

**A PATHWAY FOR PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN:
EXAMINING THE FINDINGS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE AFGHANISTAN
STUDY GROUP**

HEARING

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND
REFORM

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Friday, February 19, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:46 a.m., via WebEx, Hon. Stephen F. Lynch (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Lynch, Welch, Johnson, DeSaulnier, Speier, Grothman, Gosar, Foxx, and Higgins.

Mr. LYNCH. Again, good morning. The committee will now come to order. Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any time.

I will now recognize myself for an opening statement.

Good morning, everyone. Before we begin our first subcommittee hearing of the 117th Congress, I'd like to welcome members on both sides of the aisle and congratulate the gentleman from Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman, for returning as our ranking member. I look forward to working with all of you as we conduct meaningful oversight of the many critical national security and foreign policy challenges facing the United States.

Since the war in Afghanistan began nearly 20 years ago, more than 775,000 of our brave men and women in uniform have deployed to Afghanistan. More than 2,400 have made the ultimate sacrifice, and another 20,000 have been wounded. The war is now the longest in our Nation's history and has cost American taxpayers more than \$860 billion.

On February 29, 2020, after more than a year of diplomatic negotiations led by U.S. special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, the Trump administration, and the Taliban, signed a landmark agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan.

This agreement was established—excuse me. This agreement established a timeline for the complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, so long as the Taliban agreed to begin peace talks with the Afghan Government and to sever its ties with al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations.

In his first public testimony before Congress on the U.S.-Taliban peace deal in September of last year—and that was before our sub-

committee—Ambassador Khalilzad reported that the Taliban had not fully complied with their counterterrorism commitments under the agreement and stating, I will quote, “With regard to terrorism and al-Qaida in this setting, what I can say is that the Taliban has taken some steps, based on commitments they have made, positive steps, but they have some distance still to go,” end quote.

Despite these shortcomings, the Trump administration began a military drawdown in Afghanistan that even outpaced the terms of the February 2020 peace agreement. Today, 2,500 troops remain in Afghanistan, even as the Taliban violence continues, and the security situation on the ground continues to deteriorate.

Upon taking office last month, the Biden administration announced its intent to review the U.S.-Taliban agreement, including whether the Taliban remains in compliance with its terms. The administration also stated its commitment to protect the historic gains made by Afghan women and girls as the peace process continues.

That brings us to this important hearing, and we are honored to be joined today by the three co-chairs of the Afghanistan Study Group. I’d also like to take a moment to thank the nonpartisan U.S. Institute of Peace for the support and expertise they provided to the study group during the course of its work.

In the Fiscal Year 2020 omnibus bill, Congress, led by Senator Graham, Senator Patrick Leahy, and the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee of State Foreign Ops and Related Programs, they tasked the independent and bipartisan Afghanistan Study Group to, quote, “consider the implications of a peace settlement, or the failure to reach a settlement, on U.S. policy, resources, and commitments in Afghanistan.”

After nearly nine months of review and consultation with current and former U.S. and Afghan Government officials, allies and partners, and other key stakeholders, the Afghanistan Study Group issued its final report earlier this month. The study group concluded, in part, that, for the first time since 2001, an opportunity now exists to achieve a just and durable peace in Afghanistan, but this will not be easy.

And the current situation has left President Biden with few good options, as the study group explained in their final report—and, again, I quote—“On the one hand, the Taliban have signaled publicly that if all international forces are not withdrawn by May 1, 2021, as envisioned in the Doha Agreement, they will resume their jihad against the foreign presence and will withdraw from the peace process. On the other hand, a withdrawal may, under certain circumstances,” excuse me, “under current conditions, will likely lead to a collapse of the Afghan state and a possible renewed civil war,” close quote.

So nearly 20 years of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan might very well be defined by the next three to six months, likely with profound consequences for U.S. national security and the future stability of the region.

We are thankful for the thoughtful and deeply probing analysis of the Afghan Study Group, and we are thankful for the patriotic service of the members of that group and our distinguished witnesses. We look forward to their testimony.

And, with that, I will now yield to the ranking member from the great state of Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman, for his opening statement.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I'm glad you're holding the hearing so quickly. And I'd like to thank the study group for showing up today, or whatever, at least for being at the hearing virtually.

As we discussed at last week's markup, it is, I think, sometimes easier, you know, if we do have hearings in the Capitol, at least the option to it. We've done it on other committee hearings, and it seems to work out OK. Not everybody has to show up.

In any event, this year is the 20th anniversary of United States being attacked by al-Qaida in 2001. Those brutal attacks took the lives of nearly 3,000 innocent Americans in New York, Pennsylvania, and The Pentagon.

Days later, on October 7, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom and invaded Afghanistan, leading to the toppling of the Taliban's terrorist regime. The United States has been in Afghanistan ever since.

Unfortunately, every time we meet to discuss ongoing efforts in Afghanistan, the same issues have come up. To date, the U.S. taxpayers spent over \$1 trillion in Afghanistan, either supporting combat or construction. In America's longest war, we're just starting to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

President Trump reduced the American footprint in Afghanistan from over 100,000 soldiers during the Obama Administration to just a few thousand. On February 29 of last year, under the strong leadership of President Trump, the United States signed a peace agreement to gradually withdraw Americans. This agreement will create a safe and prosperous Afghanistan by ensuring that it will not be a safe harbor for terrorists.

Now, I understand, and I'll be the first to admit, that just packing our bags and leaving is dangerous, which is why we're having this hearing today. That type of withdrawal will create a vacuum for terrorism, and potentially set back social and governmental gains in Afghanistan, not to mention, I think it could lead to the possibility of Iran and Russia increased presence in the region.

What I do believe is that it should be our goal to reduce our global military footprint and bring troops home. This just needs to be done safely and with American national security interests at heart.

I want to thank you and your group for the hard work you've done to produce this report. The report makes specific recommendations and ought to advance American interests in Afghanistan and the region, such as clarifying the end state, working to promote the success of the peace negotiating process, and having an overarching regional diplomatic strategy. Each of your recommendations suggest the need for a safe, stable, and independent Afghanistan. It's important for the Biden administration to continue the hard work of President Trump to advance these goals for achieving independence.

I look forward to hearing from you today.

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

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you, Mr. Grothman. The gentleman yields back.

I will now introduce our distinguished panel of witnesses, all of whom are co-chairs of the Afghanistan Study Group, and two of whom are old friends, and I had the honor and pleasure of working with them in Afghanistan at various times.

We are honored today to be joined by the distinguished former U.S. Senator from New Hampshire, the Honorable Kelly Ayotte. Kelly Ayotte represented New Hampshire in the U.S. Senate from 2011 to 2016, where she chaired the Armed Services Committee on Readiness. Senator Ayotte co-chairs the Commission on Health Security at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. She is also a board member of the Board of Advisors from the Center on Military and Political Power at the Foundation of Defense of Democracy and the Aspen Institute's Economic Strategy Group.

General Joseph F. Dunford is a native of south Boston and Quincy. General Dunford served as the 19th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Nation's highest-ranking military officer. In this role, he was the principal military adviser to the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council from 2015 to 2019.

General Dunford was commissioned in 1977 and served as infantry officer at all levels, to include commanding the 5th Marine Regiment during Operation Iraqi Freedom. His experience of leading large organizations included serving as the 36th Commandant of the United States Marine Corps, the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, and commander of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Welcome.

Ms. Nancy Lindborg is the co-chair of the—is also a co-chair of the Afghanistan Study Group. Nancy Lindborg is president and CEO for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, a position she assumed in August 2020. She is responsible for the overall management of the foundation and its grantmaking activities. She previously served as the president and CEO of the U.S. Institute of Peace from February 2015 through August 2020.

So, I want to welcome all of you, and thank you for the wonderful work that you have done, the patriotic service you have rendered to our country.

So, before I swear in our witnesses, I should note that, while the U.S. Institute of Peace facilitated the work of the Afghanistan Study Group, the co-chairs are not affiliated with the Institute. However, I do wish to thank the Institute for the support they provided to the study group.

The witnesses will now be muted so we can—be unmuted—excuse me—so we can swear them in.

I ask you to please raise your right hands.

Do you swear or affirm that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Ms. AYOTTE. I do.

Ms. LINDBORG. I do.

General DUNFORD. I do.

Mr. LYNCH. OK. Let the record show that the witnesses have answered in the affirmative. Thank you.

Without objection, your written statements will be made part of the record.

Senator Ayotte, you are now recognized for a five-minute summation of your testimony.

