe Mr. Coffey, who are we depending on to ensure, as I understand it, that the Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies. Who are we depending on to make sure that that is the case?

Mr. COFFEY. In my opinion, this is one biggest questions resulting from the agreement with the Taliban. All it says is that there will be some sort of enforcement mechanism. There are no details whatsoever what this will be. And I think as policymakers start looking at this in more detail, we have to be worried about second and third order effects.

For example, just one hypothetical scenario I could quickly paint is that we have the Gulf States are the trusted intermediary to observe this. And then the sizable amount of Gulf State military focus and capability and planning and resourcing is now devoted to Afghanistan at a time when Iran is being very active in the region.

So, again, we have to think about the second and third order effects on how we go about implementing this policy. But I agree it is completely vague. And right now, if you take it at face value, it is basically trusting the Taliban which is—

Mr. PERRY. Well let me just add for the record too that I like most Americans want to see us finish the mission and come home and be out of Afghanistan. At the same time, I find it abhorrent that we would hand any bit of it over to terrorist, the enemy, et cetera, and leave it in those circumstances. But I think your point is well made, and that is a huge concern.

Let me ask—and if you want to impart on that a little bit more just for the interest of time here.

Mr. Ambassador, in light of what Mr. Coffey said, assuming you kind of agree with that, if you want to embellish the point, what are our options as the United States if the Taliban, or the Afghan Government for that matter does not live up to its end of the deal? What are our options?

Mr. LUTE. Well, we conduct—Congressman, we conduct counterterrorism operations offshore and from secure land bases all over the world where we do not have, as we do in Afghanistan today, 13,000 American troops. Which actually—the presence of those troops in no small part is the rallying cry for the Taliban.

Mr. PERRY. Sure.

Mr. LUTE. So there are techniques and methods that were not on the books in 2001 when we were attacked that over the last 20 years we have not stood still, and we have much greater intelligence capacity, especially penetration in that region than we had prior to 9/11. We have much greater, much more sophisticated strike options to enforce the counterterrorism provisions of the agreement than we had 20 years ago.

So I—I believe we can conduct counterterrorism in Afghanistan if necessary to enforce the agreement, much as we do elsewhere around the world.

Mr. PERRY. So let me just develop that a little bit. Would you agree that some of our intelligence prowess in Afghanistan enhanced as it is prior to or in comparison to 20 years ago, one of the functions of that must be because we have human intelligence on the ground? We are all over, the United States and its allies are all over Afghanistan right now. But once we leave, certainly I think that that is going to be—there is going to be—it is going to be diminished. Would you agree or not agree?

Mr. LUTE. The presence of 13,000 American troops and—

Mr. PERRY. Not only 13,000 American troops. Not only. You know, okay, go ahead.

Mr. LUTE [continuing]. And others, right, do give us human intelligence that is very useful. But we also have sophisticated technical intelligence that we did not have at the same time.

Mr. PERRY. So with the political environment here, what we are potentially expecting this week or in the following weeks regarding an AUMF, we might have the capability—we have the capability to reach out and touch anybody around the world. But is the political will going to be there to do that? And are we going to have the approval of the Afghan Government to come to their country and conduct counterintelligence or counterterrorist strikes in a sovereign nation without our presence there on the ground?

Mr. LUTE. Well, if they approved of our presence on the ground, then it seems to me even with the diminished presence, they would approve of our support—

Mr. PERRY. We are making an agreement right now to leave.

Mr. LUTE [continuing]. I mean, we all agree with that. As to the potential of an AUMF, I mean, I am not the best expert in the room in terms of prospects of a new AUMF. But the one that exists gives us sufficient latitude, as we have demonstrated in last 20

years, to strike pretty much wherever we want to around the world, if American security is at risk.

Mr. PERRY. Thank you. I yield.

Mr. BERA. Let me recognize the gentleman from California, Mr. Sherman.

Mr. SHERMAN. A cynical politician—and I am sure there are none of them here—would say that the administration would benefit the most with the maximum possible withdrawal accomplished by this fall so long as the Taliban did not have the maximum possible power until next winter.

The Israelis have come to the conclusion that often they cannot destroy a terrorist effort. They instead talk of mowing the grass. And so we either stay in Iraq—or rather in Afghanistan, or we use our air power to make sure that terrorist groups do not have anything as big as Tora Bora ever again. We are not going to be able to prevent them from finding an apartment to plot something. They plotted 9/11 in an apartment in Hamburg.

We went into Afghanistan, and we failed. We—at the beginning to create a viable and popular government. We did so in part because we were distracted by the invasion of Iraq. But in large part we failed because Pakistan did not want us to succeed. Pakistan would spiel itself at great strategic problem if it had enemies both to the east and the west. And the Durand Line which is internationally accepted border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is accepted internationally except by Afghanistan.

