

S. HRG. 117-939

**THE CONCLUSION OF MILITARY OPERATIONS IN
AFGHANISTAN AND PLANS FOR FUTURE
COUNTERTERRORISM OPERATIONS**

HEARING

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

—————
SEPTEMBER 28, 2021
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THE CONCLUSION OF MILITARY OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN AND PLANS FOR FUTURE COUNTERTERRORISM OPERATIONS

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2021

UNITED STATES SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:30 a.m. in room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Senator Jack Reed (Chairman of the Committee) presiding.

Committee Members present: Senators Reed, Shaheen, Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Hirono, Kaine, King, Warren, Peters, Manchin, Duckworth, Rosen, Kelly, Inhofe, Wicker, Fischer, Cotton, Rounds, Ernst, Tillis, Sullivan, Cramer, Scott, Blackburn, Hawley, and Tuberville.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR JACK REED

Chairman REED. Let me call the hearing to order.

First, an administrative action. Since a quorum is now present, I ask the Committee to consider a list of 2,993 pending military nominations. Included in this list is the nomination of General Jacqueline D. Van Ovost, U.S. Air Force, for a reappointment to the grade of general, and to be Commander of U.S. Transportation Command. All of these nominations have been before the Committee for the required length of time.

Is there a motion to favorably report this list of 2,993 pending military nominations to the Senate?

Is there a second?

FEMALE VOICE. Second.

Chairman REED. All in favor, please say aye.

[Chorus of ayes.]

Chairman REED. The motion carries. Thank you.

[The list of nominations considered and approved by the committee follows:]

MILITARY NOMINATIONS PENDING WITH THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE WHICH ARE PROPOSED FOR THE COMMITTEE'S CONSIDERATION ON SEPTEMBER 28, 2021.

1. **General Jacqueline D. Van Ovost, USAF to be general and Commander, US Transportation Command** (Reference No. 237)
2. In the Army there are 169 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Daniel C. Alder) (Reference No. 508)
3. In the Army there are 128 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Eric R. Adams) (Reference No. 509)

4. In the Army there are 108 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Michelle M. Agpalza) (Reference No. 510)
5. In the Army there are 14 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Thomas K. Brenton) (Reference No. 511)
6. **Col. Edward D. Casey, ANG to be brigadier general** (Reference No. 619)
7. **BG Linda S. Hurry, USAF to be major general** (Reference No. 621)
8. **Col. Carla D. Riner, ANG to be brigadier general** (Reference No. 622)
9. **Capt. Max G. McCoy, Jr., USN to be rear admiral (lower half)** (Reference No. 659)
10. **Col. Richard G. Adams, ANG to be brigadier general** (Reference No. 742)
11. **LTG Karsten S. Heckl, USMC to be lieutenant general and Deputy Commandant for Combat Development and Integration, Headquarters, US Marine Corps** (Reference No. 959)
12. **MG David J. Julazadeh, USAF to be lieutenant general and Deputy Chief of Staff for Capability Development, Supreme Allied Command Transformation** (Reference No. 960)
13. In the Air Force there are 2 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Ingrid C. Kaat) (Reference No. 961)
14. In the Air Force there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant colonel (Angelica Hawrysiak) (Reference No. 962)
15. In the Air Force there are 176 appointments to the grade of major (list begins with Katherine A. Abbott) (Reference No. 963)
16. In the Air Force there are 54 appointments to the grade of major (list begins with Jon R. Alexander) (Reference No. 964)
17. In the Air Force there are 29 appointments to the grade of lieutenant colonel (list begins with Timothy James Anderson) (Reference No. 965)
18. In the Air Force there are 8 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Brad C. Bordes) (Reference No. 966)
19. In the Air Force there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Sarah E. Isbill) (Reference No. 967)
20. In the Army Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Jose E. Santos-Martinez) (Reference No. 968)
21. In the Army Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Donna J. Broussard) (Reference No. 969)
22. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant colonel (Stephen W. Chu) (Reference No. 970)
23. In the Army Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Jason R. Bradley) (Reference No. 971)
24. In the Army Reserve there are 2 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with David W. Lewis) (Reference No. 972)
25. In the Army Reserve there are 10 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Paul E. Boccio) (Reference No. 973)
26. In the Army Reserve there are 12 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Dennis M. Bishop) (Reference No. 974)
27. In the Army Reserve there are 2 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Philip N.R. Estes) (Reference No. 975)
28. In the Army Reserve there are 7 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Kim R. Clidas) (Reference No. 976)
29. In the Army there are 29 appointments to the grade of major (list begins with Kelsy L. Abell) (Reference No. 977)
30. In the Army there are 86 appointments to the grade of major (list begins with Brian J. Ahern) (Reference No. 978)
31. In the Army there are 161 appointments to the grade of major (list begins with Anthony W. Adams) (Reference No. 979)
32. In the Army there are 150 appointments to the grade of major (list begins with Marjorie Acsenvil) (Reference No. 980)
33. In the Army Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Malik J. Freeman) (Reference No. 981)
34. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Richard J.H. Gash) (Reference No. 982)
35. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of major (Lucretia C. Portwine) (Reference No. 983)
36. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant colonel (Shilo S. Velasquez) (Reference No. 985)
37. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant colonel (Daniel E. Torres) (Reference No. 986)

38. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant colonel (Andrew Garcia IV) (Reference No. 987)
39. In the Army Reserve there are 5 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with James L. Fuhriman) (Reference No. 988)
40. In the Army Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Mercedes Murillo) (Reference No. 989)
41. In the Army Reserve there are 9 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Kathryn L. Adams) (Reference No. 990)
42. In the Army Reserve there are 19 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with James E. Adkins, Jr.) (Reference No. 991)
43. In the Army Reserve there are 5 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with David J. Adam) (Reference No. 992)
44. In the Army Reserve there are 3 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Travis T. Elder) (Reference No. 993)
45. In the Army Reserve there are 2 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Karen M. Hansen) (Reference No. 994)
46. In the Navy there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant commander (Spiros Kulubis) (Reference No. 995)
47. **MG Lance K. Landrum, USAF to be lieutenant general and Deputy Chairman, North Atlantic Treaty Organization Military Committee** (Reference No. 1074)
48. **Col. Matthew S. Reid, USMC to be brigadier general** (Reference No. 1075)
49. **VADM Colin J. Kilrain, USN to be vice admiral and Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff** (Reference No. 1078)
50. In the Air Force there are 11 appointments to the grade of major (list begins with Nicole Marie Bermudez Beck) (Reference No. 1080)
51. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of major (Bryan T. Jack) (Reference No. 1081)
52. In the Army Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Marci J. Sam) (Reference No. 1082)
53. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of major (Jennifer M.A. Bromm) (Reference No. 1083)
54. In the Army Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Travis C. Carpenter) (Reference No. 1084)
55. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant colonel (Michael C. Wallet) (Reference No. 1085)
56. In the Army Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Shawn D. Wray) (Reference No. 1086)
57. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of major (Jordan L. Woodburn) (Reference No. 1087)
58. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Corey M. James) (Reference No. 1088)
59. In the Army Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (David Melendez) (Reference No. 1089)
60. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant colonel (John C. Boyle) (Reference No. 1090)
61. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of major (Jennifer N. Pendleton) (Reference No. 1091)
62. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Kevin A. Poole) (Reference No. 1092)
63. In the Army Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of colonel (Daniel J. Carlson) (Reference No. 1093)
64. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of major (Dmitriy Kalantarov) (Reference No. 1094)
65. In the Navy there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant commander (William T.T. Chen) (Reference No. 1095)
66. In the Navy there is 1 appointment to the grade of captain (Craig A. Clutts) (Reference No. 1096)
67. In the Navy there is 1 appointment to the grade of captain (Christopher J. Goodson) (Reference No. 1097)
68. In the Navy there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant commander (Brett E. Grady) (Reference No. 1098)
69. In the Navy Reserve there is 1 appointment to the grade of captain (Ignacio I. Mendiguren) (Reference No. 1099)
70. In the Army there are 5 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with David O. Anglin) (Reference No. 1100)

71. In the Army there are 63 appointments to the grade of major (list begins with Lito D. Amande) (Reference No. 1101)
72. In the Army Reserve there are 2 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Daniel C. Estaville) (Reference No. 1102)
73. In the Army Reserve there are 18 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with George W. Boguslawski) (Reference No. 1103)
74. In the Army there are 21 appointments to the grade of colonel (list begins with Douglas F. Baker, Jr.) (Reference No. 1104)
75. In the Army there are 33 appointments to the grade of lieutenant colonel (list begins with David S. Bickell) (Reference No. 1105)
76. In the Army there are 6 appointments to the grade of major (list begins with Victoria M. Adame) (Reference No. 1106)
77. In the Navy there are 19 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Hanif K. Bent) (Reference No. 1107)
78. In the Navy there are 24 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Twyla M. Arbuckle) (Reference No. 1108)
79. In the Navy there are 45 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Aaron M. Ackerman) (Reference No. 1109)
80. In the Navy there are 5 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Daniel A. Dierks) (Reference No. 1110)
81. In the Army there is 1 appointment to the grade of lieutenant colonel (Sean P. Mahoney) (Reference No. 1111)
82. In the Navy there is 1 appointment to the grade of commander (Wajahat Ali) (Reference No. 1112)
83. In the Navy there is 1 appointment to the grade of commander (Mason P. Jones) (Reference No. 1113)
84. In the Navy there is 1 appointment to the grade of commander (Jarrod M. Trant) (Reference No. 1114)
85. In the Navy there are 97 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Dannemarc Atis) (Reference No. 1115)
86. In the Navy there are 83 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Samuel O. Adjei) (Reference No. 1116)
87. In the Navy there are 36 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Peter L. Agdamag) (Reference No. 1117)
88. In the Navy there are 56 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Moronkeji S. Aderibigbe) (Reference No. 1118)
89. In the Navy there are 3 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Leonardo D. Calderon) (Reference No. 1119)
90. In the Navy there are 225 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Susana Agudelouribe) (Reference No. 1120)
91. In the Navy there are 48 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Marilyn A.H. Andersen) (Reference No. 1121)
92. In the Navy there are 114 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Michael S. Ackman) (Reference No. 1122)
93. In the Navy there are 46 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Ashley M. Belyea) (Reference No. 1123)
94. In the Navy there are 14 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Devin M. Arneson) (Reference No. 1124)
95. In the Navy there are 18 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Colin A. Barnard) (Reference No. 1125)
96. In the Navy there are 14 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Jeremy M. Bullard) (Reference No. 1126)
97. In the Navy there are 55 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Matthew D. Akers) (Reference No. 1127)
98. In the Navy there are 46 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Brian T. Abe) (Reference No. 1128)
99. In the Navy there are 37 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Macbride J. Abeasi) (Reference No. 1129)
100. In the Navy there are 67 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Nathan J. Admiraal) (Reference No. 1130)
101. In the Navy there are 74 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Andrew M. Adams) (Reference No. 1131)
102. In the Navy there are 2 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Carl A. Grover) (Reference No. 1132)
103. In the Navy there are 44 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Christopher S. Anderson) (Reference No. 1133)
104. In the Navy there are 38 appointments to the grade of lieutenant commander (list begins with Matthew C. Abare) (Reference No. 1134)