**STATEMENT OF HON. KELLY A. AYOTTE, CO-CHAIR,
AFGHANISTAN STUDY GROUP**

Ms. AYOTTE. Thank you, Chairman Lynch and Ranking Member Grothman and members of the committee for taking the time on this important and difficult topic.

We have submitted the Afghanistan Study Group's report as our formal testimony, representing not only ourselves, but the full complement of members whose congressional mandate it was to deliver our analysis and recommendations. It has been an honor to chair this study group, supported by the United States Institute of Peace, alongside General Dunford and Nancy Lindborg, and the esteemed member of—group of members who helped us, 12 of them, along with 26 superb senior advisors.

Collectively, those who contributed to this report have a breadth of leadership experience in foreign policy, national security, humanitarian aid, Democratic institutions, and counterterrorism.

The study group conducted 40 consultations with over 60 key stakeholders in Afghanistan, including U.S. officials and former officials, Afghan officials, Afghan members of civil society, and the private sector regional stakeholders, allied partners, multilateral organizations, as well as academics and activists.

We understand and we're humble about the complexity and difficulty of the decisions that need to be made in Afghanistan. However, we believe that our recommendations, which were just issued in January, are particularly timely.

This is a crucial moment for Afghanistan and the United States. The United States needs to decide whether we will continue to keep our troops in the country past May 1, the deadline set forth in the Doha Agreement, in order to support the peace process, and protect our national security interests.

There are currently 2,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan. That number has been reduced from 14,500 over the last several years during the Trump administration. And now, for the first time since 2002, there are almost twice as many non-American NATO troops supporting the mission in Afghanistan.

Yesterday and the day before, NATO defense ministers met to discuss the future of our alliance in Afghanistan. Our NATO allies have been anxious to know what the U.S. will do. They have stood by us for two decades, and how we end our engagement in Afghanistan matters to our NATO allies, and may impact our ability to call on our partners in the future outside of NATO countries.

Although we thoroughly considered other alternatives which we detailed in the report—and you certainly can look at that analysis—we recommend that U.S. troops remain beyond May 1. We believe a precipitous withdrawal of U.S. and international troops in May would be catastrophic for Afghanistan, leading to civil war, and allow the reconstitution of terror groups, which threaten the United States within an 18-to 36-month period. Our presence in Afghanistan has contained these groups and protected our homeland.

Let me be clear. Although we recommend that our troops remain beyond May 1, we propose a new approach toward Afghanistan,

which aligns our policies, practices, and messaging across the U.S. Government to support the Afghan peace process rather than prosecute a war. Our troops would remain not to fight a forever war, but to guarantee the conditions for a successful peace process and to protect our national security interests to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a haven again for terrorists who threaten the United States of America.

Our report calls for a negotiated peace that ends the war and allows our troops to eventually come home. We believe that it is possible for the United States, with the engagement from countries in the region and our NATO partners, to negotiate an extension of the May 1 Doha deadline because the process got off to a late start, and the conditions indicated in the Doha Agreement have not been met.

Achieving peace in Afghanistan requires conditionality on all sides. That conditionality includes the reduction of violence by the Taliban, and a demonstrated ability by the Taliban to contain terror groups in Afghanistan, and by the Afghan Government to deal with corruption and to accept that the Taliban will have some role in the future of Afghanistan.

Sustainable peace will not be possible without an inclusive government.

Chairman, if I may continue 30 more seconds? Thank you.

Based on our experiences and consultations, it's clear that civil society has been greatly enhanced in Afghanistan over the last two decades and has an important role to play going forward.

Finally, we recommend an intensified and active regional diplomacy to support the peace negotiations in Afghanistan going forward. After two decades of war, there is not a military solution in Afghanistan for either side, but the best hope to protect American interests and help preserve the gains made by the Afghan people, is to align U.S. policy to support the opportunity for a negotiated peace settlement.

Thank you.

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you, Senator. I've been known to have a slow gavel, so we won't hold people to the exact second.

But next, we will hear from my dear friend, General Joe Dunford, for five minutes for a summation of his testimony.

General, you are recognized.

STATEMENT OF GENERAL JOSEPH F. DUNFORD, JR., CO-CHAIR, AFGHANISTAN STUDY GROUP

General DUNFORD. Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this morning, and it's an honor to join my fellow co-chairs and to represent the members of the Afghan Study Group.

The Senator outlined our mandate, our methodology, and our core recommendations, and I'd like to briefly expand on her comments by outlining the key judgments that we made during our deliberations, and provide some further context on our recommendations.

Based on the extensive consultations that the Senator mentioned with key stakeholders, the experience of the Afghan Study Group,

as well as the senior advisors, we made key judgments about Afghanistan in four major areas: the security environment, the stability of the Afghan state, regional dynamics, and the current peace negotiations themselves. And I want to summarize a few of the more important judgments so you can understand the logic behind our recommended approach, but also the framing of the alternative pathways that the chairman mentioned that are included in the report. These are pathways that we considered, but we did not recommend them.

With regard to security, many will point to the fact that the terrorist threat has been reduced, and we agree with that assessment, but we believe that that is because of the U.S.-trained Afghan forces and continued U.S. military presence. And, as the Senator mentioned, as a result of our deliberations, we believe that the threat can reconstitute itself in a period of about 18 to 36 months and present a threat to the homeland and to our allies.

We conclude, and it will be no surprise to members of the committee, that the Afghan forces are highly dependent on U.S. funding, as well as operational support, and they will remain so for some time. And we also conclude that the probability of civil war is high in the wake of a precipitous U.S. withdrawal.

With regard to stability of the state, our analysis and recommendations on stability of the Afghan state were very much informed by the work that led to the Afghan, or to the Fragile State Act, and our judgment is that Afghanistan meets the definition of a fragile state. But, despite very real challenges, with support, the Afghan Government can deliver minimally effective governance.

And Ms. Lindborg is going to address further how the Afghan or how the Fragile State Act informed our recommendations in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the most important judgments we offer concerns the opportunity to see enhanced regional and broader diplomatic effort in support of the Afghan peace negotiations, as well as a possible peace agreement. This issue was raised in a large number of our engagements. And there does, in fact, appear to be an end state that would satisfy all regional stakeholders, to include Pakistan, China, Russia, India, and others.

And by no means, when I outline these factors, do we believe it would be easy, then, to take this and create an overarching regional diplomatic approach, but we do offer foundational elements for that diplomatic approach, and they include an Afghanistan that is at peace with its neighbors; one that doesn't allow its territory to be used for attacks on other countries; one that is not a venue for proxy warfare; one that is not a source of mass migration or illicit narcotics; and one that is interconnected with the region.

Our judgments with regard to the ongoing Afghan peace negotiations include the fact that we believe our military presence and our diplomatic engagement, which are a physical manifestation of U.S. commitment, are actually foundational for the Afghan peace negotiations. We believe that continued support to Afghan state institutions throughout the peace process will be necessary.

And the Senator mentioned our engagements did highlight that the Taliban were not meeting the conditionality of the February 2020 agreement, and she pointed out that that was as a result of

not seeing a broad reduction in violence, and as a result of not seeing the Taliban demonstrate the will or capacity to prevent al-Qaida from using Afghanistan as a platform.

And I want the members of the committee to know that we also relied on the recently released United Nations report as well as the January 2021 U.S. Treasury Report when we made our judgments about Taliban and their current relationship with al-Qaida.

The third element of that, of course, is progress toward peace in the former peace agreement, and we haven't seen that progress to date.

It's also important at this point that I highlight, with regard to the peace negotiations, that we've placed equal emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of the current Afghan Government in that peace process.

Informed by these judgments, we determined our approach in the recommendations we made. And I want to emphasize, we did look at all the various pathways that we believe are available to President Biden before offering the recommendations that the Senator outlined. And we did spend as much time on the alternative pathways as we did on our recommendation. And we made every effort to give this challenge a fresh look, and we believe that the way that we've integrated our security, diplomatic and assistance recommendations, does provide new opportunities, even as we seek to leverage the ongoing Afghan peace negotiations.

And without understating the challenges, I think each of the three of us would emphasize that the group was compelled by the argument to take advantage of the opening that currently exists with an emphasis on meeting our national interests, clarity of commitment, acting in accordance with our allies, conditionality, and increased emphasis on diplomacy.

And, Chairman, I look forward to your questions which will allow us to examine our work and these recommendations in more detail. Once again, thank you very much for conducting this hearing on such an important and timely topic.

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you, General.