Does Pakistan need to keep Afghanistan weak to protect its pushdown inhabited territory and/or prevent it being between a hostile and being a hostile Pakistan? Ms. Miller?

Ms. MILLER. I would not necessarily say Pakistan has to keep Afghanistan weak. But Pakistan does want the Taliban back into some share of power in Afghanistan. And they want that—

Mr. SHERMAN. And if you are aiming for weakness, you would want neither the government in Kabul nor the Taliban to be in control—has the Taliban ever accepted the Durand Line? Could any Afghan accept the Durand Line?

Ms. MILLER. No. I mean the Pakistanis like to point out when they are of the mind to show the limitations of their influence over the Taliban. They like to point out that when the Taliban was the government in Afghanistan, they also did not recognize the—

Mr. SHERMAN. And there was the—even the Taliban did not control the north. If one wanted to make sure that an Afghan Government could not unite the whole country, be strong and perhaps covet Pakistani territory, you would look at the last 40 years and say mission accomplished.

But I want to go on to something else too. On Friday two gunmen hit the crowd at a Kabul event. They seemed to be trying to kill Abdullah Abdullah. Abdullah Abdullah is not on great terms with President Gani. He is not on great terms with the Taliban, but neither seems to have been the source of this attack or at least publicly. Instead, ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack. Should we believe them? Was this attack from ISIS?

Ms. Miller again.

Ms. MILLER. I do not have any independent information on that. They did claim it. And it is plausible given that this was a gath-

ering that was predominantly the minority Shia who have been regularly targeted by ISIS in Afghanistan.

Mr. SHERMAN. And I—we have got two men, both inaugurated as President on the same day. Are we going to have in effect a three-way coalition out of this peace deal with the Taliban being the most powerful of the three partners?

Ambassador Lute.

Mr. LUTE. So I think this points to the matter that before we can get into a conversation or the Afghans can get into a conversation with the Taliban, they have to have an intra-Government conversation with themselves. And if you compare—

Mr. SHERMAN. One would hope the other way would be to go to have the Taliban—are there—the Taliban in could effect be king-maker or strategic center—

Mr. LUTE. I think—

Mr. SHERMAN. Are there policy differences of a major import between Gani and Abdullah Abdullah? Is this about policy, or is this about just which one of them run?

Ms. Miller, I think you have an opinion on this.

Ms. MILLER. Yes, it is about power. It is not about policy. And, unfortunately, Afghanistan has a system in which an overwhelming degree of power is concentrated in the hands of the President. And that is against the backdrop of the patronage-based political system.

So it is a winner take all kind of system. They might purport to have some policy differences. But that is not what this is about. It is about who controls the reign of power and patronage.

Mr. SHERMAN. We could have done a much better job in spending more time before we establish an Afghan Government in making sure that that government was acceptable to Pakistan and did not have a winner take all corrupt patronage system.

But we did what we did and we are where we are.

And I yield back.

Mr. BERA. Let me go ahead and recognize the gentlelady from Missouri, Mrs. Wagner.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to our witnesses. I appreciate the opportunity to evaluate the steps this administration is taking to end America's longest-running war.

Much work remains to be done, but I am hopeful that the agreement the administration has negotiated will lay the foundation for a lasting peace in Afghanistan. After nearly 20 years and 2,315 brave Americans lost, it will take courage and pragmatism to bring an end to the conflict. However, security in the region must remain central to the peace process.

Ambassador Lute, I want to followup on Mr. Perry's line of questioning. In your testimony, you called the President's deal, quote, "an agreement on countering terrorism." As we work toward implementation of this counterterrorism agreement, we must be clear about the Taliban's obligations, and I think that is one of our big concerns.

What consequences, again, should the United States set for a Taliban backtracking on counterterrorism? You talked about addi-

tional strike actions. What else have we got to hold their feet to the fire here?

Mr. LUTE. Well, so we have two main elements of leverage here. One is our presence. So we could stop the troop withdrawal if the agreement is not adhered to by the other party. So, if the Taliban—I think we will have reasonably good insight in this regard. We will have good intelligence. If the Taliban do not abide by the letter of the agreement, then we can simply stop the troop withdrawal.

The other major influencing factor we have is this continued funding to the Afghan Government. We pay—Americans pay \$4 to \$5 billion a year to keep the Afghan Army and police in the field, and we completely take that government responsibility off the Afghan Government, and we pay that.

In addition, the international community pays another 4 billion, which is about three-quarters of the Afghan Federal budget. So the substantial international funding here gives us a lot of leverage, and we should use that leverage.

Mrs. WAGNER. We should use that leverage.

I believe our future engagement with Afghanistan must include ongoing support for the Afghan national defense and security forces to enhance long-term stability in the region; however, it will be difficult, I think, to balance support for the security forces with our commitment to an Afghan-led peace process.