105. In the Navy there are 23 appointments to the grade of commander (list begins with Karima Ayeshe) (Reference No. 1135)
106. In the Navy there are 18 appointments to the grade of commander (list begins with Emilee K. Baldini) (Reference No. 1136)
107. In the Navy there are 41 appointments to the grade of commander (list begins with Tuesday L. Adams) (Reference No. 1137)
108. In the Navy there are 54 appointments to the grade of commander (list begins with Scott E. Adams) (Reference No. 1138)
109. In the Navy there are 25 appointments to the grade of commander (list begins with Christopher A. Adams) (Reference No. 1139)
110. In the Navy there are 108 appointments to the grade of commander (list begins with Adeniyi S. Alatishe) (Reference No. 1140)
111. In the Navy there are 23 appointments to the grade of commander (list begins with Jon A. Angle) (Reference No. 1141)
112. In the Navy there are 50 appointments to the grade of captain and below (list begins with Carl K. Bodin) (Reference No. 1142)
113. In the Navy there are 38 appointments to the grade of commander (list begins with Ebenezer Aniagyei) (Reference No. 1143)
114. **Col. James D. Brantingham, USAF to be brigadier general** (Reference No. 1175)
115. **BG Jeffrey C. Coggin, USAR to be major general** (Reference No. 1176)
116. **MG Xavier T. Brunson, USA to be lieutenant general and Commanding General, I Corps** (Reference No. 1177)
117. **BG Gregory J. Gagnon, USAF to be brigadier general** (Reference No. 1178)
118. **RADM(lh) Jeffrey S. Scheidt, USN to be rear admiral** (Reference No. 1182)

TOTAL: 2,993

Good morning. The Committee meets today to discuss the end of American military operations in Afghanistan. After nearly 20 years of war, enormous sacrifice by American and coalition military, diplomatic and intelligence personnel and vast United States investment, the Afghan state has failed and the Taliban has taken control. We need to understand why and how.

As part of this hearing, we will seek to understand the factors that contributed to the Taliban's rapid takeover of the country and the collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. While there is a temptation to close the book on Afghanistan and simply move on to long-term, strategic competition with China and Russia, we must capture the lessons of the last two decades to ensure that our future counterterrorism (CT) efforts in Afghanistan and elsewhere continue to hold violent extremists at bay.

I know that much of this hearing will focus on our final months in Afghanistan. I think it is equally important, however, that this Committee takes a step back and examines the broader 2-decade mission that shaped the outcome we face today. Our withdrawal this summer and the events surrounding it did not happen in a vacuum. The path that led to this moment was paved with years of mistakes, from our catastrophic pivot to Iraq, to our failure to handle Pakistan's support for the Taliban, to the flawed Doha agreement signed by President Trump. The Members of this Committee and the witnesses before us have overseen chapters of war that spanned four presidential administrations, both Democratic and Republican, and we owe the American people an honest accounting. I hope that this hearing will be frank and searching, so that future generations of Americans will not repeat our mistakes.

Our witnesses today are Secretary Lloyd Austin, Secretary of Defense; General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff (JCS); and General Frank McKenzie, Commander of U.S. Central

Command (CENTCOM). I welcome each of you and thank you for your many years of service.

I also want to commend and thank our military men and women for their heroic efforts to evacuate more than 124,000 American citizens, Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants, and other at-risk Afghans over 17 days in chaotic and perilous conditions—a remarkable accomplishment. We especially honor the brave American service men and women who were killed and wounded while selflessly protecting those seeking safety.

So how did we get here? There are countless decisions and factors that could be pointed to, but I would highlight a few that clearly paved the way.

Early in the war, we did achieve our original counterterrorism objective of significantly degrading al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Over time, however, that mission morphed into convoluted counterinsurgency and nation building. While the United States presence in Afghanistan drew down significantly over the last few years, the lack of a defined strategy continued to erode the mission.

One of the clearest inflection points was the ill-fated decision to go to war in Iraq. Just as we began to achieve momentum in Afghanistan, the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq drew critical resources, troops and focus away from the Afghan theater. Our best opportunity in Afghanistan was squandered and we were never able to get back on track.

Throughout the war, we were also unsuccessful in dealing with Pakistan's support to the Taliban. Even as American diplomats sat down with Pakistani leaders and our forces cooperated on counterterrorism missions, the Taliban enjoyed sanctuary inside Pakistan with time and space to regroup.

More recently the Taliban's resurgence can be tied to the flawed Doha agreement, which then-President Trump signed in 2020. This deal, negotiated between the Trump administration and the Taliban without our coalition allies or even the Afghan Government present, promised the end of the entire international presence in Afghanistan, including contractors critical to keeping the Afghan Air Force in the fight, with virtually no stipulations. The Taliban, with momentum on the battlefield and no incentives to honor the Doha agreement, used the final year of the Trump administration to boldly escalate violence and begin its faithful March toward Kabul.

Despite colossal efforts over multiple administrations, both Democratic and Republican, we were unable to help build an Afghan Government capable of leading its people nor an Afghan security force capable of defeating the Taliban. Afghan soldiers fought bravely in the face of massive casualties, but faced with the loss of American military support and hamstrung by corruption within, they were unable to stand on their own against Taliban forces.

Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie, you have each led troops in combat in Afghanistan, commanded at the theater level, and advised our Nation's top leaders on our Afghanistan strategy. You have played significant roles throughout this war, and I hope that you are forthcoming in your answers today.

To begin, I would ask that you provide an accounting of the intelligence and other key assessments that factored into your judg-

ments about the viability of the Afghan Government and Afghan forces and how those trends changed over time. I would like to know any lessons you have identified for how we can more effectively work by, with, and through partner nation forces in the future.

Additionally, I would like to understand what factors you attribute to the Taliban's success and whether we missed indicators and warnings of their imminent takeover.

Finally, while we have transitioned our military from Afghanistan after largely achieving our counterterrorism objectives, we must continue to ensure that Afghanistan can never again be used as a base for terrorist groups to conduct operations against the United States and our allies. We must remain vigilant about these threats and ensure that we establish an effective counterterrorism architecture moving forward. To that end, I would ask that you update the Committee on your plans for over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations.

The United States faces new and evolving threats around the world. To overcome them we must first understand what went wrong to our mission in Afghanistan and learn from those missteps. We owe it to the American people.

I want to thank you again for being here this morning, and I look forward to your testimony.

Now, before I turn to the Ranking Member Inhofe, for the benefit of my colleagues, because we have two rounds of open testimony and a closed session following, I will strictly enforce the 5-minute limit allowed for each Member. I intend to recess at 1:00 p.m. for lunch and promptly resume at 1:30 p.m. I would again remind my colleagues that there will be a classified briefing immediately following the open session in SVC-217, the office of Senate Security.

Again, before I turn to Ranking Member Inhofe, I want to note that the rules of the Committee state that witness testimony should be sent to the Committee 48 hours in advance, and it is customary that, at the very latest, testimony arrives the afternoon before the hearing. I am disappointed that the statements of our witnesses were not sent to the Committee until late last evening, giving Senators and the staff very little time to review. I hope that when these witnesses appear again before this Committee, they will follow the Committee rules and customs.

Now, let me turn to Ranking Member Inhofe.

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JAMES INHOFE

Senator INHOFE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let us make sure that everyone understands that the 5-minute limit does not affect opening statements.

Let me say it a little bit stronger, the statement that was made by our Chairman, that there is no reason in the world that they waited until late last night to send this information to us. All these Members, they want to be well informed, and they did not have that opportunity.

I want to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to our servicemembers and our veterans. Our men and women in uniform bravely volunteer to go into harm's way for one reason: to keep their fellow Americans safe. They represent our very best.

I especially want to recognize those who made the ultimate sacrifice, and their families. On August 26th, we were reminded so painfully of what we ask our troops and their families to do. They laid it all on the line for this country. Those 13 men and women died trying to evacuate their fellow Americans and at-risk Afghans from Kabul under extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances.

So I want to be perfectly clear. The frustration on this Committee about the chaotic and deadly withdrawal from Afghanistan is not, and should never be, directed towards our troops. It was President Biden and his advisers who put them in that situation. Even worse, this was avoidable. Everything that happened was foreseen. My colleagues on this Committee and the commanders in charge, we saw it coming. So we are here today to understand what happened and why that advice was ignored.

General McKenzie, you said in February, before the President decided to fully withdraw from Afghanistan, quote, "You have to take a conditions-based approach." You expressed your concern, quote, "about the actions that the Taliban have taken up until this point," meaning that the Taliban was not constraining al Qaeda, as it had agreed to do so under the conditions-based agreement that it signed with the Trump administration, that it was a conditions-based statement, in position.

Around the same time, General Miller, who was then the commander of United States Forces Afghanistan, advised his chain of command to keep approximately 2,500 troops in the country. He warned that the Taliban might otherwise take over.

General McKenzie, you offered a similar warning when you last testified before this Committee in April, right after the President made his decision to withdraw. You said, quote, "My concern is the ability of the Afghan military to hold the ground that they are on now without the support that they have been used to for many years."

Throughout the spring, we saw many districts quickly fall to the Taliban, many without firing a shot. This is why I urged President Biden in June to rethink his approach and maintain a small force in Afghanistan in order to prevent the collapse we ultimately saw. It was also why the Members of this Committee, on both sides of the aisle, spent months urging the administration to evacuate Americans and our Afghan partners sooner.

But President Biden and his advisers did not listen to his combat commander, he did not listen to Congress, and he failed to anticipate what all of us knew would happen.

So in August, we all witnessed a horror of the President's own making. Afghans died as they desperately gripped onto the departing flights. The Taliban is in a stronger position than it has been since 9/11. The terrorist Haqqani members are now in senior government positions. We went from "we will never negotiate with terrorists" to "we must negotiate with terrorists." You know, in the years that I have been here, we have heard over and over again, "you do not negotiate with terrorists," and now it is required.

Worst of all, 13 brave Americans were killed in the evacuation effort. Three days later, the Biden administration said that it struck an ISIS operative, but, in fact, it killed 10 Afghan civilians,

including 7 children. Then, President Biden concluded the draw-down by doing the unthinkable—he left Americans behind.

The men and women who served in uniform, their heroic families, and the American people deserve answers. How did this avoidable disaster happen? Why were Americans left behind?

President Biden's decision to withdraw has expanded the threat of terrorism and increased the likelihood of an attack on the Homeland. The administration is telling the American people that the plan to deal with these threats is something called over-the-horizon counterterrorism, and that we do these types of operations elsewhere in the world. That is misleading, at best, and dishonest, at worst.

There is no plan. We have no reliable partners on the ground. We have no bases nearby.

The Afghan Government is now led by terrorists with long ties to al Qaeda, and we are at the mercy of the Pakistan Government to get into Afghanistan airspace. Even if we can get there, we cannot strike al Qaeda in Afghanistan because we are worried about what the Taliban will do to the Americans who are still there, and Americans are still there.