Ms. Lindborg, you are now recognized to give us a five-minute summation of your testimony. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF HON. NANCY LINDBORG, CO CHAIR,
AFGHANISTAN STUDY GROUP**

Ms. LINDBORG. Thank you. And I add my thanks to Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, and members of the subcommittee. Thanks for this opportunity to discuss the report of the congressionally mandated Afghan Study Group. It has been an honor to serve alongside my two very distinguished co-chairs, and all the members of the Afghan Study Group.

My co-chairs have ably described the core approach and key recommendations of the report. I will simply go beyond their comments to emphasize that we do believe that there is an important opportunity to pursue a negotiated peace that has not existed before, and we're clear there is no military solution, and, therefore, recommend this new approach that, for the first time, creates this clear goal of a negotiated peace; enables us to align our messaging policies and practices; and, as you heard from General Dunford,

puts a heavy emphasis on partnership with our allies and regional diplomacy.

These recommendations build on the work of previous study groups that have focused on the links between fragile states and violent extremism. And, as the former president of U.S. Institute of Peace, I was pleased to be a part of two of these study groups, and to witness, in December 2019, the signing into law of the Global Fragility Act with bicameral and bipartisan support.

These studies, and the Global Fragility Act, informed our deliberations by underscoring that fragile states, which are characterized by the breakdown of the social compact between the state and its people, provide a breeding ground for violent extremism. And we learned from 9/11 that state fragility presents a threat to our security even when geographically remote, and Afghanistan certainly qualifies as a fragile state.

So, we understand the fatigue of dealing with Afghanistan, so let me underscore we are not recommending a blank check to the Afghan Government. The report is clear about the importance of ensuring that not just the Taliban, but also the government of Afghanistan is held accountable for meeting conditions. The government must engage seriously in the peace negotiations, as well as exercise greater responsibility in curbing corruption.

The continued corruption and lack of access to justice for too many of their citizens consistently results in widespread grievances that are easily exploitable by the Taliban. This is a common characteristic of fragile states that often leads to violent extremism.

So, the report, therefore, lays out an approach that's based on the core principals of the Global Fragility Act: first and foremost, a shared goal across our security, development, and diplomacy efforts, and then focused coherent international support to keep key institutions functioning, in this case, until there is a peace agreement; working with our allies, as agreed upon in the 2020 Geneva donor conference that lays out four years of strict conditions, we should put large infrastructure or other expansive projects aside for now, continue our support for essential humanitarian assistance, basic services, and, importantly, support for civil society.

The growth of civil society over the past two decades, which now includes a new generation of young Afghans, is a bright spot, and they have consistently and courageously elevated critical values of human rights, women's rights, and democracies, which we believe are fundamental to a future stable Afghanistan. They are the constituency demanding a sustainable peace.

So, ultimately, a peaceful Afghanistan that doesn't present a threat to the region, or to the United States, it will ultimately require an inclusive, accountable government able to sustain a social compact with its citizens. This will take a long time. But first, it requires peace and a stop to the fighting.

So, I will just underscore the moment that we have before us by focusing seriously on the peace process. We have, for the first time, this opportunity to align messages, policies, and actions, because too often in the past, we've pursued military victory at the same time as a peace process. We've surged while announcing withdrawals. We've let short-term counterterrorist interests undermine long-term institution building. Our multiple objectives pursued

with multiple tools by multiple parts of our government bureaucracy have often undermined each other.

We have confused our Afghan partners and regional actors, which often leads to hedging behavior that has further undermined our ability to achieve our objectives and withdraw military forces.

So, this report calls for a new approach, calls for a negotiated peace that ends the war and allows our troops to come home with honor, recognizing that this requires effective conditionality on all sides, but that a negotiated peace would best serve American interests and help preserve the gains of the Afghan people over the last two decades.

Thank you.

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you very much.

The chair now recognizes himself for five minutes for questions.

So, we're at an important crossroads right now. I do appreciate the report. I want to recommend to the members—so the report—the Afghan Study Group report is about 88 pages, but I thought some of the most helpful material was at the very end. And, you know, sort of as—not as an afterthought, but as an addendum.

There are four pathway alternatives. As I understand it, the Afghanistan Study Group began to write this report prior to a time when we knew who was going to be the next President. So, I think it's helpful to know that, in the context of this report, the group did not know whether they were advising President Biden or President Trump. And I think that makes it a better report.

I do want to say that, of the four pathways and the red-team analysis, you know, present very different scenarios, but I would recommend that members read those to understand the likely consequences of choosing one path versus another.

So, my question to the panel really—and I know you've each taken, you know, slices of your responsibility during your testimony, but, OK, so May 1 comes. We know that the Taliban anticipates complete withdrawal. The previous administration pointed to a timeline-specific determination that they would withdraw. But, at the same time, we see that the global terrorism index has Afghanistan at the top of the list. It has had more terrorism than any other nation on the planet. Twenty of the largest terrorist attacks on the planet last year, six of them were in Afghanistan.

We've got a pattern of assassination ongoing right now, major government officials being assassinated, religious leaders assassinated, journalists assassinated, judges assassinated, all personnel who are, I think, inimical to Taliban rule. You know, they're eliminating their opponents.

So, my question is: We come up to May 1, and we announce—I guess we announce an extension of our presence there, and I'm concerned because, even now, even now, we have force protection issues, and I think General Dunford has spoken to that previously.

What does it look like? What does it look like? And I don't expect that we have an opportunity between now and May 1 to negotiate an extension with the Taliban. They seem to be of a mind that, you know, they've been led to believe by the earlier administration that May 1, we're gone.

And so tell me what that looks like? Tell me how that rolls out in terms of next steps if we chose that path, that we extend the

date of withdrawal? Does it require us to put in more troops for force protection?

I know that the previous Secretary of Defense, we met with him in Afghanistan, and he recommended that there be a minimum of 4,500 troops for force protection services—purposes, and now, we're a couple thousand below that.

So, tell me what that looks like on May 1 if we adopt your primary recommendation of extending the deadline and adopting the four initiatives that you've recommended?

And anyone who feels, you know, best able to answer that, go right ahead. I know you're all equally capable.

General DUNFORD. Chairman, I'll start, and then—and let the other co-chairs fall in on it. I mean, that is—what you've got in that is the critical question. And I would say upfront that we have humility about our ability to predict what the Taliban will or won't do if we stay past the 1st of May, but there are some factors that we considered.

No. 1 is, what leverage do we have over the Taliban? And there is three things that we look at when we think about the Taliban; one is they want relief from sanctions; the other is they want international legitimacy; and the third is that they recognize that, regardless of the future character of the Afghan Government, continued international support is going to be required.

So, to mitigate the risks associated with May 1, we're not advocating for a unilateral declaration that we remain behind after the 1st of May. We're recommending that the Taliban actually hear that same message from other regional stakeholders, not the least of which is China, Russia, and Pakistan.

And, so, we do think that continued negotiations with the Taliban to highlight the fact that we remain committed to the February 2020 agreement, and we've demonstrated that by drawing down to 2,500, we remain committed. But due to the reasons that my co-chairs outlined in their opening statement, we haven't had the time to fully implement the agreement, and the core conditions outlined in the agreement haven't yet been met.

So, the mitigation is both in terms of the approach that we would take in conjunction with others, as well as the narrative, if you will, about why an extension past May 1 is required.

The second question you asked is also an important question, which is: Do we need to increase forces if the Taliban don't accept an extension past the 1st of May, and if they then would re-initiate attacks against U.S. Forces?

And, Chairman, we heard exactly what you heard. In the fall, what we were told by commanders on the ground and the Department of Defense was that 4,500 U.S. Forces, in addition to the NATO forces that are there, was the minimum level to address both the mission as well as protection of our forces in the context of the conditions that existed in the fall. And, as you've highlighted, those conditions have only gotten worse since the fall.

So, in our judgment, 2,500 would not be adequate should the Taliban re-initiate attacks against the United States, and we've recommended that the administration engage with the leadership to make sure President Biden has that information as he makes his decision.

But I think the important thing is that we believe that the impact of the May 1 decision can be mitigated, again, with both diplomacy, and by using leverage. Sometimes we think we don't have any leverage over the Taliban. They have been using violence to gain leverage in the negotiations, but we assess that the Taliban recognize that they cannot achieve their political objectives merely through violence, and particularly in those three areas that I mentioned.

I'll stop there and see if the other co-chairs want to add to that.

Ms. AYOTTE. What I would just add is that the regional partners—some aren't partners, some are just regional countries—for us, have an interest. While they want us to leave, it's—they understand it creates a very big problem for them if we precipitously leave in terms of migration, in terms of the civil war in Afghanistan to their own interests.