Mr. Coffey, you mentioned that the United States should work with regional partners to find a way to continue training Afghan soldiers while inter-Afghan talks progress. How should the United States work with Central Asian nations to build the infrastructure for U.S.-Afghan training programs if American troops are being, in fact, drawn down?

Mr. COFFEY. I think one region in this whole campaign in Afghanistan that has been neglected the most is Central Asia. The Central Asian republics—

Mrs. WAGNER. I agree.

Mr. COFFEY [continuing]. Want to play an—well, specifically, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan want to play a bigger role. They realize they have a lot at stake. And they also realize they have a lot of opportunities available to them if things in Afghanistan turn around.

And we have governments in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, especially in the post-Karimov era, that are wanting to play ball with the United States when it comes to Afghanistan, and they have played a leading role in development assistance in Afghanistan.

So I think the U.S. should be figuring out, gauging, taking the temperature with these countries on what role can they play, not only for perhaps training Afghan security forces outside of Afghanistan, but, if we are going to fully withdraw U.S. forces in 14 months, then maybe having an over-the-horizon force that is very close by, will send some sort of message or act as some sort of deterrent, in addition to other things as well, but some sort of over-the-horizon force in the Central Asian region that could rapidly respond to anything that pops up in Afghanistan.

Mrs. WAGNER. Mr. Coffey, you also wrote that the goal of any counterinsurgency is to allow those with legitimate political griev-

ances to address those grievances through the political processes, and not through violence.

Mr. COFFEY. Yes.

Mrs. WAGNER. Would this entail some sort of a power-sharing agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan Government?

Mr. COFFEY. I would say that this is relative to how the Afghans view what is legitimate or not, or what is a political grievance or not. And this is why, as Americans, as we enter the intra-Afghan talks, we have to resist the temptation to try to get too involved at that stage.

The Afghans, Afghan being the Afghan Government and civil society, and the Taliban are going to have to determine how the future arrangement will be.

Mrs. WAGNER. Thank you.

I have run out of time, Mr. Chairman. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. BERA. Let me recognize the gentleman from Florida, Mr. Mast.

Mr. MAST. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I thank you all for your comments today.

You know, like many, like many of my colleagues and some of our panel, I have had the honor of going out into the dark and killing our enemies. It is an honor to do that for the United States of America.

I think daily about the toll. I see it every day—I have mentioned it before—as I walk into the Rayburn House Office Building, you walk in through our horseshoe entrance, and you see the wall with the names of our fallen from the war on terror. I think about it with the men and women that I have seen in places like Walter Reid, those that have been targeted by snipers, those that have ventured across fields of land mines and improvised explosive devices, those whose armored vehicles were struck, those that were in downed aircraft.

I think about the empty place settings at the tables of our Gold Star families. Every servicemember, every Gold Star family should have their chest out with pride for what their servicemembers have done in defense of this Nation. They kept our enemies off of our shores. They kept the fight abroad, and served with honor each and every day.

That being said, I absolutely believe that withdrawal from Afghanistan needs to occur. I do not believe that we should be paying the financial and the human toll of trying to repair or fix Afghanistan. I do not believe that we can fix Afghanistan, personally.

And, in my opinion, if Afghanistan is captive by tyrants, then they need to fight themselves to remove themselves from that captivity.

As I said, I think we need to withdraw. And, if peace comes with withdrawal, then even better. But, if we withdraw and Afghanistan allows itself to become a place again where terrorism can flourish and Afghanistan is a place where it becomes a launching point for terrorism, I would offer this as a warning. I believe that the American response, if needed again, would be far more indiscriminate than it has been to date. It would be far more harsh than it has been to date if we were ever forced to return there again, and I offer that as a warning to Afghans.

Now, I want to offer this as well: Whether or not Afghanistan and the Taliban are the same today as they were in 2001, I know for a fact that the United States of America is not the same today as it was in 2001. Our ability to have geospatial intelligence, cyber intelligence, financial intelligence, our ability to go out there and target our enemies is totally different than it was when we began this war, and it is in that that I also offer warning for allowing Afghanistan to become a launching point, but it is in that that I would ask this question to you all.

I believe that a nation can only fix itself. We, as Americans, we know that better than anybody. We fixed ourselves. We removed ourselves from tyranny. And, to do that, it took toil and suffering and sacrifice.

So, with all of the comments I have heard about not wishing for Afghanistan to fall back into civil war—I am not saying that I wish for war, but I see civil war as being the best possible avenue within Afghanistan for them to remove themselves from the tyranny that they fall under, being the Taliban.

Why do you all not wish for that conflict to occur, for them to not reach inside internally and remove the cancer that is inside of them and allow themselves to make of their nation what they want? Why do you not want to see that occur?

Mr. LUTE. So let me take a stab at that.