The administration needs to be honest. Because of President Biden's disastrous decision, the terrorist threat to American families is rising significantly, while our ability to deal with these threats has declined decidedly.

We will have another hearing with expert witnesses on Thursday—that is just 2 days from now. We understand the Undersecretary of Defense, Colin Kahl, has agreed to testify in that hearing. So today is really just a start.

In conclusion, I would just like to say this. President Biden made a strategic decision to leave Afghanistan which resulted in the death of 13 United States servicemembers, the deaths of hundreds of Afghan civilians, including women and children—that is what terrorists do—and left American citizens surrounded by the very terrorists who attacked us on 9/11, and they are still there.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Well, thank you very much, Senator Inhofe.

Secretary Austin and Chairman Milley, the Doha agreement—excuse me. We want to give you an opportunity to have opening statements, as I have been reminded. So, General Austin, you are recognized.

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE LLOYD J. AUSTIN III,
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE**

Secretary AUSTIN. Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, Members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss our recent draw down in evacuation operations in Afghanistan. I am pleased to be joined by Generals Milley and McKenzie, who I know will be able to provide you with additional context.

I would like to make a few points before turning it over to you and to them. First I want to say how incredibly proud I am of the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces, who conducted themselves with tremendous skill and professionalism throughout the war, the draw-down and the evacuation.

Over the course of our Nation's longest war, 2,461 of our fellow Americans made the ultimate sacrifice, along with more than 20,000 who still bear the wounds of war, some of which cannot be seen on the outside. We can discuss and debate the decisions, the policies, and the turning points since April of this year, when the President made clear his intent to end American involvement in this war. We can debate the decisions, over 20 years that led us to this point. But I know that you agree with me that one thing not open to debate is the courage and the compassion of our servicemembers, who, along with their families, served and sacrificed to ensure that our Homeland would never again be attacked the way it was on 9/11.

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

In fact, I would like to talk to you a little bit about that issue of time. The reason that our troops were able to get there so quickly is because we planned for just such a contingency. We began thinking about the possibilities of a non-combatant evacuation as far back as this spring.

Indeed, by late April, 2 weeks after the President's decision, military planners had crafted a number of evacuation scenarios. In mid-May, I ordered Central Command to make preparations for potential noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO). Two weeks later I began pre-positioning forces in the region to include three infantry battalions. On the 10th of August, we ran another tabletop exercise around a non-combatant evacuation scenario. We wanted to be ready and we were. In fact, by the time that the State Department called for a NEO, leading elements of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit were already on the ground in Kabul. Before that weekend was out another 3,000 or so ground troops had arrived, including elements of the 82nd Airborne.

But Let us be clear. Those first 2 days were difficult. We all watched with alarm the images of Afghans rushing the runway and our aircraft. We all remember the scenes of confusion outside the airport. But within 48 hours, our troops restored order, and process began to take hold. Our soldiers, airmen and marines, in partnership with our allies and partners and our State Department colleagues, secured the gates, took control of airport operations, and set up a processing system for the tens of thousands of people they would be manifesting onto airplanes.

They and our commanders exceeded all expectations. We planned to evacuate between 70,000 and 80,000 people. They evacuated more than 124,000. We planned to move between 5,000 and 9,000 people per day. On average, they moved slightly between more than 7,000 per day. On military aircraft alone, we flew more than 387 sorties, averaging nearly 23 per day. At the height of this operation an aircraft was taking off every 45 minutes. Not a single sortie was missed for maintenance, fuel, or logistical problems. It was the largest airlift conducted in U.S. history, and it was executed in 17 days.

Was it perfect? Of course not. We moved so many people so quickly out of Kabul that we ran into capacity and screening problems at intermediate staging bases outside Afghanistan. We are still working to get Americans out who wish to leave, and we did not get out all of our Afghan allies enrolled in a Special Immigrant Visa program. We take that seriously, and that is why we are working across the interagency to continue facilitating their departure. Even with no military presence on the ground, that part of our mission is not over.

Tragically, lives were lost: several Afghans killed climbing aboard an aircraft on that first day; 13 brave United States servicemembers and dozens of Afghan civilians killed in a terrorist attack on the 26th; and we took as many as 10 innocent lives in a drone strike on the 29th.

Non-combatant evacuations remain among the most challenging military operations, even in the best of circumstances, and the circumstances in August were anything but ideal. Extreme heat, a landlocked country, no government, a highly dynamic situation on the ground, and an active, credible, and lethal terrorist threat.

In a span of just 2 days, from the 13th to the 15th of August, we went from working alongside a democratically elected longtime partner government to coordinating warily with a longtime enemy. We operated in a deeply dangerous environment, and it proved a lesson in pragmatism and professionalism.

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

Now I know that Members of this Committee will have questions on many things, such as why we turned over Bagram Airfield and how real is our over-the-horizon capability, and why did we not start evacuations sooner, and why did we not stay longer to get more people out? So let me take each in turn.

Retaining Bagram would have required putting as many as 5,000 United States troops in harm's way just to operate and defend it, and it would have contributed little to the mission that we had been assigned, and that was to protect and defend the embassy, which was some 30 miles away. That distance from Kabul also rendered Bagram of little value in the evacuation. Staying at Bagram even for counterterrorism purposes meant staying at war in Afghanistan. Something that the President made clear that he would not do.

As for over-the-horizon operations, when we use that term we refer to assets and target analysis that come from outside the country in which the operation occurs. These are effective and fairly common operations. Indeed, just days ago, we conducted one such strike in Syria, eliminating a senior al Qaeda figure. Over-the-horizon operations are difficult, but absolutely possible, and the intelligence that supports them comes from a variety of sources and not just United States boots on the ground.

As for when we started evacuations, we offered input to the State Department's decision, mindful of their concerns that moving too

soon might actually cause a very collapse of the Afghan Government that we all wanted to avoid, and that moving too late would put our people and our operations at greater risk. As I said, the fact that our troops were on the ground so quickly is due in large part to our planning and our pre-positioning of forces.

As for the mission's end, my judgment remains that extending beyond the end of August would have greatly imperiled our people and our mission. The Taliban made clear that their cooperation would end on the first of September, and as you know, we faced grave and growing threats from ISIS-K. Staying longer than we did would have made it even more dangerous for our people and would not have significantly changed the number of evacuees we could get out.

Now as we consider these tactical issues today, we must also ask ourselves some equally tough questions about the wider war itself and pause to think about the lessons that we have learned over the past 20 years: Did we have the right strategy? Did we have too many strategies? Did we put too much faith in our ability to build effective Afghan institutions, an army, an air force, a police force and government ministries?

We helped build the state, Mr. Chairman, but we could not forge a nation. The fact that the Afghan army that we and our partners trained simply melted away, in many cases without firing a shot, took us all by surprise, and it would be dishonest to claim otherwise.

We need to consider some uncomfortable truths, that we did not fully comprehend the depth of corruption and poor leadership in the senior ranks. That we did not grasp the damaging effect of frequent and unexplained rotations by President Ghani of his commanders. That we did not anticipate the snowball effect caused by the deals that the Taliban commanders struck with local leaders in the wake of the Doha agreement, and that the Doha agreement itself had a demoralizing effect on Afghan soldiers.

Finally, that we failed to grasp that there was only so much for which, and for whom, many of the Afghan forces would fight. We provided the Afghan military with equipment and aircraft and the skills to use them. Over the years, they often fought bravely. Tens of thousands of Afghan soldiers and police died. But in the end, we could not provide them with the will to win, at least not all of them. As a veteran of that war, I am personally reckoning with all of that.

But I hope, as I said at the outset, that we do not allow a debate about how this war ended to cloud our pride in the way that our people fought it. They prevented another 9/11, they showed extraordinary courage and compassion in the war's last days, and they made lasting progress in Afghanistan that the Taliban will find difficult to reverse and that the international community should work hard to preserve.

Now our servicemembers and civilians face a new mission, helping these Afghan evacuees move on to new lives and new places, and they are performing that one magnificently as well. I spent time with some of them up at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst just yesterday. I know that you share my profound gratitude and respect for their service, their courage, and professionalism, and I

appreciate the support that this Committee continues to provide them and their families. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Secretary Austin follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT BY SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LLOYD J. AUSTIN III

Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss our recent drawdown and evacuation operations in Afghanistan.

I am pleased to be joined by Generals Milley and McKenzie, who I know will be able to provide you with additional context.

I am incredibly proud of the men and women of the U.S. Armed Forces, who conducted themselves with tremendous skill and professionalism throughout the war, the drawdown, and the evacuation.

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

We can discuss and debate the decisions, the policies, and the turning points since April of this year, when the President made clear his intent to end American involvement in this war. We can debate the decisions over 20 years that led us to this point.

But one thing not open to debate is the courage and compassion of our servicemembers, who—along with their families—served and sacrificed to ensure that our Homeland would never again be attacked the way it was on September 11, 2001.

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

The reason that our troops were able to get there so quickly is because we planned for just such a contingency. We began thinking about the possibilities for a non-combatant evacuation as far back as this spring.

By late April, two weeks after the President's decision, military planners had crafted a number of evacuation scenarios. In mid-May, I ordered Central Command to make preparations for a potential non-combatant evacuation operation. Two weeks later, I began pre-positioning forces in the region, to include three infantry battalions. On the 10th of August, we ran another table-top exercise around a non-combatant evacuation scenario. We wanted to be ready, and we were.

By the time that the State Department called for the NEO, significant numbers of additional forces had already arrived in Afghanistan, including leading elements of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, who were already on the ground in Kabul. Before that weekend was out, another 3,000 or so ground troops had arrived, including elements of the 82nd Airborne.

To be clear, those first two days were difficult. We all watched with alarm the images of Afghans rushing the runway and our aircraft. We all remember the scenes of confusion outside the airport. But within 48 hours, our troops restored order, and process began to take hold.

Our soldiers, airmen, and marines—in partnership with our allies, our partners, and our State Department colleagues—secured the gates, took control of airport operations, and set up a processing system for the tens of thousands of people they would be manifesting onto airplanes. They and our commanders exceeded all expectations.

We planned to evacuate between 70,000 to 80,000 people. They evacuated more than 124,000.

We planned to move between 5,000 to 9,000 people per day. On average, they moved slightly more than 7,000 per day.

On military aircraft alone, we flew more than 387 sorties, averaging nearly 23 per day. At the height of this operation, an aircraft was taking off every 45 minutes, and not a single sortie was missed for maintenance, fuel, or logistical problems.

It was the largest airlift conducted in U.S. history, and it was executed in just 17 days. Was it perfect? Of course not. We moved so many people so quickly out of Kabul that we ran into capacity and screening problems at intermediate staging bases outside of Afghanistan.

We are still working to get Americans out who wish to leave. We did not get out all of our Afghan allies enrolled in the Special Immigrant Visa program. We take that very seriously. That is why we are working across the interagency to continue

facilitating their departure. Even with no military presence on the ground, that part of our mission is not over.

Tragically, lives were also lost: several Afghans killed climbing aboard an aircraft on that first day; 13 brave United States servicemembers and dozens of Afghan civilians killed in a terrorist attack on the 26th; and we took as many as 10 innocent lives in a drone strike on the 29th.