And, so, they also—in this negotiation process, it is why we recommend sort of a re-invigorated regional diplomacy in the context not just of the peace negotiations going forward, but in renegotiating this May 1 deadline. And we heard that with our consultations from the regional countries that we were able to connect with, including Pakistan. And, so, I think that will also help leverage this with the Taliban.

Ms. LINDBORG. Chairman, I would just add, thank you for noting the pathways that are included in the report, and I do commend those, because we looked very carefully at what the alternatives are, understanding that, you know, these are not great choices, but that we believe that the recommendations provide the best options, and enable us to test the proposition that this is the possibility for peace against an almost certain outcome of collapse and civil war were we to leave, without the conditions having been met on May 1.

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you very much.

I will now recognize the ranking member, the gentleman from Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman, for his five minutes of questioning.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Thank you. We've been in a conflict with Afghanistan for two decades. Last fall, we had the Doha Agreement. I'll ask any one of you: Is it a fair characterization to say that, without this agreement, there wouldn't be peace talks now between the Afghan Government and the Taliban?

Ms. AYOTTE. Yes. I think we need to acknowledge that this was important to bring these peace negotiations forward. It's hard to go back and know whether it would have happened, but it clearly—the push toward the peace negotiations was a very important step by the Trump administration that brought us to this point.

Mr. GROTHMAN. When we negotiate with the Afghan—with the Taliban, do you feel that it is enough a monolith or whatever that they have the ability to stick with their side of the deal?

General DUNFORD. Ranking Member Grothman, what I would say is that we believe the leadership of the Taliban can speak with one voice, and the evidence of that was, in the early days when there was an agreement to have a complete cease-fire for a period of time, the Taliban actually had the authority and had the ability to effect that cease-fire.

So, we know that there is a degree—a high degree of control by Taliban leadership over all their fighters. I would not, my own judgment, use the word “monolith,” and it’s not automatic that, if we make an agreement with Taliban leadership, that all their fighters across Afghanistan will stop fighting.

I do think it’s fair to say that we can affect a significant reduction of violence and set conditions such that the Afghan forces are much more capable of providing security should the character of government change.

Mr. GROTHMAN. You mentioned before the problems we have with the current Afghan Government. What do the—I guess because Afghanistan itself is nowhere near a monolith, what do the people of Afghanistan think right now of the Taliban, of the Afghan Government? And I talked to a guy who was over in Afghanistan about four years ago, who worked for me a little, What do they think of the United States?

General DUNFORD. Yes. I can start just—my mic’s open and then let the other co-chairs jump in. But the one thing that we heard universally from the Afghans—and we spent a lot of time, as the other co-chairs mentioned, with civil society, Afghan leaders, and there is a very strong consensus for peace inside of Afghanistan. But, to be candid, not peace at any cost.

And they all emphasized the need to protect the gains that have been made in Afghanistan over the past two decades with regard to civil society, women, and so forth. And they also said that any future Afghanistan must be consistent with the values that are memorialized in the current constitution.

And, with regard to—and now I’m not speaking of the Taliban, but I’m speaking about Afghans that are in the government and civil society. I think, universally, they recognize the important role that the United States continues to play in brokering a peace agreement and bringing stability and security to Afghanistan. I don’t think it would be an overstatement to say that they view us as indispensable in that regard.

With regard to the Taliban, I think I would just conclude by saying there is a high degree of mistrust across Afghan society about the Taliban, and about the ability to have them included in a future government. But this is really the gist of what has to occur inside of the Afghan peace negotiation is, they’ve got to come up with a framework within which there can be a character of government that is consistent with the values of the constitution, and yet, allows the political differences that clearly exist in Afghanistan to be settled without force.

And I’ll let the other co-chairs followup if I’ve missed something.

Ms. AYOTTE. One thing I would comment on is that the Afghanistan of today is different than the Afghanistan that the Taliban ruled 20 years ago, and that’s because of civil society. And the notion that the members of this civil society and the people are going to accept that same kind of rule, I think, is a very different situation and that that won’t be acceptable to them if we go back to 20 years ago.

So, just a point that we heard over, and I’m sure many of you have also heard that when you traveled to Afghanistan.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Yes. It's kind of interesting. I was struck by the number of young people on social media. I mean, that, by itself, I would think, would dramatically change the thinking of the average person as opposed to the more agrarian society that we had 20 years ago.

I'll narrow it down, though, because I talked to a guy who, as I said, worked for me. Do the average Afghans have a high or low opinion of the United States? Does it bother them that they're there? Do they like us? Do they view us as a positive force, or do they view us as a bunch of outsiders and they wish we'd get out of there?

General DUNFORD. My own experience, in that regard, is it's not one voice. I think all Afghans, out of pride, would wish that they could protect themselves and not require U.S. Forces to be there. I think that's a fair statement.

Clearly, those of the same ideology as the Taliban want the United States gone. I think, universally, the assessment of the rest of the Afghans, even those that want to see us eventually gone, recognize, that at least for the near term, and particularly in the context of bringing about peace and getting a peace agreement for the Afghan peace negotiations, they want the United States, perhaps, to leave at some point, but not precipitously.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. I'll give you another question about, in general, the Afghan Government.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentleman's time has expired.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Oh, I'm sorry.

Mr. LYNCH. That's OK. That's OK. And, if we want to go back to a second round, we can do that.

But I do want to recognize the chairwoman of the full committee, Mrs. Maloney, for five minutes for her questioning.

Mrs. MALONEY. Thank you so much, Chairman Lynch, and thank you so much, Ranking Member Grothman, for your continued efforts on the oversight of the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

Last Congress, under your leadership, this subcommittee held multiple hearings and briefings that highlighted the importance of U.S. support for women and girls in Afghanistan. In fact, you and I received a letter last week from the Afghan Government's chief negotiator along with four female diplomats on the Afghan team involved in the peace process.

Mr. Chairman, I would like permission to enter this into the hearing record. In the letter, the negotiators wrote that our hearings, quote, "sent a strong message that there is accountability and that the women and negotiators must be listened to, respected, and that the issues they speak about must be taken seriously."

They said, and I quote, "The two hearings also gave us the assurance that we will not be alone in demanding a just and practical political settlement that one that guarantees equal rights and opportunities for all people," end quote.

Ms. Lindborg, do you think public messaging from Washington, including during congressional hearings, sends a strong signal to the Taliban that the U.S. expects them to respect and protect the rights of Afghan women and girls?

And thank you, again, Mr. Chairman, for your leadership on this, and put this in the record.

Mr. LYNCH. Without objection, the lady's submission is accepted into the record.

Mrs. MALONEY. So, Ms. Lindborg?

Ms. LINDBORG. Great. Thank you, Chairwoman Maloney, and thank you for your leadership on these issues.

I think that the letter underscores both the extraordinary progress of the Afghan women over the last several decades and the important role that they're playing now. And, absolutely, I think it's important for there to be continued signals and expressions of support for preserving those gains, and also for ensuring that they have a voice at the negotiating table.

We know from research that having a voice at the table makes a difference in creating a more lasting and durable peace agreement.

So, thank you for entering that.

And I would—I would also note, building on the previous question, that women in, particular, are terrified that the U.S. will leave precipitously, and understand that their—that we haven't met the conditions yet for the peace negotiation to really move forward in a more effective way.

Thank you.

Mrs. MALONEY. Thank you, and I'm also encouraged that President Biden's National Security Advisor recently made clear to his Afghan counterpart that the gains that have been made by women and other minority groups must be protected as part of the peace process.

Nevertheless, I think we can all agree that the gains Afghan women have made since 2001 are fragile, and I have deep concerns that they may be at risk if the Taliban returns to power.

The study group itself acknowledges that there is, quote, "realistic and widespread fear that women will be marginalized in the public space should the Taliban return."

And, in a recent report, the special IG for Afghanistan's reconstruction cautioned that a narrative has formed in Afghanistan that, quote, "The country can either have women's rights at the cost of peace, or peace at the cost of women's rights," end quote.

Senator Ayotte, if the Taliban overrun or enter a power-sharing agreement with the Afghan Government, do you expect an effort to roll back the rights of Afghan women and girls?

Ms. AYOTTE. Chairman, thank you.

First of all, I think this is a very important issue for the negotiations. And we heard loud and clear from civil society, especially women's groups, that they did not want to be marginalized, and that's why the government itself does have women negotiators at the table.

And just to put in some perspective, as it's outlined in our report, in 2001, when the Taliban were in Afghanistan, zero girls were educated. Now, over 3 million girls are educated. There are women in the government; there are women in the society, in the private sector.