My estimate is that, if we withdraw precipitously and this slips into civil war, there is a good chance that the Afghan Government would not prevail. I think that, without—despite our efforts over 20 years to build capable Afghan security forces, both Army and police, they are still highly dependent on us just to maintain the stalemate today.

So, if you withdraw that support, I think we slip into a position of Taliban advantage, especially in the rural Pashtun south and east. And this, of course, is along the models of how the Taliban seized power in the mid-nineties, after civil war, after an Afghan period of civil war.

So I am concerned with the outcome of the civil war, and I do not think it would be one—I do not think it is a sure thing that the Afghan Government would prevail.

Mr. MAST. I thank you for your comments.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would offer this one thing to Afghanis: Give me freedom, or give me death.

Mr. BERA. Thank you.

If the witnesses would indulge, I think we will do a second round of questions for those members that have some, and I will recognize myself for that second round.

First off, I thank all of you for your service, and you have outlined the complexity here. If I think about this conflict in simple terms, with the three different power centers. Obviously, you have the Taliban. You have President Ghani, who I think largely is supported by the Pashtun sector. And then you have Abdullah Abdullah, mostly aligned with the northern alliance. That is simplistic, but that generally outlines some of the complexity.

Additionally, I do not know the exact unemployment rate in Afghanistan, but I am going to guess it is relatively high.

I am also going to guess that the youth unemployment rate, the number of young men that are unemployed, is relatively high.

I am going to guess that there is a sizable number of former Taliban fighters who have been displaced out of Afghanistan that may be residing over the border in Pakistan, et cetera, that, if there is peace, would return to Afghanistan with nothing to do, without jobs, et cetera.

I am going to suggest it is going to be very difficult for this body to continue to justify supporting 75 percent of the Afghan economy over a long period of time when all of us who do townhalls back home listen to our own constituents talking about how we cannot build our own infrastructure, fill the potholes, make college affordable. The difficulty of justifying that level of financial support for Afghanistan will increasingly be difficult if the Afghans cannot come together in some political settlement to govern their own country.

And that is not to say that I do not want us to figure out some level of sustained peace, whatever that looks like. We have invested both blood and dollars there, and we want to give the Afghans a reasonable chance of success. We have also got a counter drug mission there with our DEA, et cetera. The opium trade seems to be the one economic driver that is sustainable in Afghanistan,

So we do have interests there. That really is not a question, but I am simply capturing the complexity of the economic situation there. Afghanistan is also in a neighborhood where India might have an ability to provide some economic development and financial system. Pakistan is not going to want India to be that close.

Ms. Miller, you have grappled with this for a long time. Is that, again, just at a highly simplistic level, the complexity of what we face?

Ms. MILLER. Yes, and I think you have illustrated a lot of the complexities, and it is important to remember that a peace agreement, even if it happens, is a limited vehicle for solving these kinds of problems. It can ideally reduce levels of violence considerably by ending the main insurgency even if there is some continuing violence, but it is not going to solve all of Afghanistan's economic problems, the drug problem, et cetera.

It would remove one of the big obstacles to economic growth in Afghanistan, which is the ongoing conflict, but Afghanistan is a place that—I mean, it is in a poor, arid, landlocked country that has always been dependent on external resources in some form or another, and I would expect that to continue for a lengthy period of time, even if there is a peace agreement.

Mr. BERA. And, Ambassador Lute, I agree with your assessment that, if there was a civil war, that it is not a given or it is not even a likelihood that the Afghan security forces would prevail here. The Taliban, as hardened fighters may actually be in a better position.

The U.S. has made large investments in trying to create a capable Afghan security force and we have been at it for years now. Some of that has to come from within. We have equipped them probably with equipment that they do not know how to use, or cannot use in a real capable fashion. You hear the stories of folks just dropping their weapons and cutting and running.

Mr. Mast pointed out that democracy and freedom almost have to come from within, and you have got to fight for it. We have seen in our own history that we have shed blood to protect our own individual freedoms, our own values of democracy.

What is your assessment of the Afghan security forces?

Mr. LUTE. So I do not think we have shown adequate progress given the level of investment. And, if there is a number—let's say the top-five lessons from the last 20 years, this lesson about our ability or maybe the limits of our ability to generate indigenous security forces in a place as foreign to us as Afghanistan and as isolated and poor as Afghanistan ought to be in the top-five lessons.

Too often—first of all, we started late. We did not get serious about funding the Afghan security forces and putting manpower to the Afghan security forces until about 2008, 2009, so we are already 7 or 8 years into this.

Second, we created—we tried to mirror image the Afghan forces by making them look like us. We did not always put our best advisers on the front lines. We economized in terms of our advisory effort. And, frankly, we got the Afghan security forces that we paid for, and we poured money in sort of 2010, 2011, over 10 billion a year for those 2 years, but that was overspending, because it could not absorb that kind of investment.