Non-combatant evacuations remain among the most challenging military operations, even in the best of circumstances, and the circumstances in August were anything but ideal. Extreme heat.

A land-locked country. No government. A highly dynamic situation on the ground, and an active, credible, and lethal terrorist threat.

In the span of just two days—from August 13th to 15th—we went from working alongside a democratically elected, long-time partner government to coordinating warily with a long-time enemy. We operated in a deeply dangerous environment. It proved a lesson in pragmatism and professionalism.

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

I know that Members of this Committee will have questions on many things, such as why we turned over Bagram Airfield, how real is our over-the-horizon capability, why we didn't start evacuations sooner, and why we did not stay longer to get more people out. Let me take each in turn.

Retaining Bagram would have required putting as many as five thousand United States troops in harm's way, just to operate and defend it. It would have contributed little to the mission that we had been assigned: to protect and defend our embassy some 30 miles away. That distance from Kabul also rendered Bagram of little value in the evacuation. Staying at Bagram—even for counter-terrorism purposes—meant staying at war in Afghanistan, something that the President made clear he would not do.

As for over-the-horizon operations: when we use that term, we refer to assets and target analysis that come from outside the country in which the operation occurs. These are effective, and fairly common, operations. Just days ago, we conducted one such strike in Syria, eliminating a senior al Qaeda figure. Over-the-horizon operations are difficult but absolutely possible. The intelligence that supports them comes from a variety of sources, not just U.S. boots on the ground.

As for when we started evacuations: we offered input to the State Department's decision, mindful of their concerns that moving too soon might actually cause the very collapse of the Afghan Government that we all wanted to avoid, and that moving too late would put our people and our operations at greater risk. As I said, the fact that our troops were on the ground so quickly is due in large part to our planning and pre-positioning of forces.

As for the mission's end: my judgment remains that extending beyond the end of August would have greatly imperiled our people and our mission. The Taliban made clear that their cooperation would end on the first of September, and as you know, we faced grave and growing threats from ISIS-K. Staying longer than we did would have made it even more dangerous for our people and would not have significantly changed the number of evacuees who we could get out.

As we consider these tactical issues today, we must also ask ourselves some equally tough questions about the wider war itself, and pause to think about the lessons that we have learned over the past 20 years. Did we have the right strategy? Did we have too many strategies? Did we put too much faith in our ability to build effective Afghan institutions—an army, an air force, a police force, and government ministries?

We helped build a state, but we could not forge a nation. The fact that the Afghan army we and our partners trained simply melted away—in many cases without firing a shot—took us all by surprise. It would be dishonest to claim otherwise.

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

We provided the Afghan military with equipment and aircraft and the skills to use them. Over the years, they often fought bravely. Tens of thousands of Afghan

soldiers and police officers died. But in the end, we couldn't provide them with the will to win. At least not all of them.

As a veteran of that war, I am personally reckoning with all of that. But I hope, as I said at the outset, that we do not allow a debate about how this war ended to cloud our pride in the way that our people fought it. They prevented another 9/11, they showed extraordinary courage and compassion in the war's last days, and they made lasting progress in Afghanistan that the Taliban will find difficult to reverse and that the international community should work hard to preserve.

Now, our service members and civilians face a new mission: helping these Afghan evacuees move on to new lives in new places. They are performing that one magnificently, as well. I spent time with some of them up at Joint Base Maguire-Dix-Lakehurst, just yesterday. I know that you share my profound gratitude and respect for their service, courage, and professionalism.

I appreciate the support that this Committee continues to provide them and their families.

Thank you.

Senator REED. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. General Milley, I believe you have a statement.

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

General MILLEY. Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, thank you for the opportunity to be here with Secretary Austin and General McKenzie to discuss Afghanistan. As you mentioned up front, we submitted matters for the record, a lengthy statement of this cut-down oral version, and I know it got to you late.

During the past 20 years, the men and women of the United States military along with our allies and partners fought the Taliban, brought Osama bin Laden to justice, denied al Qaeda sanctuary, and protected our Homeland for two consecutive decades. Over 800,000 of us in uniform served in Afghanistan. Most importantly, 2,461 of us gave the ultimate sacrifice, while 20,698 of us were wounded in action, and countless others of us suffer the invisible wounds of war. There is no doubt in my mind that our efforts prevented an attack on the Homeland from Afghanistan, which was our core, original mission. Everyone that has served in that war should be proud. Your service mattered.

Beginning in 2011, we steadily drew down our troop numbers, consolidated and closed bases, and retrograded equipment from Afghanistan. At the peak, in 2011, we had 97,000 United States troops, alongside 41,000 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops in Afghanistan. Ten years later, when Ambassador Khalilzad signed the Doha agreement with Mullah Baradar on 29 February 2020, the United States at 12,600 United States troops, with 8,000 NATO and 10,500 contractors. This has been a 10-year multi-administration draw down, not a 19-month or 19-day NEO.

Under the Doha agreement, the United States would begin to withdraw its forces contingent upon Taliban meeting certain conditions, which would lead to a political agreement between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan. There were seven conditions applicable to the Taliban and eight conditions applicable to the United States. While the Taliban did not attack United States Forces, which was one of the conditions, it failed to fully honor any other condition under the Doha agreement.

Perhaps most importantly, for United States national security, the Taliban has never renounced al Qaeda or broke its affiliation with them. We, the United States, adhered to every condition.

In the fall of 2020, my analysis was that an accelerated withdrawal, without meeting specific and necessary conditions, risks losing the substantial gains made in Afghanistan, damaging United States worldwide credibility, and could precipitate a general collapse of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the Afghan Government, resulting in a complete Taliban takeover or general civil war. That was a year ago. My assessment remained consistent throughout.

Based on my advice and the advice of the commanders, then-Secretary of Defense Esper submitted a memorandum on 9 November, recommending to maintain United States Forces at a level between about 2,500 and 4,500 in Afghanistan until conditions were met for further reduction. Two days later on 11 November 2020, I received an unclassified, signed order directing the United States military to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan no later than 15 January 2021.

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

When President Biden was inaugurated, there were approximately 3,500 United States troops, 5,400 NATO troops, and 6,300 contractors in Afghanistan, with a specified task of train, advise, and assist, along with a small contingent of counterterrorism forces. The strategic situation at inauguration was stalemate.

The Biden administration, through the National Security Council process, conducted a rigorous interagency review of the situation in Afghanistan in February, March, and April. During this process, the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all of us, the CENTCOM commander, General McKenzie, the United States 4A General Miller, and myself were all given serious consideration by the administration. We provided a broad range of options and our assessment of their potential outcomes. The cost, benefit, risk to force, and risk to mission were evaluated against the national security objectives of the United States.

On 14 April, the President announced his decision, and the United States military received a change of mission to retrograde all United States military forces, maintain a small contingency force of 600 to 700 to protect the embassy in Kabul until the Department of State could coordinate contractor security support, and also to assist Turkey to maintain the Karzai International Airport, and transition the United States military to an over-the-horizon counterterrorism support and security force assistance.

It is clear, it is obvious, the war in Afghanistan did not end on the terms we wanted with the Taliban now in power in Kabul. Although the NEO was unprecedented, and is the largest air evacuation history. Evacuating 124,000 people, it came at an incredible cost of 11 marines, one soldier, and a Navy corpsman. Those 13 gave their lives so that people they never met will have an opportunity to live in freedom, and we must remember that the Taliban was and remains a terrorist organization, and they still have not broken ties with al Qaeda.

I have no illusions who we are dealing with. It remains to be seen whether or not the Taliban can consolidate power, or if the

country will further fracture into civil war, but we must continue to protect the United States of America and its people from terrorist attacks coming from Afghanistan. A reconstituted al Qaeda or ISIS with aspirations to attack the United States is a very real possibility, and those conditions to include activity in ungoverned spaces could present themselves in the next 12 to 36 months. That mission will be much harder now, but not impossible, and we will continue to protect at the American people.

Strategic decisions have strategic consequences. Over the course of 4 Presidents, 12 Secretaries of Defense, 7 Chairmen, 10 CENTCOM Commanders, 20 Commanders in Afghanistan, hundreds of congressional delegation visits, and 20 years of congressional oversight, there are many lessons to be learned. Two specific to the military that we need to take a look at, and we will, is did we mirror image the development of the Afghan National Army, and the second is the rapid collapse, unprecedented rapid collapse, of the Afghan military in only 11 days in August.

However, one lesson must never be forgotten. Every soldier, sailor, airman, and marine who served there in Afghanistan for 20 consecutive years protected our country from attack by terrorists, and for that, they should be forever proud, and we should be forever grateful.

Thank you, Chairman, and if I could, I know that there are some issues in the media that are of deep concern to many Members on the Committee, and with your permission, I would like to address those for a minute or two. Again, I have submitted memorandum for the Committee to take a look at.

Chairman REED. You may proceed.

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

With respect to the Chinese calls, I routinely communicated with my counterpart, General Li, with the knowledge and coordination of civilian oversight. I am specifically directed to communicate with the Chinese by Department of Defense (DOD) guidance, the policy dialogue system. These military-to-military communications at the highest level are critical to the security of the United States in order to deconflict military actions, manage crisis, and prevent war between great powers that are armed with the world's most deadliest weapons.

The calls on 30 October and 8 January were coordinated before and after with Secretary Esper and Acting Secretary Miller's staffs and the interagency. The specific purpose of the October and January calls were generated by concerning intelligence which caused us to believe the Chinese were worried about an attack on them by the United States. I know, I am certain, that President Trump did not intend to attack the Chinese, and it is my directed responsibility, and it was my directed responsibility by the Secretary, to convey that intent to the Chinese.

My task at that time was to de-escalate. My message, again, was consistent—stay calm, steady, and de-escalate. We are not going to attack you.

At Secretary of Defense Esper's direction, I made a call to General Li on 30 October. Eight people sat in that call with me, and I read out the call within 30 minutes of the call ending. On 31 December, the Chinese requested another call with me. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia Pacific Policy helped coordinate my call, which was then scheduled for 8 January, and he made a preliminary call on 6 January. Eleven people attended that call with me, and readouts of this call were distributed to the inter-agency that same day.

Shortly after my call ended with General Li, I personally informed both Secretary of State Pompeo and White House Chief of Staff Meadows about the call, among other topics. Soon after that, I attended a meeting with Acting Secretary Miller, where I briefed him on the call.

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

By Presidential Directive and Secretary of Defense directives, the chairman is part of the process to ensure the President is fully informed when determining the use of the world's deadliest weapons. By law, I am not in the chain of command, and I know that. However, by Presidential Directive and DOD instruction, I am in the chain of communication to fulfill my legal statutory role as the President's primary military advisor.

After the Speaker Pelosi call I convened a short meeting in my office with key members of my staff to refresh all of us on the procedures which we practiced daily at the action officer level. Additionally, I immediately informed Acting Secretary of Defense Miller of Speaker Pelosi's phone call. At no time was I attempting to change or influence the process, usurp authority, or insert myself in the chain of command. But I am expected, I am required, to give my advice and ensure that the President is fully informed on military matters.