And so, in order for a peace agreement to be successful, this issue of inclusivity will have to be addressed, because I do not believe that the women who are engaged now are going to accept a government that has no role for them or where they are

marginalized. So, this is obviously a very key issue at the negotiating table.

Mrs. MALONEY. Thank you.

And, General Dunford, last, what impact would that ultimately have on the future security and stability of Afghanistan, and what is the best way for the U.S. to continue to insist that women's and girls' rights must be respected in any agreement? General Dunford?

General DUNFORD. OK. Thank you, Chairwoman Maloney.

And what I would say is that we highlighted the issue of women's rights and values in a future Afghanistan consistent with the constitution for two reasons, and it wasn't just because it was the right thing to do; we actually assessed that stability and security cannot be achieved unless we have a future Afghanistan consistent with the values in the constitution and unless women's rights are respected. And that, again, was not the—just the assessment of the group. It came from those 60 engagements that we conducted, and we heard this universally.

And I believe the second part of your question is a really important one, is, so—well, how do we ensure that this happens? And this is why we believe that our facilitation of the Afghan peace negotiations and subsequent support for any peace settlement and implementation is so critical, because I think the United States, both with regard to resources and influence, can assist the Afghan Government in forming a future government where the character actually does respect women, and again, those values memorialized in the constitution.

Mrs. MALONEY. Thank you.

In closing, thank you all for all of your work. And thank you, Chairman and Ranking Member. We have seen, again and again, that women's participation in resolving conflict is essential to sustainable peace. It is critically important that we in the United States continue to support the women and girls of Afghanistan and around the world.

Again, thank you for your work, and I yield back.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you. Thank you, Madam Chair.

And the chair now recognizes the gentleman from Arizona, Mr. Gosar, for five minutes.

Mr. GOSAR. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for having this hearing this morning.

I want to begin with part of the premise of the study group's findings, which is adapting the current withdrawal structure in place from one focused on counterterrorism and troop reduction to one where troop withdrawal is based on permanent Taliban cease-fire, and the cessation of indiscriminate violence against the Afghan people.

Essentially, we're discussing war termination and banking the concept that U.S. involvement in a current civil war in Afghanistan will end when the primary threat, the Taliban, has committed to peace.

My main concern here is that we're hanging our future plans on such an expectation that seems rather impossible. Since 2001, United States has been attempting to meet these conditions with little success. In fact, this year—

Mr. LYNCH. Mr. Gosar, you might be muted. Sorry. I think Mr. Gosar is freezing up. Let's see if he comes back. [Audio malfunction.]

Mr. LYNCH. Mr. Gosar, you were muted or frozen for a good portion of that testimony, or question. I'm not sure if we can correct the situation.

Mr. GOSAR. Can you hear me?

Mr. LYNCH. All right. We're going to try to resolve Mr. Gosar's technology problem. But, in the meantime, I would like to go to the next Republican member, the gentlelady from North Carolina, Ms. Foxx.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate it.

And I want to thank our witnesses very much for their very good presentation and your opening comments, and I'd like to wish Chairwoman Maloney a happy birthday. I thank—I don't know if she's still there, but I wish her a happy birthday.

To the witnesses today—and, again, thank you all for being here and for your work. Your report—I'm wanting to ask the same question that Chairwoman Maloney asked—I'm glad she did—about the women in Afghanistan, and I'm pleased to hear your responses on that.

Your report says that an irresponsible withdrawal of U.S. Forces risks a new civil war in Afghanistan. I agree that a withdrawal should be done responsibly, but I'm concerned that the threat of a civil war may not be avoidable.

The Department of Defense lead inspector general report on Operation Freedom Sentinel, released this week, states that the Taliban have not agreed to any substantive matters in the peace talks and said that the group is deploying violence across the country to increase its leverage in the negotiations.

Is it possible that the Taliban have no interest in coming to a lasting peace and that a civil war will be the ultimate outcome if U.S. troops leave Afghanistan?

And I'll ask that question to General Dunford.

General DUNFORD. Congresswoman, thank you for that question.

Look, my short answer is, is it possible that civil war will result regardless? I would have to say in candor, yes, it is possible.

I think what is important, though, for us to consider—and I think it really gets to where Congressman Gosar was going as well—is what's different today than has been the case over the past 18 or 19 years, and I think the difference is that we have the Taliban at Doha in discussions with the Afghan Government. And we have an opportunity in a short period of time to determine whether or not they're sincere in wanting peace, and we have an opportunity in a short period of time to see if there's a framework within which the compromise that's necessary for a reduction in violence and in a future government can be determined.

And so, Congresswoman Foxx, that's why we offered the alternate pathways, because our real recommendation is: Take advantage of this opportunity as it exists right now and it hasn't existed for the last 18 or 19 years. And all of the other pathways that we outline in the report will still be available to President Biden subsequent to determining whether or not the Afghan peace negotiations can be successful or not.

So, that's why we really do focus on taking advantage of the opportunity and testing the theory of the case. Because we are humble, I think, all of us, about our knowledge of what the future will be, but we have to deal with what the facts are that we know. And the facts that we know are that there is ongoing discussions at Doha, so let's see if we can make something of them.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you.

Senator Ayotte, your report highlights the need for continued economic support for the essential institutions of the Afghan state, including security institutions.

I understand the need to provide support for these institutions to ensure stability within the country. However, it concerns me and it concerns my constituents a lot that we have been investing in Afghanistan for the better part of 20 years and likely will for the foreseeable future.

Can you discuss how much longer you envision the U.S. and our partners' aid being necessary to support Afghan institutions and how we can assure that that aid is being used as efficiently as possible?

Ms. AYOTTE. Yes. Thank you, Congresswoman Foxx.

I think your constituents rightly are concerned about this. And I know that all the work done by the inspector generals over the years in Afghanistan have highlighted areas where we have invested, for example, in some of these major infrastructure projects that really have not borne fruit and have wasted taxpayer dollars. So, this is a very important issue to focus on.

Yes, we will need to continue to support the Afghan institutions. In our report, we lay out that that should be done consistent with the outline of the Global Fragility Act, which all of you passed, and focusing really on targeted aid that supports the major institutions, and hold that aid as targeted, conditional; hold people accountable.

And, also, in terms of the Afghan National Security Forces, it's going to be important that we continue to support them. Because without that support, obviously, the security situation in terms of protecting our own national security interests will devolve further. So, we do need to continue to do that.

I'm also, with your permission, going to ask my colleague Nancy Lindborg, who has really worked very closely on this particular issue, to jump in, if that's OK.

Ms. FOXX. Certainly. Thank you.

Ms. AYOTTE. Thank you.

Ms. LINDBORG. Yes. Thank you, Congresswoman Foxx. It's absolutely an important question. The report details how we can reduce the levels of assistance while providing the kind of focus that Senator Ayotte just identified.

And, also, we have the opportunity to work more closely with our allies and our partner donors to move forward what was agreed upon in Geneva in November: four years of very strict conditions, and conditions based on holding the Afghan Government responsible for upholding the kind of rights and rule of law and reduction in corruption that are absolutely essential for the kind of state that can more effectively be stable into the future.

We've seen that the lack of justice for particularly rural residents creates the opportunity for the Taliban to come in, exploit those grievances, and gather recruits.

So, it's important for the security of the country to have the kind of assistance that promotes that better governance. That's the core of the Global Fragility Act.

Ms. FOXX. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I don't have a clock, but I suspect my time has expired, and I will yield back.

And, again, thank the panelists, and thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your leadership on this.

Mr. LYNCH. I thank the gentlelady.

The gentlelady yields back.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Vermont, Mr. Welch, for five minutes.

Mr. WELCH. Thank you very much.

I really appreciate the panelists and your report that is extremely helpful, and I thank all of you.

And I want to particularly thank, of course, General Dunford for your service but also, through you, for the brave men and women who served us and all those who died. Thank you, General.

A couple of things.

No. 1, Senator Ayotte mentioned that the effort here is to promote a peace process, not a war process, is the ultimate resolution. But we've been there 20 years, and I've come to certain conclusions.

One is, we can't trust the Taliban. That's pretty obvious. No. 2, we can't have confidence in the Afghan Government. It's been corrupt; it's been ineffective. No. 3, if we're going to have a process that requires us to trust the negotiated outcome with the Taliban, I'll lack confidence in that.

And, General Dunford, I think you outlined areas where we have some leverage. And those were that the Taliban wants relief from sanctions, it wants international recognition, and it wants international help.