So there are all kinds of rich lessons here to be explored in terms of our ability to build the Afghan forces.

Quite frankly, we had pockets of our quality in the Afghan forces. The commandoes, the special forces are quite good. There are elements of the air force that are quite good. But the rank and file of especially the police and the regular Army are insufficient in my view to provide security for Afghanistan.

That is why the big hope here is that you decrease the violence not by imposing security, but by compromise in a political deal. So you take the Taliban off the field because you offer them a spot in the politics, and that is the promise here.

Mr. BERA. Let me recognize the ranking member, Mr. Yoho.

Mr. YOHO. No. I think it is very interesting which way we go. You know, you have got a country that I think the average literacy rate is what, 43 percent?

Mr. LUTE. Illiteracy, or literacy?

Mr. YOHO. Illiteracy, yes.

Mr. LUTE. It is—

Mr. YOHO. It is high. And so you have got an uninformed electorate, and we know, like in our country, you know, our Founding Fathers said, as long as you have a well-informed electorate, you can keep a republic, and not that they have a republic, but it is—you have got to start at the basics, and, if you look at the population, it is 18 million. I think the average age is 18 years of age.

So you have got a whole group of people that have known nothing but war. This is what they have grown up in. This is all they know. They do not know, you know, what we are trying to invoke or place in there. And it is the good work that our military has done. You know, I think that we have done that.

Ambassador Lute, you were talking about our goal according to the peace deal, is to prevent the harboring and staging of organizations that threaten the security of the United States. It is in the

peace deal. And we have the technology. We can stay here. We can be in Colorado. We can monitor, and we can take out people. We have certainly seen that with Soleimani.

But, by doing that, it breeds more of those type of beliefs, the radical jihadists that are going to be insurgents. There has got to be a different avenue that we can go, and I am all for having a third country come broker a deal. I would prefer a Muslim country. I know India has offered to help. Pakistan despises that. But, if they do it economically, I am all for that, because I think the more people that are invested in there that we can work with—not an Iran—you know, I think, if we work toward that—and that is why I like the idea—if the Norwegians can do that, if they are willing to take that on, man, I will support you any way.

And I think we should ease out of that, but I do not see a good solution to coming out of this. You know, you have got the Afghan Government, the Ghani government. You have got Abdullah Abdullah. As you said, he thinks he is in charge. Ghani thinks he is in charge. And the people within the Taliban, there is different factions that one group has agreed they are in charge, but the other ones do not think that. They do not agree with that.

And, you know, God bless the people of Afghanistan. I just hope there is a more cohesive way that we can come out of that.

I guess my question is: Are you seeing any influence from Iran disrupting the peace process, or any other country—China, Russia, anybody? And I ask you that in that—those countries would love to have us stay over there, stay involved, stay distracted. Anybody?

Ms. MILLER.

Ms. MILLER. There is a lot of hedging going on, and so all of these countries, all of the neighboring countries, and the near neighboring countries have their friends and groups that they have influence over, you know, Greece by money.

Mr. YOHO. Yes.

Ms. MILLER. And the hedging, is my understanding, has gone up. That is not the same thing as trying to disrupt the peace process. I mean, even Iran would benefit from a somewhat more stable Afghanistan, and there are limits to how much they can hedge with the Taliban given that there is a lot of bad blood between Iran and the Taliban. So I do not think they want to see them back in a monopoly of power—

Mr. YOHO. Right.

Ms. MILLER [continuing]. In Afghanistan just to annoy the United States, but it is—you know, I think this is part of the reason why you are going to see a lot of trouble ahead in the peace process, is that rallying all these countries to be working on the same page is going to be very difficult.

Mr. YOHO. Is anybody willing to secure the gains that we have gained, you know, with women in education and things like that—is anybody willing, outside of the United States of America, to keep those positive gains? If we were to withdraw, is the Taliban going to be there? Is the Ghani government going to be there, Abdullah, or any other country going to say, you have got to keep this here?

Ms. MILLER. I mean, there are people within Afghanistan, including some associated with the Ghani government and with Abdullah and the other factions.

Mr. YOHO. But do they have the will to do that, or the means?

Ms. MILLER. To some extent, they have the will. How much this is going to be prioritized is another question, but, within the countries of the surrounding region, I do not think this is a prioritized matter.

Mr. YOHO. I agree.

I will yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. BERA. Thank you.

Mr. Perry, let me recognize you for—

Mr. PERRY. Hey, thanks, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Ambassador, keeping on with discussion previously about our options if the Taliban or the Afghan Government does not come clean or does not fulfill their portion of the agreement, understanding today is a day where milestones are supposed to be occurring, does this allow the United States to change the timeline of removal of any, all, or do we just continue to reduce our complement regardless of their actions, or how tied in are we, or what does this impose upon the United States? How locked in are we to comply?