I am submitting for the record a more detailed and unclassified memoranda, that I believe you all now have, although late, and I welcome a thorough walkthrough on every single one of these events. I would be happy, in a classified session, to talk in detail about the intelligence that drove these calls. I am also happy to make available any email, phone logs, memoranda, witnesses, or anything else you need to understand these events.

[The information referred to follows:]

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CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20318-9999



Milley 27 Sep 2021

MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

SUBJECT: General Milley's 8 January phone call with Speaker Pelosi

In order to clearly establish the facts related to my January 8, 2021 phone call with Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, I am submitting to this committee supporting information to address the concerns and requests for information from multiple Members of both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives.

This information is provided in the context of my role as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the policies and procedures that govern the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal.

This Memorandum for Record provides specific details on:

- My phone conversation with Speaker Pelosi.
- My post-phone call meeting with the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and select staff officers from the Joint Staff.
- Associated statutory directives and guiding documents processes.
- Roles and responsibilities of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

January 8, 2021 Phone Call with Speaker of the House Pelosi

On the morning of January 8, 2021, I was notified by my Executive Officer and Special Assistant for Legislative Affairs that Speaker Pelosi was requesting an immediate phone call to discuss undefined "urgent matters."

In my office with me were my Executive Officer, my Special Assistant for Legislative Affairs, and other select staff officers. It was unknown to me who from Speaker Pelosi's staff was on the call with her.

Speaker Pelosi called me to inquire about the President's ability to launch nuclear weapons. I sought to assure her that nuclear launch is governed by a very specific and deliberate process. She was concerned and made various personal references characterizing the President. I explained that the President is the sole nuclear launch authority but he doesn't launch them alone. There are processes, protocols, and procedures in place, and I repeatedly assured her there is no chance of an illegal, unauthorized or accidental launch. I was on an unclassified government line, so my description remained at that level of detail.

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These procedures are outlined in an Executive Order, a Presidential Policy Directive, a National Security Presidential Memorandum, Department of Defense Directives, the DoD Nuclear Plan, Posture Guidance, and finally Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Emergency Procedure Volumes I–X, all of which are classified.

By Presidential Directive and SecDef Directives, the Chairman is part of this process to ensure the President is fully informed when determining the use of the world's deadliest weapons. By law, I am not in the chain of command. However, by Presidential Directive and DoD Instruction, I am in the chain of communication to fulfill my statutory role as the President's primary military advisor.

January 8, 2021 Post-Phone Call Meeting with Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Joint Staff

After the Speaker Pelosi's call, I convened a short meeting in my office with the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, my National Military Command Center watch officer, Joint Staff, J-2, J-3, and Director of the Joint Staff, among others, to refresh on these procedures, which we practice daily at the action officer level. Additionally, I immediately informed Acting Secretary of Defense Miller of her call.

At no time was I attempting to change or influence the process, usurp authority, or insert myself into the chain of command, but I am expected to give my advice and ensure that the President is fully informed.

Statutory Directive and Guiding Documents

Nuclear launch activity is governed by a very specific and deliberate process, as outlined in the following directives and documents:

- Executive Order 13618
- Presidential Policy Directive 35
- National Security Presidential Memorandum 19
- Department of Defense Directives S-3710.01 & S-5210.81
- Department of Defense Nuclear Plan
- Nuclear Posture Guidance
- Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Emergency Action Procedures, Volumes 1–10.

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The President is the sole authority for the employment of U.S. nuclear weapons. U.S. nuclear forces operate under strict civilian control. Only the President of the United States can authorize the use of U.S. nuclear weapons, and the President's ability to exercise that authority and direction is ensured by people, procedures, facilities, equipment, and communications capabilities that comprise the Nuclear Command and Control System. This system is designed to enable the authorized use of nuclear weapons while also preventing their unauthorized, accidental, or inadvertent use. Operations and activities involving U.S. nuclear weapons are surrounded by layers of safeguards.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Title 10, U.S. Code, section 151 designates the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense.

In accordance with the Unified Campaign Plan signed by President Trump, communications between the President or the Secretary (or their duly deputized alternates or successors) and the Combatant Commanders will be transmitted through the Chairman unless otherwise directed.

In accordance with DoDD 3710.01, "National Leadership Command Capability," and DoDD 5210.81, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Command and Control, Safety and Security," the Chairman creates, supports, and operates a command and control system that ensures connectivity between the President and the National Military Command System, which is responsible for nuclear execution.

In this role, the Chairman operates the National Military Command System, to meet the needs of the President, Secretary of Defense which includes defining its required components and procedures. The Chairman fulfills this responsibility in a series of publications referred to as the Chairman's Emergency Action Procedures.

As part of the nuclear command and control procedures, a decision conference is required for authentication and to verify presidential orders. Primary participants are the Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Legal Counsel, and others. The purpose is to ensure the President is fully informed and to discuss legality and proportionality.

UNCLASSIFIED

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

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

[The prepared statement of General Milley follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT BY GENERAL MARK A. MILLEY

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

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

Most importantly, 2,461 United States soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines were killed in action. Twenty thousand, six hundred and ninety-eight were wounded in action and countless others suffer the invisible wounds of war.

There is no doubt in my mind that our efforts prevented an attack on the Homeland from Afghanistan, which was our core mission. Everyone who served in that war should be proud. Your service mattered.

Beginning in 2011, we steadily drew down our troop numbers, consolidated and closed bases, and retrograded equipment from Afghanistan. At the peak in 2011, we had 97,000 United States and 41,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan.

Ten years later when Ambassador Khalilzad signed the Doha Agreement with Mullah Berader on 29 February 2020, the United States had 12,600 United States troops, 8,000 NATO and 10,500 contractors in Afghanistan.

This has been a 10-year multi-administration drawdown, not a 19-month or a 19-day withdrawal.

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

There were 7 conditions applicable to the Taliban and 8 to the United States. While the Taliban did not attack United States Forces, which was one of the conditions, it failed to fully honor any other commitments under the Doha Agreement. Perhaps most importantly for United States national security, the Taliban has never renounced al Qaeda or broke its affiliation with them.

In the 8 months from February to October of 2020, in accordance with the provisions of the Doha Agreement, we reduced United States military forces from 12,600 to 6,800, NATO forces from 8,000 to 5,400 and United States contractors from 9,700 to 7,900 in the process of systematically retrograding from Afghanistan.

One of the conditions of Doha was a reduction of violence by the Taliban leading to a nationwide cease fire. For the entirety of the 2020 fighting season, the Taliban maintained a consistently higher than average level of violence throughout the country.

My job is to advise the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council of various military options and associated costs, benefits, risk to force, and risk to mission.

In the fall of 2020, my analysis was that an accelerated withdrawal without meeting necessary conditions risks losing the substantial gains made in Afghanistan, damaging United States credibility, or a general collapse of the ANDSF and the Afghan Government resulting in a complete Taliban takeover or a general civil war.

Additionally, we estimated an accelerated withdrawal would increase risks of regional instability, the security of Pakistan and its nuclear arsenals, a global rise in violent extremist organizations, our global credibility with allies and partners would suffer, and a narrative of abandoning the Afghans would become widespread.

We further assessed the increased potential for a humanitarian catastrophe including significant numbers of refugees, a degradation in health, schools, women's rights, and revenge killings.

In 2020, Taliban violence against women, human rights defenders, journalists, and government officials continued, with almost 1,000 targeted killings attributed to the Taliban, up from 780 in 2019.

The Taliban strengthened its positions around several provincial capitals in anticipation of the departure of foreign forces and, over this time period, enemy-initiated attacks increased by over 50 percent and were above previous seasonal norms.

Based on my advice and the advice of the commanders, Secretary Esper submitted a memorandum on 9 November recommending to maintain United States Forces in Afghanistan until conditions were met for further reductions.

Two days later on 11 November, I received an unclassified signed order directing the United States military to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan by 15 January 2021.

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

When President Biden was inaugurated, there were approximately 3,500 United States troops, 5,400 NATO, and 6,300 contractors in Afghanistan tasked to train, advise, and assist with a small contingent of counter terrorism forces. The strategic situation was stalemate.

The Biden Administration, through the National Security Council process, conducted a rigorous interagency review of the situation in Afghanistan in February, March, and April.

During this process, the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie, USFOR-A Commander General Miller, and myself were all given serious consideration by the Administration.

We provided a broad range of options and our assessment of their potential outcomes. The cost, benefit, risk to force and risk to mission were evaluated against the national security objectives of the United States.

On 14 April, the President announced his decision and the U.S. military received a change of mission to retrograde all United States military forces, maintain a small contingency force of 600 to 700 to protect the embassy in Kabul until the Department of State could coordinate contractor security support, assist Turkey to maintain the Hamid Karzai International Airport, and transition the United States mission to “over the horizon” counter terrorism support and security force assistance.

There are 6 issues I would like to further discuss: planning, Bagram airbase, Intelligence, NEO execution, 31 August, and the Way Ahead.

First, there were detailed tactical and operational plans developed by USFOR-A Commander General Miller and CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie. These plans were reviewed by the interagency and approved at the highest level. At the strategic level there were extensive coordination meetings as well as daily action officer level coordination meetings.

Along with the extensive interagency coordination, there were 4 key synchronizing events; a 28 April Afghanistan Retrograde Rehearsal, an 8 May senior official rehearsal of concept (ROC Drill), an 11 June working level interagency table top exercise on NEO, and a 6 August senior official interagency Non-Combatant evacuation table top exercise.

The 28 April Afghanistan Retrograde Rehearsal was attended by leaders from across the DOD, to include the SECDEF, DEPSECDEF, OSD/P, The Joint Chiefs as well as the USFOR-A Commander General Miller, the Commander of CENTCOM General McKenzie, the Commander of TRANSCOM General Lyons, the SACEUR Commander General Wolters, the Commander SOCOM General Clarke, and the Commander of CYBERCOM General Nakasone. The main purpose of this rehearsal was to ensure shared understanding of President Biden’s decision to leave Afghanistan and coordinate and synchronize the efforts of DOD, our allies, and partners.

The 8 May senior officials level interagency table top exercise had all relevant cabinet members to include but not limited to the Secretary of Defense Austin, DEPSECDEF Kathleen Hicks, select Combatant Commanders, to include CENTCOM, EUCOM, TRANSCOM, CYBERCOM, SOCOM, and other interagency officials. This event covered a rehearsal of concept for the complete withdrawal of United States Forces from Afghanistan and covered various branch plans and sequels. It was to ensure that the United States Government, Interagency, and partners and allies had a shared vision of our withdrawal timeline, the plan itself, and to ensure it was synchronized.

On 11 June, the Joint Staff hosted a NEO interagency table top exercise. It included senior officials from across the interagency. These officials generated a myriad of key milestones to include prioritization and sequencing of key personnel, contingency for embassy closure, intermediate staging base locations, sorting and screening of evacuees and triggers for calling the NEO.

On 6 August another senior interagency Non-Combatant Evacuation table top exercise, focused on two scenarios; a semi-permissive NEO and a non-permissive NEO with a rapidly deteriorating security situation.