So, the question I have is not so much about the May 1, because we know that's a somewhat subjective date, and there can be arguments for and against. And you've made, quite well, the arguments about why that might want to be delayed.

But why not have a strategy where we just flat-out recognize that the Afghan Government has failed and has not been a reliable partner, that the Taliban is not going to be any trusted partner in the future, but where we utilize our leverage as opposed to our military, those three things you mentioned, with robust international diplomacy, where the regional countries, as Senator Ayotte mentioned, have an interest in stability as opposed to a refugee crisis? Why not focus on that and recognize that what Trump has been doing, bringing troops home, is overdue and made some sense?

General Dunford?

General DUNFORD. Congressman, thanks so much.

I think you have just succinctly captured the core recommendation that we make. And, in fact, we don't believe there's a military solution. And we do believe, both with regard to the Afghan peace negotiation but as well as long-term integration that you're sug-

gesting, that the key element of that has to be regional diplomacy and then broader international effort to bring about those conditions.

And if there is any hope for a future government that, in the character of the government, actually does have some legitimacy and is able to do the things necessary to bring about peace and stability, if that's ever going to happen, it has to be exactly as you've outlined: through a very strong and concerted diplomatic effort and in conjunction with our partners in the region and the international community.

So, Congressman, I guess what I would say—and I think I say this on behalf of the entire Afghan Study Group—what you've just outlined is certainly a conclusion that we drew in our deliberations after 10 months of talking to people and studying the problem.

Mr. WELCH. OK.

One other thing. We accepted, or stumbled into, a nation-building goal in Afghanistan, which I think most people now acknowledge has not worked, as opposed to counterterrorism.

And one of the concerns that was expressed was that Afghanistan would become a haven for terrorism. But I want to challenge that Afghanistan is any different than many other areas around the world where there is terrorism brewing where we don't have occupation or military forces.

Why would we have that policy in Afghanistan when there are so many other parts of the world where we face a similar terrorist threat?

General Dunford?

General DUNFORD. Sure, Congressman. I think there are a couple factors. One is geography. And we saw what geography means back in 2001. And the other is the historical and cultural significance of the Khorasan and what that would mean to the global jihadist movement. And those are two factors that make Afghanistan different.

I also think, Congressman—and we didn't spend a lot of time on this in the Afghanistan Study Group, but certainly I feel confident in making this assertion—when you look at South Asia as a whole and you look at the possession of nuclear weapons by two states in the region, there's no question in my mind that we have long-term security interests in South Asia.

There's also no question in my mind that Afghanistan, were it to become ungoverned spaces, has a high probability of being a location of a proxy war between two states that have nuclear weapons.

So, from a broader security perspective, I do believe Afghanistan is different.

I take your point that we're dealing with, you know, extremists with the same ideology from West Africa to Southeast Asia. And we actually do need a global strategy to deal with that that focuses on the flow of resources, the flow of foreign fighters, and the basic ideology that unites those groups.

But I do think there are some geographic, some cultural, and some historical factors of Afghanistan that do make it unique. And, as the chairman outlined, it's because of those factors that it's No. 1 on the Terrorist Index. It's because of those factors that there's

at least two groups who aspire to attack the United States directly and we believe, if left unchecked, would have the capability to do so.

Mr. WELCH. OK. Thank you, General.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. LYNCH. I thank the gentleman.

The gentleman yields back.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Louisiana, Mr. Higgins, for five minutes.

Mr. HIGGINS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I thank our panelists. This is a very important discussion.

Most of my constituents, and perhaps Americans from sea to shining sea, grow weary of this endless conflict. And many historians generally agree and the archaeological record generally suggests that the entire region that we're discussing, including, of course, Afghanistan, has been engaged in some level of continuous war for 7,000 years, with essentially brief periods of relative peace breaking up that continuous war.

In modern history, we've been there for 30 years. And, General, I would ask you, realistically, sir—you've been a voice of solid reason, and we thank you for your service and your experience and your insight here. But at what point is enough, enough for American engagement in this region?

And why, if there's a presence required from American military force, why does that have to include actual boots on the ground, soldiers on the ground, given the vast power of our Navy and the technology and success of our rapid deployment capabilities? Why do we need boots on the ground in this region, at this point, moving forward?

I realize that there's an opportunity for peace, but I'm quite sure they've had that discussion over the course of the last 7,000 years. Why would it work now? And why do we need boots on the ground there?

General DUNFORD. Thank you, Congressman. You ask a really important question. And, as you can imagine, I've been involved in several similar conversations about Afghanistan for now at least 10 years.

And I do understand your constituents growing weary. I do think that they need to understand that we've not had a U.S. loss of life in a year. And they also need to understand that we've gone from over 100,000 forces on the ground in Afghanistan when I was in command in 2013 and 2014 to 2,500 forces right now, which, in the context of our grander strategy, is certainly, in my judgment, a sustainable level.

But your question about why on the ground is really an important one. And I want to emphasize that, in our study, we focused on how to address our national interests, not whether to address our national interests.

We know that the President, any President, can make a judgment to assume risk against our national interests, either because they conclude that we are unable to address them at a sufficient level of resourcing or they want to accept that risk and reprioritize those resources somewhere else.

But why boots on the ground? And I've looked at this problem extensively. In order to be effective in conducting counterterrorism, you have to create an ecosystem, if you will, of intelligence. And we would not have the networks available to us from an intelligence perspective, we would not have the platform availability—that is, the systems that allow us to collect that intelligence—and we wouldn't have the ability to strike quickly with the resources necessary to destroy terrorists once the intelligence develops their location.

So, were we to do it from outside of Afghanistan, you would just merely have a geology problem and a responsiveness problem; you would not be as effective.

But, Congressman, I think we would not argue that a President could choose to accept risk. I view a presence of approximately the size we have right now in pursuing peace as, at least in the interim, equivalent to term insurance, where we have a sufficient presence, sustainable sufficient presence, both in terms of diplomacy and military forces to mitigate the risk of an attack against the United States.

You know, and when does that end? Again, our argument right now is, let's first focus on the Afghan peace negotiation, see if we can set the conditions for reduction of violence such that it doesn't impact our interests. And then, if that doesn't work out, I think your constituents know that we have other options that the President can take in the future, you know, should he judge that Afghan peace negotiations are not going to be successful.

I hope that answers your question.

Mr. HIGGINS. Very thoroughly. General, again, thank you for being a voice of reason.

Mr. Chairman, I have a second question to submit in writing unless we have a second round. And I yield. Thank you, good sir.

Mr. LYNCH. I thank the gentleman.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Georgia, Mr. Johnson, for five minutes.

Mr. JOHNSON. Mr. Chairman, Congresswoman Speier has to go at 12 o'clock, and so I've agreed to yield my—not yield my time, but allow her to go in front of me. So, if that is OK with the chair, I would defer to Congresswoman Speier.

Mr. LYNCH. Well, I thank the gentleman.

The gentlelady from California is recognized for five minutes. Thank you.

Ms. SPEIER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And my deep gratitude to Mr. Johnson for allowing me to go in front of him.

First, to Senator Ayotte and to General Dunford and Ms. Lindborg, thank you for your service and for providing us this blueprint.

I, like, I think, many of my colleagues, have grave concerns about the corruption that exists in Afghanistan that will not change. The fact that Inspector General Sopko has outlined for us in quarterly reports how money we have provided there has been misused should not be lost on any of us, but—and that the opioid trade continues at a very robust level.

So, I don't think we change the culture in Afghanistan. I'd be interested in each of your thoughts on that.

I do believe that protecting women and girls and allowing them to continue to progress through school is an important component.

And I would share General Dunford's supposition that we're going to have to be there. I hate saying that, but I do believe that a footprint of some sort, like we have a footprint in Europe and other places, is going to be necessary for our own personal security.

So, I would just be interested in each of your comments on those principles.

Ms. LINDBORG. Well, I'll give it a start. And thank you for the question, Congresswoman Speier. And I'm appreciating your dogs in the background.

Ms. SPEIER. I'm sorry about that.

Ms. LINDBORG. Because my cat's going in and out.

But you raise a really important question. And corruption, of course, is deeply aligned with the kind of states that are prone to violent extremism. And that's why it is such a key component of the Global Fragility Act and a cornerstone of how we recommend reorienting our assistance programs.

So, part of that is ensuring that we are aligned across all of our capabilities—our diplomacy, our security, our intelligence, and our development assistance—so that we're not inadvertently undermining each other.