Mr. LUTE. Well, I guess the next—Congressman, the next several days or even weeks will sort of answer our question, because the agreement itself in my reading is vague enough and ambiguous enough for the administration to have choices.

Mr. PERRY. Okay.

Mr. LUTE. You know, maybe—so maybe it was specifically designed that way, but, on the one hand, we can say, Look, there have been violations of the agreement here, and, therefore, we are going to withdraw faster because the agreement has been violated,” or we are going to stop withdrawing, and—

Mr. PERRY. And, of course, the Taliban could say, “Well, you have not withdrawn, so you have not shown any good faith, so we are going to continue the things that we do here,” right, and—

Mr. LUTE. Well—

Mr. PERRY [continuing]. That could be part of the equation as well?

Mr. LUTE. That is right, and then we would see a breakdown—

Mr. PERRY. Yes.

Mr. LUTE [continuing]. Of the even this first step agreement.

Mr. PERRY. Right.

Mr. LUTE. Right? So the thing we have in hand right now at least opens the door for the potential of progress.

Mr. PERRY. Look, I agree with you. It just—it does concern me that, you know—and Mast is a guy that—these guys that went and served their country and came home, you know, not the same person that they left, I mean, as a person who was privileged to wear the uniform of our country, I think that part of the thing that we have to do as policymakers is honor the commitments and the sacrifices that American servicemembers have made on our behalf, and, to me, honoring those commitments isn’t just pulling up, lock, stock, and barrel, and letting those spoils go to the enemy. I cannot accept that.

But let me ask you this: Let’s say that the agreement, for better or worse, goes generally well but there is still issues with the Taliban, they continue to attack, maybe they try and advance their

position from a terrorism standpoint or from a military standpoint if you will.

Does the agreement preclude the United States—well, maybe better put, preclude the Afghan Government from inviting the United States to keep a counterterrorism presence in the country?

Does the agreement preclude that possibility, that eventuality in the future?

Mr. LUTE. Do you want to try—

Mr. PERRY. Anybody. Okay. Yes. Go ahead.

Mr. COFFEY. Thank you.

Well, if you—according to the wording in the agreement, at 14 months, if everything goes well and intra-Afghan talks are progressing and terrorists are not using Afghanistan as a safe haven, then all U.S. and international forces should be out of the country.

Now, whether or not the Afghan Government, throughout the course of its intra-Afghan talks, could somehow give a concession that would allow them to negotiate some sort of extended presence of U.S. or international counterterrorism forces, who knows if this is even a possibility.

But, if you do read the agreement, by 14 months, if the talks are progressing and everyone thinks that the other parties are living up to their side of the bargain, there should be no international forces in the country.

Mr. PERRY. Anything to add, ma'am?

Ms. MILLER. Yes. I think, theoretically, a future Afghan Government, after a peace agreement, of which the Taliban is a part can certainly invite the United States to continue some kind of security cooperation and counterterrorism mission in the country. Whether that is realistic, I doubt. I mean, the Taliban, it would be very hard for them to actually agree to the presence of foreign forces on Afghan soil given that that was the whole rationale of their jihad, is to—

Mr. PERRY. Sure.

Ms. MILLER [continuing]. Eliminate the foreigners. And, frankly, it is also not popular much more broadly among the Afghan population to have foreign forces on Afghan soil, but there is nothing in the agreement that precludes that happening.

Mr. PERRY. Can I explore that with you a little bit? I am sure it is unpopular to have foreign forces on their soil, but what is not unpopular is to have foreign money to huge amounts pouring in and being the bulwark for their economy.

So, if one were tied to the other in that regard, what do you suppose the acceptance—maybe not popularity, but acceptance would be?

Ms. MILLER. I think that is a major reason why it has been accepted over these last years, is their—

Mr. PERRY. I do not think we should forget that. If we are—

Ms. MILLER. Yes.

Mr. PERRY [continuing]. Going to continue to pay—and—

Ms. MILLER. Yes.

Mr. PERRY [continuing]. Apparently we are to some extent—

Ms. MILLER. Yes.

Mr. PERRY [continuing]. Then there ought to be something that comes with that for America.

Ms. MILLER. I think there is a recognition that it is an uncomfortable reality for Afghans, that they are dependant on foreigners.

Mr. PERRY. With the chair's indulgence, Mr. Ambassador?

Mr. LUTE. Just one quick point with regard to this question of a potential invitation for American forces to stay or western forces to stay, in my view, the timelines do not add up. The chances of an intra-Afghan agreement, a peace—a real peace agreement in 14 months, I think, is just—it is unimaginable to me. This is going to be a long, difficult road.

So, at the 14-month mark, if we abide by the agreement, because the Taliban is abiding by the counterterrorism part of the agreement, and we withdraw completely, then we would face a very different question, which is: Ah, now there is a new Afghan Government, and they are inviting us back. That would be another whole set of hearings, I think, before the subcommittee.