Second, the Bagram decision. In order to execute the NEO, General McKenzie and General Miller assessed two potential departure airfields. With the mission changing from direct military support to the ANDSF to security of the Embassy and other key facilities at HKIA, the United States military could not secure both Bagram airfield and HKIA with the troops available.

All together securing Bagram would have required approximately 5–6,000 additional troops assuming no indigenous partner force was available. These forces are in addition to those that would be required to secure Kabul and HKIA in the event of a NEO.

As General Miller has previously testified, HKIA would always be the center of gravity of any NEO due to the population that would need to be evacuated was mostly in Kabul.

In extremis we developed contingency plans to re-seize BAGRAM, but the conditions to do so never materialized. In short, USFOR-A and CENTCOM plans estimated that in order to conduct the NEO, HKIA was the most logical choice given the mission, enemy, purpose, constraints, and restraints. Maintaining both BAGRAM and HKIA was not feasible given the mission and troops available. Their analysis was briefed, reviewed and approved at the most senior levels of our government.

Third, the Intelligence Community provided consistent strategic-level warning regarding the Taliban's increased activity as evidenced by events on the ground. There are 419 districts in Afghanistan. The Taliban controlled approximately 78 districts in February of 2021. This rose to over 100 in mid-June and surpassed 200 by mid-July, with fighting occurring on the outskirts of 15 provincial capitals.

By late July it was evident that the security situation was deteriorating rapidly. The IC consistently estimated that the ANSDF was at risk of fracture and the government could collapse after the departure of United States Forces at the end of the summer with opinions ranging from weeks, months, or in some cases years after our departure depending on when the intelligence report was written.

The consensus intelligence view estimated an ANSDF fracture and provincial capitals captured with the exception of Kabul by early to late fall or at the latest December, assuming the last United States troops were out by 31 August.

There were no estimates that I am aware of that predicted the collapse of the Afghan Army and the government in 11 days in August prior to the final departure of United States Forces.

The speed, scale and scope of the collapse was a surprise.

Fourth, there were two distinct missions that get conflated. One was the retrograde of military forces, which was largely completed by early to mid-July. The other was the execution of a non-combatant evacuation.

The first provincial capital fell on 6 August. On 14 August, Ambassador Wilson declared a NEO and the Secretary of Defense ordered the commander of CENTCOM to execute the NEO contingency plan, which was developed months earlier. We began to alert, marshal, and deploy prepositioned forces from the Middle East and pre-alerted forces from CONUS in accordance with CENTCOM's plan.

The Joint Force executed the NEO in a highly dynamic, dangerous operating environment from a war-torn country, eventually evacuating over 120,000 people entirely by air on 387 United States military sorties and 391 non U.S. military sorties.

Evacuees included 6,000 American citizens, over 3,000 3rd country nationals and the remainder were Afghans designated by the Department of State. This NEO was executed by the Joint Force deploying 6,000 troops in 2 days. We established 26 temporary safe havens stretching from the middle east across Europe and here in the United States.

The fifth point is the 31 August decision. On 25 August during the conduct of the NEO, I was asked for my best military advice on whether the United States should maintain military forces in Afghanistan beyond 31 August.

I and the Joint Chiefs of Staff along with the commander of CENTCOM, USFOR-A now Admiral Vasley, and the Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division Major General Donahue reviewed four courses of action.

We assessed the cost, benefit, risk to force, risk to mission and risk to remaining Americans in each of these COAs. We determined that any extension would increase risk to force, mission and remaining Americans to very high levels.

All the commanders and all the Joint Chiefs recommended that all U.S. Forces should depart by 31 August. Every one of us understood these were independent recommendations and there was no requirement or expectation to achieve consensus.

Remaining at HKIA beyond 31 August or attempting to re-seize Bagram Air Base and clearing Kabul of Taliban would have required a much larger commitment of forces in the range of 15 to 20,000 or more troops, and a resumption of the war against the Taliban while fighting with ISIS.

We had evacuated over 5,000 American citizens at that point. We did not have clarity on precise number or location of the remaining American citizens.

While it was militarily feasible, we assessed the cost to be extraordinarily high. In addition to U.S. casualties, we assessed the risk to remaining U.S. citizens would increase significantly. Finally we assessed there was no guarantee of getting out the remaining American citizens safely, nor was there a reasonable prospect of an end state in an achievable amount of time.

Therefore, we unanimously recommended that the military mission be transitioned on 31 August to a diplomatic mission in order to get out the remaining American citizens. That mission is still ongoing.

This NEO was unprecedented and is the largest air evacuation in U.S. history. Although the mission evacuated 120,000 people it came at an incredible cost of 11 marines, 1 soldier, and a Navy corpsman. These 13 gave their lives so that people they never met would have an opportunity to live in freedom.

For the last point, the Taliban was and remains a terrorist organization and they still have not broken ties with al Qaeda. I have no illusions who we are dealing with. It remains to be seen whether or not the Taliban can consolidate power or if the country will fracture into further civil war.

We now must continue to protect the American people from terrorist attacks emanating from Afghanistan. A reconstituted al Qaeda or ISIS with aspirations to attack the United States is a very real possibility and those conditions to include activities in ungoverned spaces could present themselves in the next 12 to 36 months. That mission will be much harder now, but not impossible, and we will continue to protect the American people.

Strategic decisions have strategic consequences, over the course of four Presidents, 12 Secretaries of Defense, seven chairmen, ten CENTCOM commanders, 20 commanders in Afghanistan, hundreds of Congressional Delegation visits, and 20 years of congressional oversight, there are many lessons to be learned.

Some of the key ones that require thoughtful examination are the decisions to reduce forces in Afghanistan in order to invade Iraq. We need to fully examine the role of Pakistan sanctuary. We need to completely understand the degree to which corruption contributed to the collapse of the Afghan Government. We need to fully understand the mission creep where we transitioned from a Counter Terrorism mission to nation building. On the military side we need to understand how we developed, trained, and equipped the ANDSF and why they collapsed in only 11 days. Each of these and many more are complex issues that will require thorough examination in the months and years ahead.

On the military side we need—and I am committed—to understand how we developed, trained, and equipped the ANDSF and why they collapsed in only 11 days and how our intel systems missed the speed of that collapse. Each of these and many more are complex issues that will require thorough examination in the months and years ahead.

It is clear that the war in Afghanistan did not end on the terms that we wanted with the Taliban in power in Kabul. However, one lesson must never be forgotten, every soldier, sailor, airman and marine who served there for the past 20 years protected our country from attack by terrorists and for that they should be forever proud and we should be forever grateful.

I want to take a moment to address the recent media reporting surrounding the conduct of my duties during the final months of the Trump Administration.

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

From October through January, I received and made hundreds of calls of assurance to allied and partner counterparts around the world as well as adversary counterparts. I also fielded many calls from you, members of Congress, both Republican and Democrat.

In frequent meetings with the joint chiefs, combatant commanders and daily meetings with my own staff, my message was consistent: that we are steady, the United States military has no role in politics, we will obey the lawful orders of the civilians appointed over us, and we will remain loyal to the Constitution.

With respect to the Chinese calls, I routinely communicated with my counterpart, General Li, with the knowledge and coordination of civilian oversight. I am specifically directed to communicate with the Chinese by Department of Defense Guidance, Policy Dialogue System. These military to military communications at the highest levels are critical to the security of the United States in order to deconflict military actions, manage crisis, and prevent war between great powers armed with nuclear weapons.

The calendar year 2019 and calendar year 2020 Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the PRC directed the DOD to routinize and prioritize DOD contacts and exchanges with the PLA to enhance predictability, stability, and prevent an incident between United States and PRC operational forces from inadvertently escalating to crisis.

The calls on 30 October and 8 January were coordinated before and after with Secretary Esper and Acting Secretary Miller's staffs and the interagency. The spe-

cific purpose of the October and January calls was generated by concerning intelligence which caused us to believe the Chinese were worried about an imminent attack by the United States.

I know, I am certain, President Trump did not intend on attacking the Chinese and it is my directed responsibility—to convey presidential orders and intent. My job at that time was to de-escalate. My message again was consistent: calm, steady, deescalate. We are not going to attack you.

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

On 31 December, the Chinese requested a call with me. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia Pacific Policy helped coordinate my call which was scheduled for 8 January. Eleven people attended the call with me. Read-outs of this call were distributed to the interagency that same day.

Shortly after my call ended with General Li, I informed both Secretary of State Pompeo and White House Chief of Staff Meadows about the call among other topics. Soon after that, I attended a meeting with Acting Secretary Miller where I briefed him on the call.

Later that same day, 8 January, Speaker Pelosi called me to inquire about the President's ability to launch nuclear weapons. I sought to assure her that nuclear launch is governed by a very specific and deliberate process.

She was concerned and made various personal references characterizing the President. I explained that the President is the sole nuclear launch authority but he doesn't launch them alone.

There are processes, protocols, and procedures in place and I repeatedly assured her there is no chance of an illegal, unauthorized, or accidental launch.

These procedures are outlined in an Executive Order, a Presidential Policy Directive, National Security Presidential Memorandum, Department of Defense Directives, Department of the Defense Nuclear Plan, Posture Guidance, and finally Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Emergency Procedure volumes I – X, all of which are classified.

By Presidential Directive and SecDef Directives, the Chairman is part of this process to ensure the President is fully informed when determining the use of the world's deadliest weapons. By law, I am not in the chain of command. However, by Presidential Directive and DOD Instruction, I am in the chain of communication to fulfill my statutory role as the President's primary military advisor.

After the Speaker Pelosi call, I convened a short meeting in my office with the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, my NMCC watch officer, J-2, J-3, and Director of the Joint Staff among others to refresh on these procedures, which we practice daily at the action officer level. Additionally, I immediately informed Acting Secretary of Defense Miller of her call.

At no time was I attempting to change or influence the process, usurp authority, or insert myself into the chain of command, but I am expected to give my advice and ensure that the President is fully informed.

I am submitting for the record, a more detailed unclassified memorandum of my actions surrounding these events.

I welcome a thorough walk-through of all these events, and I would be happy in a classified session to talk in detail about the intel that motivated these actions and the specific timeline. I am also happy to make available all emails, phone logs, memoranda, witnesses or anything else you need to better understand these events.

My oath is to support the Constitution of the United States of America, against all enemies, foreign and domestic, regardless of cost to myself, and I will never turn my back on the oath. I firmly believe in civilian control of the military as a bedrock principle essential to this Republic and I am committed to ensuring the military stays clear of domestic politics.

Chairman REED. Thank you, General.

General McKenzie, I understand you do not have a statement. Is that correct?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, I will waive my statement in order to get us back on schedule.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, General.

Secretary Austin, the Doha agreement represents direct negotiations with terrorists, and not just negotiations but an agreement with them that excluded the Afghan Government and the allies we have been fighting with us now since 9/11. It set a fixed departure

date with conditions, as has been indicated, were not really followed consistently by the Taliban. As you considered, in April, what to do, did the intelligence suggest to you that reneging on the departure of the troops would lead to significant attacks against American and allied military forces?