So, the first part of my answer is that I think we can do a better job of promoting better accountability, especially working with our donor partners, who all agreed in Geneva in November 2020 on very strict conditions over the next four years, that we will coherently work with the Afghan Government to address corruption.

And the second part of my answer is that ultimately it is going to be up to the Afghans themselves. And that's why the development of civil society, the ability of women to have a much greater role, the rise of a new generation who has very different expectations of their government and demand more accountable government and ultimately a peaceful Afghanistan, that will be the key. Because it has to be driven by the Afghans who want this less corrupt, more peaceful nation.

And our investments to support civil society have made a tremendous difference over the past 20 years. And you're right, we will need to continue to support them. But hopefully we can do so in a more effective way and at reduced levels, as we outlined in the report.

Ms. SPEIER. Thank you.

Ms. AYOTTE. I would just add to what Nancy said that I think we're also anticipating that the aid be more focused.

You know, if you look at our history of some of the projects I think I mentioned earlier that we've supported in Afghanistan, really focusing the support on key institutions and be prepared to hold them accountable, that we will, if we have to in certain areas, withdraw support with the government if they don't take certain actions that need to be taken.

And this I know is not an easy question, but I think the Global Fragility Act does provide a very important framework that we have not had in the past for how we should be supporting countries that are fragile, like Afghanistan.

General DUNFORD. Congresswoman Speier, it's good to see you again. And as you came on the screen, I thought, the last time I testified before you was about 18 months ago, and I thought it would be my last time testifying. And I think I celebrated, actually, that night that that was the end of my congressional testimony after a decade and a half of testifying. But here I am back before you again.

But in response to your question, I think it's helpful for us to identify what we can do and, as the other co-chairs have mentioned, what the Afghans can do.

What can we do with our allies? We can mitigate the risk of terrorist attacks, and we can mitigate the risk of mass migration. But when we talk about changing culture and addressing some of those underlying challenges that you identified, from corruption and opioids and so forth, all we can do in that regard is afford the Afghans an opportunity to make changes in those areas.

I'm very humble about our ability to externally effect the change in the Afghan culture that gets after those problems. I am more optimistic, even though still humble, about our ability to address our national interests.

So, I view this as kind of a twofold problem. One is, do the things that we have to do that are really relevant to our core national interests, and then set conditions where the Afghans can address those challenges that are unique to Afghanistan and really do require long-term changes in the character of government and long-term changes in the Afghan culture so that issues like women's rights are not behaviors that are conditioned on our international support but are actually an integral part of the culture.

Ms. SPEIER. Thank you.

My time has expired, and I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentlelady yields back.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Georgia, Mr. Johnson, for five minutes.

Mr. JOHNSON. I thank the chairman. And thank you for holding this very important hearing.

And I want to thank the panelists for your service to the Nation.

And, in reading your report, you indicate—or you state that the Taliban have threatened to reinstitute jihad if all international troops, including and especially the U.S. troops, are not out of Afghanistan by May of this year.

And that presents us with a bargain that is really untenable. In other words, we withdraw and then leave the situation to collapse and terrorism to then have a laboratory to explode within, or we stay the course and we do what appears to be nation-building, from seeing your standards for the U.S. being able to withdraw from Afghanistan totally.

And so you recommend that we maintain our current force posture and continue with dialog with the Taliban, and I support that conclusion.

What I want to ask is, you know, the Taliban get their financial and military support from somewhere. Where do they get their support from? Which countries?

General DUNFORD. Congressman, I think a fair amount of their support comes from the drug trade. The last time I checked, it was

in excess of 50 percent. And I don't have unclassified information on where the support comes from.

We know that the Taliban have had sanctuary in Pakistan. We know that they have an active diplomatic effort—traveling to Moscow, traveling to Beijing, traveling to other countries. We know they travel in the Gulf. We know Iran has provided some material support—

Mr. JOHNSON. Well, let me ask you this, General. The Taliban is an Islamic Wahhabi strain of Islam-based terrorist organization, is it not?

General DUNFORD. It is a Sunni terrorist organization, yes.

Mr. JOHNSON. And it's a Wahhabi-based Sunni terrorist organization? Is that correct?

General DUNFORD. Similar ideology, yes, Congressman.

Mr. JOHNSON. And the Wahhabi strain of Islam is a very extreme, fundamentalist strain which undergirds the Saudi monarchy, correct?

General DUNFORD. The Saudi monarchy—I mean, Wahhabism obviously emanates from Saudi Arabia. It originated in Saudi Arabia, and there has been a historic relationship between the royal family, if you will, and Wahhabi religious leaders, yes.

Mr. JOHNSON. Yes. And the Wahhabist strain of Islam is behind the 18,000-plus madrasas, or Islamic schools, that teach this fundamentalist strain of Islam. Isn't that correct?

General DUNFORD. There's no question that the Taliban originates from the madrasas in Pakistan. That's correct.

Mr. JOHNSON. And isn't it also true that the Taliban gets support from Saudi Arabia, from the Saudi Arabian Government?

General DUNFORD. Yes, Congressman, I don't have any specific information certainly as a part of the Afghan Study Group that can point to any specific country as providing material resources to the Taliban. I'm not suggesting that's not true. I just can't—I can't comment on it.

Mr. JOHNSON. Well, it just seems to me that if we identify the revenue sources of the Taliban, we can weaken them and maybe even eliminate them as a threat if we choke off their resources.

And my suggestion is that Saudi Arabia may, in fact, be a major source of revenue and resource for the Taliban, and I think America's policy should not be at cross-purposes with itself. If we're supporting the Saudis, who are supporting the Taliban, we are at cross-purposes with ourselves.

And those are the kinds of things that I believe we should look to in being able to solve this problem that we have. We don't want to leave Afghanistan and leave it to the Taliban to establish another Wahhabi-based nation, which would be a lawless nation. You know, drugs, terrorism would flow with impunity, and we would have to go back in at some point to protect our interests, like we had to go in after September 11 of 2001, 20 years ago.

So, you know, I mean, am I off base?

General DUNFORD. Congressman, you're not.

The only thing I'll tell you from my past experience is that, you know, identifying resources as one, you know, of the critical capabilities of the Taliban is something that we have looked at for a

long time, and we've looked at trying to interdict those sources of revenue.

In my experience, we've found that the sources of revenue for the Taliban are fairly diverse and fairly resilient. Again, a large part of it comes from the opioid trade inside of Afghanistan. But they have proven to be pretty resilient in their ability to develop resources. And I'm unaware of any single source of income that we could go after in the immediate future to have a big impact.

But that's not something that—we should continue to look at that, for sure.

Mr. JOHNSON. Thank you.

Would any of the other panelists want to comment?

Ms. LINDBORG. Yes, Congressman. I would just add, you know, that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Taliban is that they grew out of the more conservative Pashtun culture. And so it's a bit of a distinguishing characteristic from some of the other Wahhabi-based terrorist groups, in that their principal focus is on Afghanistan as opposed to looking outward to create a larger caliphate.

And so, therefore, that's what makes the prospect of a negotiated peace possible, is that it's bringing together the Afghan sides and recognizing that they are—that the Taliban are connected to the Pashtunwali conservative parts, particularly present still in the more rural south, which is part of where they derive their ability to sustain themselves and some of their resources.

Mr. JOHNSON. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, you've been more than liberal with the time, and I appreciate it. And, with that, I yield back.

Mr. LYNCH. I thank the gentleman. The time was well-spent.

And just a side note. We have followed that chain of causation from the Wahhabi-supported and Wahhabi-sustained madrasas in northern Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. We have met with the royal family in Saudi Arabia, urging them—we don't have evidence that the Saudi Government is supporting the madrasas, but we do feel there's money coming out of the Gulf or maybe from members of the Saudi royal family who are supporting those efforts.

So, the gentleman's target is spot-on. There are wider problems, as Ms. Lindborg has pointed out, with the Pashtun nature of this. But, like I say, the gentleman's remarks were well-received.

I don't see Mr. Gosar on the board, so I'm going to go to the gentleman from Colorado, Mr. DeSaulnier, for five minutes.

Mr. DESAULNIER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Gentleman from California.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentleman—I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Mr. DESAULNIER. That's OK. You should say that I'm a native of the great Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I do want to thank all of my colleagues, first off, for the content and the tone of this hearing, particularly for you, Mr. Chairman, because you set that tone, and how constructive this is. And many of us yearn more for this type of focus and atmosphere.

And to the witnesses, thank you so much for your careers and your dedication to peace and America's peace. Really a remarkable

product here in a very complex situation that I am only somewhat familiar with.