Mr. PERRY. I thank you.

Appreciate it, Mr. Chair.

Mr. BERA. I want to thank the witnesses. I will use the chair's prerogative and give each of you, if you want to—and if there is anything we did not ask or that we should be thinking about, a minute or two to make a closing statement. Then, we will wrap up the hearing.

Ms. Miller, if you want to start.

Ms. MILLER. Sure. First, just one quick point related to a question that came up a number of times, which is what kind of enforcement mechanisms are there? There is only one enforcement mechanism against the Taliban, and that is keeping American troops in Afghanistan. There is not anything else that the U.S. can do. You keep troops there, you kill them. That is pretty much it.

Beyond that, I would just mention, apropos what Doug just mentioned about how long it might take to get a peace agreement, I fully agree that 14 months would be a very short amount of time to get a real peace agreement that could endure in Afghanistan.

I am somewhat concerned that the administration currently seems to be thinking about this in a different way, which is get a fast peace agreement within just a few weeks that is basically a very thin peace agreement that just puts together some kind of interim government, sets out a process for future resolution of issues, but does not really resolve any of the problems in Afghanistan. And I think that is a kind of peace agreement that would probably very quickly fall apart in the implementation.

So I am a bit concerned about the lack of patience to really see it through in the way that might actually—might actually result in a durable peace.

Mr. BERA. Ambassador Lute.

Mr. LUTE. So the last point I would make, Mr. Chair, is that, while we have spent some time here talking about the limitations of what has been agreed, right, what I think it is important to recognize is that this is the power of diplomacy. I mean, this is the power of a serious, dedicated diplomat like Ambassador Khalilzad, who knows the region, who speaks the local languages. I mean, after all, he is an Afghan American. I am not sure there is another American who could have pulled this off, even what we have, with all its limitations, right?

But it speaks to the power of investing in our diplomats—and here we are, the Foreign Affairs Committee—and the status of manning, the status of funding in the foreign affairs account for both the State Department, who funds—which funds people like Khalilzad, but also the Agency for International Development, which gets to some of the root problems of terrorism and insurgencies, right, and the continued funding in the Afghan Government. We have got to turn that around, or else we are destined to constantly put the hammer on these problems—our very capable military—which is often an ill-suited tool.

So this should serve as, I think, an example and a reminder of the power of diplomacy.

Mr. BERA. Ambassador Lute, thank you for making that statement. And as I often do, I do want to salute not only our troops, but also our men and women in the State Department and our foreign service officers at USAID and State for representing our country and the hard work that they do every day. So I fully appreciate that point.

Mr. COFFEY.

Mr. COFFEY. Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Two points to conclude on. The first is echoing the need for patience and holding steady, especially in the earlier days and in the early weeks of this process; it is going to be very bumpy.

I heard a lot of criticism, and we have all sort of mocked a little bit the competing governments that exist in Afghanistan right now, but we should not forget that, in well-established democracies in Europe, sometimes it takes weeks, and the case of Belgium, it took a couple of years to form a government after an election, and this is all part of the horse trading that is going on right now, internal, inside baseball, or perhaps there is a good Cricket metaphor that could be used.

But inside baseball, Afghan political politics debate that is happening, and we should give them the space and give them the time to work this out. It is not the end of the world that talks do not start today. If they do not start in like 2 months from now, then maybe we should start worrying, but let's just give it some time.

The second is—and this was not mentioned at all, and I do want to make this point. We have to make sure that the U.S. Government throughout this process of withdrawing forces consults very closely with our allies, both NATO and outside of NATO that have troops on the ground.

There has been a lot of consultation with NATO, which is great, but there are a lot of countries that are not in NATO that contribute sizable forces to Afghanistan, like the Republic of Georgia, for example, which I think is the fourth largest troop contributor, and they need to be involved in this, because international forces are supposed to withdraw in proportionate to the withdraw of U.S. forces, and it is no easy logistical task to bring troops out of a place like Afghanistan.

So I just ask that we make sure the U.S. Government consults with our allies on the withdrawal process, if we do, in fact, withdraw forces.

Thank you.

Mr. BERA. Thank you.

I want to thank the witnesses and all the members for being here today.

And, with that, the committee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:34 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation

Ami Bera (D-CA), Chairman

March 10, 2020

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation in Room 2172 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live on the Committee website at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/>):

DATE: Tuesday, March 10, 2020

TIME: 2:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: Prospects for Peace: The Way Forward in Afghanistan

WITNESSES: Ms. Laurel Miller
Director, Asia Program
International Crisis Group
(Former State Department Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan)

The Honorable Douglas Lute
Lieutenant General, U.S. Army, Retired
Senior Fellow, The Belfer Center, Harvard University
(Former U.S. Ambassador to NATO)

Mr. Luke Coffey
Director, Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy
The Heritage Foundation

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.