Secretary AUSTIN. Chairman, to my recollection, the intelligence was clear that if we did not leave in accordance with that agreement, the Taliban would recommence attacks on our forces.

Chairman REED. They would include the blue-on-green attacks and any other means they could use to attack American forces.

Secretary AUSTIN. That is correct, Chairman.

Chairman REED. So the choice was, in many respects, was, were we going to incur additional casualties indefinitely in Afghanistan? That is one way to look at it. Is that fair?

Secretary AUSTIN. That is correct, Chairman. You certainly would have to take additional measures to be able to defend yourself if the Taliban recommenced their offensive operations against us.

Chairman REED. Now, General Milley and General McKenzie, did the Doha agreement affect the morale of the Afghan forces, i.e., was there a sense now that even though it was months away, that the United States was leaving since we had agreed to leave?

General MILLEY. I will let Frank talk the details, but my assessment is yes, Senator, it did affect the morale of the Afghan security forces.

Chairman REED. General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, it is my judgment that the Doha agreement did negatively affect the performance of the Afghan forces, in particular by some of the actions that the government of Afghanistan was required to undertake as part of that agreement.

Chairman REED. One of the critical issues was the agreement to withdraw contractors, which are basically the engine that maintains the air force of Afghanistan and many other logistical operations. That was just as critical as the troop departure, I would assume.

General MCKENZIE. Chairman, it was. We had plans in place to try to conduct those operations from over the horizon. They were not as effective as having contractors on the ground, on site with the aircraft.

Chairman REED. The momentum appeared to be shifting to the Taliban. Indications were their penetration or parts of the country in the northern sectors, particularly which traditionally opposed the Taliban, the Northern Alliance, but that started—to be fair, that started long before Doha. There are some commentators who have suggested since 2014, the Taliban have been surrounding provincial capitals, insinuating themselves into the politics of the local communities, striking bargains. Is that your impression too, General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, I think it is a good assessment that from 2014 on, the Taliban did pursue that strategy, and they had some success. Now, the government of Afghanistan also had success holding onto centralized urban areas and population centers, but the Taliban pursued a distinct strategy and had some success with it.

Chairman REED. Now, Secretary Austin, you did provide your best military advice to the President regarding the situation in Afghanistan, and has been recounted several times through multiple meetings, and he received advice from many different quarters. Do you feel that you had the opportunity to make your advice very clear?

Secretary AUSTIN. I do, Chairman. As I have said before, I always keep my advice to the President confidential, but I am very much satisfied that we had a thorough policy review, and I believe that all of the parties had an opportunity to provide input. That input was received.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much.

Senator Inhofe.

Senator INHOFE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It was 2 weeks ago that we had a closed, classified hearing. We had General Miller's recommendation at that time. Well, let me first of all just mention that during your confirmation process, you committed, and I am speaking now to General McKenzie and General Milley, to give me your honest and personal views of this Committee, even if those views differed from those of the administration, and I am confident that you will be doing that.

During this hearing that we had, it was emphasized to us, from General Miller, that he was recommending the 2,500 troops in Afghanistan. Now, we did not receive the documentation from your offices, I say to the witnesses today, until, well actually, 10:35 last night. So there really was not time to get into a lot of the details, but I would ask General McKenzie, did you agree to the recommendation that General Miller had 2 weeks ago?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, again, I will not share my personal recommendation to the President, but I will give you my honest opinion, and my honest opinion and view shaped my recommendation. I recommended that we maintain 2,500 troops in Afghanistan, and I also recommended earlier in the fall of 2020 that we maintain 4,500 at that time. Those are my personal views. I also have a view that the withdrawal of those forces would lead inevitably to the collapse of the Afghan military forces, and eventually the Afghan Government.

Senator INHOFE. Yes, so I understand that, and General Milley, I assume you agree with that in terms of the recommendation of 2,500?

General MILLEY. What I said in my opening statement and the memoranda that I wrote back in the fall of 2020 remained consistent, and I do agree with that.

Senator INHOFE. This Committee is unsure as to whether or not General Miller's recommendation ever got to the President. Obviously, there are conversations with the President, but I would like to ask, even though General McKenzie, I think you have all made this statement. Did you talk to the President about General Miller's recommendation?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, I was present when that discussion occurred, and I am confident that the President heard all the recommendations and listened to them very thoughtfully.

Senator INHOFE. So one of the recommendations that was made by the three of you would be the recommendation that originally was made by General Miller 2 weeks ago.

During the August 18th interview on ABC, George Stephanopoulos asked President Biden whether U.S. troops would stay beyond August 31st if there were still Americans to evacuate. President Biden responded, and this is a quote, "If there are American citizens left, we are going to stay to get them all out." This did not happen. President Biden's decision resulted in all of the troops leaving, but the American citizens are still trying to get out.

How many American citizens, in your opinion, are still there? Just go down the line, each one of you. Anyone?

Secretary AUSTIN. Senator, I would defer to the State Department for that assessment. That is a dynamic process. They have been contacting the civilians that are in Afghanistan, and again, I would defer to them for definitive numbers.

Senator INHOFE. Go ahead. Others?

General MILLEY. Same as the Secretary just said. There were numbers at the beginning of this whole process with the F-77 report out of the embassy, and we know that we took out almost 6,000, I guess it is, American citizens. But how many remain—

Senator INHOFE. Okay. Do all of you agree that Secretary of State Blinken, when he made his analysis as to how many people would be here, would still be there, he talked about the 10,000 to 15,000 citizens left behind, and then evacuated some 6,000. That would mean a minimum of 4,000 would still be there now. Would anyone disagree with that? By your silence, I assume you agree.

Secretary AUSTIN. I have no—I personally do not believe that there are 4,000 American citizens still left in Afghanistan, but I cannot confirm or deny that, Senator.

Senator INHOFE. So you think Secretary of State was probably wrong in his analysis?

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, and just for the record, the Chair and the Vice Chair/Ranking Member have each abided by the 5-minute rule, so fair is fair.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie for being here this morning. Secretary Austin and General Milley, thank you for your effort to put into some historical perspective what happened in Afghanistan, and for recognizing the incredible service and sacrifice of the troops who served there.

General Milley, in a hearing before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense in June, I explicitly raised concerns about the plight of at-risk Afghans due to our withdrawal, and I asked about the Department's plans to evacuate them. Now you indicated today that you thought we might be facing the kind of desperate situation that we saw in Kabul, but your response at that time was that, quote, "Lots of planning was ongoing," and this is in-quote, "and the State Department was leading efforts pertaining to evacuating our Afghan partners." You explicitly told the committee that in your professional opinion, you did not see Saigon 1975 in Afghanistan. So I am just trying to figure out why we missed, or from a public perception, it appears that we did not an-

ticipate the rapid fall of Afghanistan and Kabul, and the rise of the Taliban, and the way we saw it play out on television. What did we miss?

General MILLEY. I think, Senator, we absolutely missed the rapid 11-day collapse of the Afghan military and the collapse of their government. I think there was a lot of intelligence that clearly indicated that after we withdrew, that it was a likely outcome of a collapse of the military and collapse of the government. Most of those intelligence assessments indicated that that would occur late fall, perhaps early winter, Kabul might hold till next spring. It depends on when the intel assessment was written. So after we leave, the assessments were pretty consistent that you would see a general collapse of the government and the military.

While we were there, though, up through 31 August, there is no intel assessment that says the government's going to collapse and the military's going to collapse in 11 days, that I am aware of, and I have read, I think, pretty much all of them. Even as late as the 3rd of August, and there is another one on the 8th of August, et cetera, they are still talking weeks, perhaps months, et cetera.

General McKenzie can illuminate on his own views on the same topic. He gave his assessments at the same time. Although General Miller did, in many, many assessments, say rapid, fast, hard for collapse, he also centered into the October-November time frame as opposed to August.

Senator SHAHEEN. So how do we avoid that happening again?

General MILLEY. I think the key, Senator that we missed, frankly, we had some indicators, but we did not have the full wholesome assessment of leadership, morale, and will. There were some units, and I do not want to say negative things about these guys, the 60,000, 70,000 of the Afghan service that were killed in action over the last 20 years, and many units did fight at the very end. But the vast majority put their weapons down and melted away in a very, very short period of time. I think that has to do with will, leadership, and I think we still need to try to figure out exactly why that was. I have some suggestions, but I am not settled on them yet.

But we clearly missed that. I think one of the key factors we missed it for was we pulled our advisors off three years ago, and when you pull the advisors out of the units, you no longer can assess things like leadership and will. We can count all the planes, trucks, and automobiles, and cars, and machine guns, and everything else, we can count those from space and all the other kind of intel assets, but you cannot measure the human heart with a machine. You have got to be there.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. Secretary Austin, I am about to run out of time, so you may want to respond to this on the next round, but one of the challenges with getting Special Immigrant Visa applicants out of Afghanistan has—and this was not just a problem in the evacuation. This has been a historic problem that has gone over years—has been having the documents that show they actually served with our military, and DOD has been cited as the major problem in getting those documents.

So again, how do we make sure that does not happen again in some future conflict, where we need our partners on the ground to

serve alongside of our military members? I am out of time, so hopefully you will answer that. Thank you.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Senator Shaheen.

Senator Wicker, please.

Senator WICKER. Chairman Reed, before I ask my questions I have an objection. We have been having hearings in a classified setting on this, our first public hearing. I am sorry Senator Kaine has had to step away, but in a previous hearing he expressed frustration in various hearings he had been to, and a frustration that I shared. That when the State Department is here and we ask them a question, they say, "Well, you have to ask the Defense Department that." Now today, again, Defense Department people are before us, and a question was asked, and the answer to Senator Inhofe as well, "You will have to ask the State Department that."

Senator Kaine gently but fatherly sent a message to the administration at our last classified hearing that we need to cut that out, that members of the Defense Department need to be ready for the questions that we have asked and that we are going to ask. So I object to the continuation of that in this hearing today.

While I am at it, I would also point out, General Milley, I appreciate your statement and I have read it, and I understand what you are trying to say. But further than what you mentioned, the allegation is that you told combatant commanders to report back to you. Our clear understanding is that you are not in their chain of command that they report directly to the commander in chief through the Secretary. So to the extent that you told them to report to you, they were not in your chain of command.

Now, let me see if I can get one question in here, having taken 2 minutes to mention a very important objection. General Milley, in the fall of 2020, you said an accelerated withdrawal would risk substantial gains and damage U.S. credibility, and I want to ask our witnesses about U.S. credibility.

On July 8, President Biden said, "The likelihood there is going to be Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely." We now know he was advised actually this might happen. It turns out, it was completely untrue, that statement on July 8th.

Later in July, the President of the United States, President Biden, says, "I trust the capacity of the Afghan military, better trained, better equipped, and more competent in terms of conducting the war." President Biden was wrong on that. We told our interpreters, our drivers, our friends, the people who had had our backs during this entire period of time that we would not abandon them, and that is exactly what we did.

In an interview, that has already been referred to, on network news, President Biden says, and I quote, "If there are American citizens left, we are going to stay and get them all out." Two days later, the President of the United States unequivocally said, "Any American that wants to come home, we will get you home. We are going to stay and get them out." The President of the United States, our commander in chief, did exactly the opposite.