So, first to General Dunford: In a statement last weekend, the Taliban said: Anyone seeking extension of wars and occupation will be held liable for it, just as in the previous two decades.

The inspector general in its most recent report said, and I quote, “The Taliban is very likely prepared to resume its campaign of violence against the U.S. and coalition targets if it perceives that coalition forces have stalled or reversed course on the agreed upon withdrawal.”

So, General, knowing that—and you’ve alluded to this in some of the other responses, but what is your expectation for what will happen? And how well can we protect not just Afghans but, in particular, American forces who will remain there if the Biden administration suggests, as you are suggesting, that we revisit this accord?

General DUNFORD. Congressman, thanks.

And, you know, I would say right up front, I don’t know whether the Taliban will accept a U.S. presence beyond the 1st of May, and I don’t know what they’ll do should we decide to stay past the 1st of May.

I am compelled, again, by the areas of leverage that we have over the Taliban and by our judgment that they see the political process as the best way to achieve their long-term objectives. In other words, I think they are aware of the limitations of military force. I think they believe they can get leverage in the peace negotiations by increasing violence, and I think that’s what we’re seeing them do right now. I don’t believe that they assess they can achieve their overall political objectives with a sustained military campaign, which is why they’re in Doha right now and why they are talking to the Afghan Government.

Should we decide to stay past the 1st of May and should the Taliban resume attacks against the United States, I leave it to those who are leading the fight right now to talk to specifics, but it would be my judgment that we would have to make some adjustments in our force posture and in our force composition to adequately protect our forces and continue to support the Afghan forces under those conditions.

Mr. DESAULNIER. Thank you, General.

Senator Ayotte and Ms. Lindborg, my questions originally were designed more around leverage and what kind of actual mechanisms we have. I really appreciate the recommendation that we don’t be driven by the metric chronologically of time but of performance.

Which leads me to, we know that the world is changing. We know now, with research and work, remarkable work, that neuroscientists and sociologists are working on now, that we as humans and cultures are only willing to accept so much change. We see it in our own country. And you’ve all alluded to the future and younger generations. And, of course, we’ve talked about this in regards to this region and its neighbors, particularly in Iran.

So, the expectation that you can build these inclusive institutions and avoid the extractive institutions that unfortunately Afghanistan has been plagued with through its history, and the hope and

the expectation that particularly younger people, who are being socialized in a very, very different environment from older generations, strikes me as really the key question and a lot to hope for. Not that we shouldn't, and I really think we have to. But the expectation that this critical mass is there, not just in the next few months but in the next few years, that these new generations can actually change what previous generations haven't been able to change in Afghanistan.

So, Senator, if you could just respond to that. And maybe Ms. Lindborg and General Dunford, if you have any observations.

Ms. AYOTTE. Thank you, Congressman. I think you've made a very important observation and point.

And it brings me back to where, when the Taliban were in charge, before the attack on our country and before we went to Afghanistan, the Afghanistan of today, 20 years later, there has been a growth, as we've mentioned, of civil society, of young people, of just the ability to use the internet and communicate and also robust press that was not present. And that's taken time, and that has caused some fundamental changes within the country.

Now, it hasn't, obviously, changed the whole character of the nature of Afghanistan. They still have grave challenges with corruption and other issues. But that piece and that change of the configuration and more voices being able to actually speak out in that society does make it a very different circumstance for the Taliban to consider, if they think they're going to be able to go back and somehow govern in the way they did in 2001, if they want to be part of the government.

And I think it's an important component of what we hope can be built on going forward despite all the challenges there.

Mr. DESAULNIER. Ms. Lindborg?

Ms. LINDBORG. Yes. Thank you very much for your question and your observations.

And, you know, we've learned a lot from previous decades of nation-building, and I think one of the core lessons is that people have to build their own nation. And, therefore, it will be the power, the energy, and the demand of this new generation and women who ultimately will determine what Afghanistan looks like. And that's the only way that change will occur.

One of the last trips I made before the pandemic shut everything down was to Afghanistan, and I had a chance to meet with a wide swath of women, youth, faith leaders, government leaders, you know, really courageous human rights workers, and the Helmand peace marchers in both Jalalabad and Kabul. And, you know, there is—I think there is a palpable new energy and demand for peace. People are just really tired of the war. And they do have the ability, I believe, to make a difference in how this all goes forward.

And our help to get a viable peace process supported is the bet that we're making with our recommendations.

Mr. DESAULNIER. Thank you.

General DUNFORD. Congressman, if I could just make one quick followup as the committee considers this.

You know, when I think about the problem, I don't think about it as, can we effect the changes that you talked about? I agree with you in terms of how difficult they will be. I think we should look

at the problem we're trying to solve as one of, can we reduce the level of violence and allow those changes and allow the political differences to be addressed in an environment where there's a reduced level of violence and a reduced terrorist threat?

So, in other words, I have a much humbler appreciation for what can be achieved in the near term. And I think if we look at how long will it take to effect fundamental cultural changes and address the economy and address the character of the government, I do think we're talking about, you know, a long, long time for some of those issues to be addressed.

What I think is more realistic is for us to come out of the Afghan peace negotiations with a peace agreement that actually does result in the reduction of violence and actually does allow these political differences that are very real and need to be addressed to be addressed in an environment where we don't have a terrorist threat and there's reduced violence and there's a political framework within which these issues are being addressed. That, to me, is what winning would look like.

Mr. DESAULNIER. Well, thank you again. Really, really fascinating. And I really want to thank the Peace Institute as well. What a valuable, valuable resource.

And, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back, but I want to thank you for letting me tease you about the geographic issues, differences between Colorado and California. And I realize, as a native of Massachusetts, when I lived there, I frequently got those states confused. Anything west of West Stockbridge was always confusing to me.

Mr. LYNCH. Anything west of Worcester is the same, as far as I'm concerned.

Mr. DESAULNIER. The home of my alma mater, Worcester. Thank you.

Mr. LYNCH. Well, we are very—and I apologize to the gentleman from California. We are very proud of the gentleman's connection to Massachusetts. It was certainly California's gain and Massachusetts' loss.

But, in closing, you know, we've had the presence and the participation of our panelists for two hours now, so I think I should bring this to a close, even though I have more questions and I would like to further discuss this.

In closing, I want to thank our panelists for their wonderful work and their willingness to help the committee with its task. I think this study, this report, could be extremely helpful to the administration, and I'm sure they are weighing it seriously.

I want to commend my colleagues for their participation, despite the weather all across the country, in this important conversation.

With that, without objection—

Mr. GROTHMAN. Could I—

Mr. LYNCH. Is somebody seeking time?

Mr. GROTHMAN. Yes. This is Congressman Grothman.

Mr. LYNCH. Oh, Mr. Grothman, I'm sorry.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Before you break up, I'd like to thank you for having the hearing. I, quite frankly, wish it'd go another couple more hours, because I have a lot of questions to ask.

I want to emphasize that, at least as far as me, I realize we have important obligations as a world power. We have a fraction of the

number of troops there that we did a few years ago, and I have no problem voting if the feeling is it's necessary to keep those troops there years more, if that's the appropriate thing.

I wouldn't mind if—it's unfortunate we have a hearing like this that has to be public, because, of course, people are listening in to what we say who might not be considered friends of the United States, and that makes things difficult. I wish we would've had some time to get into the potential roles that Iran and Pakistan are going to play if we left, which I think is relevant. And I appreciate Congressman Johnson's comments as to where the money is coming from and if any of the money is coming from people who we think are our friends.

But I'd like to thank you for having it. If you want to do another one of these a month from now or two months from now, I'd be happy to do another one, because I'm sure I could find another 15 or 20 minutes of questions. But, again, thank you for having the hearing.

Mr. LYNCH. I thank the gentleman.

And just so we all understand, Inspector General Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction, has his report coming out in two weeks. It's a follow-on to many of the same issues we're talking about here but on a granular level with respect to some of the projects that Ms. Foxx identified, the spending of money, the corruption, all that.

So, that will give us an opportunity to revisit a lot of these issues and have a wider discussion as well, so I'm looking forward to that. And I think that's scheduled in two or three weeks.

But, with that—and I appreciate the gentleman's remarks.

Without objection, all members will have five legislative days within which to submit additional written questions for the witnesses to the chair, which will be forwarded to the witnesses for their response. I ask our witnesses that if questions are submitted to them to please respond as promptly as you are able. Again I want to thank our panelists for your wonderful and patriotic work, this meeting is now adjourned.

Mr. LYNCH. Again, I want to thank our panelists for your wonderful and patriotic work.

This hearing is now adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 12:31 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