To fill out this form online: Either use the tab key to travel through each field or mouse click each line or within blue box. Type in information.

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Note: Red boxes with red type will NOT print.

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON _____ Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation _____ HEARING

Day Tuesday Date 3/10/2020 Room 2172

Starting Time 2:03 PM Ending Time 3:34 PM

Recesses ☐ (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____) (____ to ____)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Ami Bera

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

To select a box, mouse click it, or tab to it and use the enter key to select. Another click on the same box will deselect it.

TITLE OF HEARING:

"Prospects for Peace: The Way Forward in Afghanistan"

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

See attached.

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

N/A

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or
TIME ADJOURNED 3:34pm

Clear Form

Note: If listing additional witnesses not included on hearing notice, be sure to include title, agency, etc.

Subcommittee Staff Associate

WHEN COMPLETED: Please print for subcommittee staff director's signature and make at least one copy of the signed form. A signed copy is to be included with the hearing/markup transcript when ready for printing along with a copy of the final meeting notice (both will go into the appendix). The signed original, with a copy of the final meeting notice attached, goes to full committee. An electronic copy of this PDF file may be saved to your hearing folder, if desired.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC, AND NONPROLIFERATION

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OPENING STATEMENT CHAIRMAN BERA

Opening Statement

The Honorable Ami Bera

Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Prospects for Peace: The Way Forward in Afghanistan

Tuesday, March 10, 2020

10:00am, 2172 Rayburn House Office Building

I want to thank Ranking Member Yoho, the members of this subcommittee, our witnesses, and members of the public for joining us at today's hearing.

Modern U.S. involvement in Afghanistan was born out of one brutally tragic day. That was the despicable and horrific attack on September 11th, 2001. It was a turning point in American history, and we have felt the consequences ever since.

9/11 was the singularly defining day in our relationship with Afghanistan and its people. It led to the entry of American and NATO troops in the country, a decision I supported at the time. Nearly twenty years later, we are still there. In the interim, according to some counts, we've lost nearly 2,500 American lives, tens of thousands of American were wounded, and we have spent about a trillion dollars in military operations and development and reconstruction efforts in the country.

The toll on the Afghan people has been greater. A United Nations report released last month documented over 100,000 civilians killed or injured in the last ten years.

The Bush and Obama administrations, and now the Trump administration have each tried to bring America's longest war to a close. The President has been particularly up front about his intentions to bring our troops home, a sentiment I share. He empowered former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, to negotiate directly with the Taliban.

The result was that the United States and the Taliban signed a peace deal calling for the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan within 14 months in exchange for a Taliban commitment to not provide safe harbor for those who would attack the U.S. or our allies. The next phase in the process are negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

The signing came after a successful seven-day reduction in violence in which neither the United States, Taliban, nor the Afghan government carried out offensive security operations. After twenty years, the world and the Afghan people witnessed seven days of peace. While the deal did not require a reduction in violence after its signing, it specified that a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire would be an item for further discussion between the Taliban and Afghan government.

Within a week, we saw how fragile this process will be. The Taliban launched an attack on the Afghan government in Helmand Province, which was followed by a U.S. airstrike on Taliban forces. The week of peace had ended, leaving the world to wonder whether we are back to normal order.

The most important part of the deal - negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government - may prove even harder to carry out and seem to already be faltering. The deal called for negotiations to begin by today - March 10th. It also required an Afghan government-Taliban prisoner swap before talks between the two sides commence but a swap has not yet taken place.

Finally, ongoing tensions between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah will make it even harder for the government of Afghanistan to form its own negotiating team that reflects the entire country. Both President Ghani and CEO Abdullah have declared themselves President following a contentious and close election, and even held swearing-in ceremonies at the same time yesterday. The U.S. has recognized Ghani.

Not surprisingly, as of today, the Afghan government had not formed a negotiating team to work on a lasting peace deal with the Taliban. It's also an open question whether the Taliban will actually enter into good-faith negotiations with the Afghan government. NBC News [reported](#) late last week that the "U.S. government has collected persuasive intelligence that the Taliban do not intend to

honor the promises they have made in the recently signed deal with the United States". So, as we consider how our drawdown will occur, we need to be mindful that the Afghan government may not be ready or willing to engage, and the Taliban may be acting in bad faith.

The road to peace has not been easy. We are not there yet. As the U.S. begins to draw down its presence, we once more find ourselves asking the question that has haunted American and international leaders since we entered Afghanistan:

What does responsible withdrawal look like?

I look forward to the testimony of expert witnesses today so that they can take our questions and explain to the American people the best path forward. I hope we can hear from them how we can secure the gains we've made in the country, particularly for women and girls. I'd like to also hear how we can help the Afghan government sustain itself and govern the entire country. With that, I will turn it over to the ranking member, Mr. Yoho.