Now, I think you were right, General Milley, when you advised that our credibility would be damaged. Our credibility has been gravely damaged, has it not, General Milley?

General MILLEY. I think that our credibility with allies and partners around the world and with adversaries is being intensely reviewed by them to see which way this is going to go, and I think that “damage” is one word that could be used, yes.

Senator WICKER. Yes, and Secretary Austin, no question that this sends a disastrous message to China and Russia. What message does it send to our NATO allies and our other allies around the world about not only our credibility, but our national resolve?

Secretary AUSTIN. Thanks, Senator. What the world witnessed is United States military evacuating 124,000 people out of a contested environment in 17 days.

Senator WICKER. Well, you testified that that was a great accomplishment, our withdrawal and our evacuation. What about our credibility?

Secretary AUSTIN. As I engage my counterparts, I think our credibility remains solid. Clearly, Senator, there will be people who question things going forward, but I would say that the United States military is one that—and the United States of America, people place great trust and confidence in. Relationships are things that we have to work on continuously, and we understand that and will continue to do that.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Wicker.

Senator Gillibrand, please.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am also very grateful to our servicemembers who committed so much over the last 20 years, and I do want to thank President Biden for taking the tough yet necessary step to stop and end an endless war, something that many of us have pushed for over the last decade.

There is obviously still a lot to do both overseas and here at home, such as ensuring that Afghan refugees are treated respectfully and responsibly, both on the DOD bases, such as ensuring that they can be transitioned into their new lives in the United States. We also have the responsibility to our troops and to all Americans to make sure that we have a complete picture of what we did, accomplished, and happened over the last 20 years across all the administrations. We have to look back so that we can do better when we look forward.

One way to do better is to make sure Congress maintains and fulfills its constitutional responsibility. We have to put back into the hands of Congress the right and responsibility to declare war. What started as a mission to defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the perceived threat in Iraq expanded to 20 years of war in more multiple countries, with hundreds of thousands of lives lost, and trillions of dollars spent? This is why I introduced the War Powers Reform Resolution, so that Congress can take back this responsibility for the benefit of our servicemembers. Congress must set clear and defined goals for the use of military force abroad, and place a limit to how long, where, and against whom we can continue military action without a new authorization, in order to finally put a stop to endless wars and prevent them in the future.

Second, there should be a comprehensive, rigorous, and objective audit on the war in its entirety. Over the last 20 years, the United States spent more than \$2 trillion on the war in Afghanistan, and we lost thousands of American lives and tens of thousands of Af-

ghan civilians. I commend the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction for its independent and objective oversight of the Afghanistan reconstruction, but I do have questions beyond that.

First, General Milley, in your testimony, you said and you mentioned that there are many lessons to be learned. What did you mean by that statement?

General MILLEY. Senator, thank you. I think there is a series of strategic lessons to be learned, and I would echo some of the ones that Senator Reed mentioned early on, specific military lessons we have to take a hard look at. The United States military was tasked, under the 2002 Bonn Agreement, to train, man, and equip the Afghan army. The Germans were required to train, man, and equip the Afghan police. As we built that army and all of its components, I think that one error we may have made over time is we made them too dependent on technology, too dependent on our capabilities, we did not take in the cultural aspects perhaps as much as we should have, and we mirror-imaged, to put it simply.

I think that is a big lesson. We are going to have to take a hard look at it. The result is when you pull contractors, you pull troops. That, I think, is one of many contributing factors to the rapid collapse. So that is a big lesson. Another one is the intel lesson that we talked about. I think that is in the military realm as well as the intelligence community realm.

There are a lot of other lessons, legitimacy of the government, corruption of the government. Those sorts of things are all out there as to why that government collapsed as rapidly as it could, but those are for others to sort out. There is a specific set of military lessons we need to pull out within the military.

Senator GILLIBRAND. I have read various opinion pieces. I know everyone here is deeply disturbed that the trained Afghan military did not perform as expected. I would like your thoughts on if they had performed as expected, would we have seen a prolonged civil war? What is your estimate of what the impact of them actually fighting would have been?

General MILLEY. My estimate is if they had performed as we expected them to perform that the government would still be there. They would have probably lost significant chunks of territory, but Kabul would be there, and some of the major provincial capitals. But I would defer that, probably you would get a more granular view from that from General McKenzie.

Senator GILLIBRAND. General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. I think had the Afghan military fought, we would have probably seen the approaches to Kabul get into the winter, still under the control of the government of Afghanistan. A lot of the outlying provinces would not have been.

But I would just note that it was not so much the collapse of the Afghan military as the collapse of the Afghan Government writ large. Those two things happen together, and they were completely linked together. So when you consider one, I think you have to think about the other.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Additionally, in retrospect, one of the areas of debate has been whether we should have started our evacuation earlier. I recognize that the Kabul Government asked us not to

start our evacuation early. Can you speak to what you now know and whether it would have been smarter or more effective if we had started evacuate personnel a year in advance or 6 months in advance or any time in advance?

Chairman REED. Could I ask the Senator?

Senator GILLIBRAND. I apologize. I did not realize my time was expired.

Chairman REED. Thank you.

Senator GILLIBRAND. I will submit that for the record.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much Senator Gillibrand.

Senator Fischer, please.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I too would like to thank our military men and women for their dedication to this country, for the sacrifices that they and their families make in any theater of war, and make every day for us.

But our exit from Afghanistan was a disaster and the missteps that are already outlined had consequences that struck close to home—as a Nebraskan, Corporal Daegan Page, who was one of the 13 servicemembers killed in action. We should not forget we have the policy discussions here today, but let us remember the human sacrifice.

We also left American citizens behind. General Milley, in your written testimony, you stated withdraw would increase risks of regional instability, the security of Pakistan and its nuclear arsenals, a global rise in violent extremist organizations, our global credibility with allies and partners would suffer, and a narrative of abandoning the Afghans would become widespread. Would you agree that all of these things that happened over the last eight weeks are currently happening?

General MILLEY. I think in the main, yes, Senator, most of those are probably happening right now.

Senator FISCHER. I hope that we see in the future, military advice having more consideration by the administration on what will happen from what you and General McKenzie have said today.

General MILLEY. If I may, Senator, I can tell you with 100 percent certainty that the military voice was heard and it was considered.

Senator FISCHER. It was considered, but not followed. Correct?

General MILLEY. Presidents are elected for reasons. They make strategic decisions, and—

Senator FISCHER. I would say this Committee, General, has always stressed that commanders on the ground should be listened to. Would you agree with that?

General MILLEY. I would, and I would tell you they were listened to. I think there is a difference between us having an opportunity to have a voice, and I think it is very important that the military has a voice, but I firmly believe in civilian control of the military, and I am required and the military commanders are required to give our best military advice, but the decision-makers are not required in any manner, shape, or form to follow that advice.

Senator FISCHER. No, they are not, I agree with you about civilian control of this country, but I think it is also important to realize when we continue to see missteps by an administration that is costing lives.

Secretary Austin, it is being reported right now that the Biden administration reached out to Russia about using Russian bases in the central Asian nations bordering Afghanistan to the north for our strike assets to fly out of over-the-horizon counterterrorism missions. Is that true?

Secretary AUSTIN. Senator, this is an issue that I believe came up during a conversation that the President had with President Putin, where President Putin offered to provide assistance.

Senator FISCHER. But have you reached out to the Russians asking specifically to use bases?

Secretary AUSTIN. General Milley just recently had a conversation with his Russian counterpart.

Senator FISCHER. So the reports are true that have been coming out today?

Secretary AUSTIN. I can assure you that we are not seeking Russia's permission to do anything. But I believe and General Milley can speak for himself, but I believe that he asked for clarification on what that offer was.

Senator FISCHER. I have a number of questions which I will need to get to with General McKenzie about over-the-horizon and the capabilities as we look to the future, and what is available there. But I think what we are seeing in the reports today about asking to use Russian bases, that is just another example that we see of the Biden administration, they have really left us in a terrible position that we have to ask the Russians to be able to protect the United States from terrorists, and we have to ask them to use their installations.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary AUSTIN. I would just reemphasize, Senator that we are not asking the Russians for anything.

Senator FISCHER. But you are negotiating and trying to get these bases to be able to use their installations, because Afghanistan is a landlocked country, and when we have explanations from the military and they give examples for over-the-horizon, and use countries like Yemen and Libya and Somalia, that does not take into consideration that Afghanistan is landlocked. We have to depend on Pakistan to give us airspace to get there.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Fischer.

Senator Blumenthal, please.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I want to express my hope that this hearing is just the beginning, a first step in an in-depth analysis, going not just to the last 10 weeks or even 10 months, but 10 years and longer back, so that we can match the courage of the men and women of America who have sacrificed during this 20-year war, all of them and all of their families, not just in Afghanistan, but around the world. We owe them, veterans of America, much more than we are giving them right now because they have earned it.

That in-depth analysis looking backward is essential, but I want to look forward right now to what is happening in Afghanistan with respect to Americans and our Afghan allies.

After our withdrawal, it was left to an unofficial network or coalition of veterans, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), some

government officials. I was involved in an effort through chartered planes and airports outside of Kabul to try to airlift on a makeshift, ad hoc basis, Americans and Afghan allies still there. They have targets on their back, their situation is increasingly urgent and desperate. I have been frustrated by the lack of someone in charge, in lines of authority, a point person.

We need an evacuation czar, somebody who will provide a plan and supervise actions so that we can get out of Afghanistan the Americans that remain there, and I will tell you, we do not have an estimate on the number because nobody is in charge right now.

So let me ask you, Secretary Austin, who at the Department of Defense as overall responsibility with overseeing the effort to evacuate?

Secretary AUSTIN. As you know—well, first of all, Senator, thank you to you and your colleagues for all that you have done to continue to help get American citizens out of Afghanistan.

The State Department, following the departure of the military, the State Department remained engaged and continued to work to get American citizens out. As we have seen, some 85 American citizens and 79 legal permanent residents have departed via the Kabul airport, and so that work continues on.

The State Department set up a cell to continue this work and develop a mechanism. That cell is headed up by Ambassador Bass. As you may recall, Ambassador Bass was one of the senior counselors on the ground at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) as we were conducting the investigation.

I have a general officer that is a part of that cell and we have reached out to, or Ambassador Bass has reached out to veterans groups and others who may have information that can help us continue to contact and eventually, evacuate American citizens and lawful permanent residents (LPRs).

So this work continues and we remain committed to continuing that work until we get out as many American citizens that are willing to come out.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, there was a point and you can call it the eye of the storm, when the Taliban had taken over the country, but really was not in charge, when we could have evacuated a great many more Americans and our Afghan allies, the translators and others, guards, security officers. I feel that the administration was on notice. In fact, a group of us went to the White House in the spring and urge that there be a plan for evacuation. Unfortunately, the withdrawal prevented there from being anybody on the ground.

In the wake of that withdrawal, there was a vacuum of leadership, and I would hope that there would be more effective action now to put somebody in charge and develop a plan, because we know that there are many Americans, whether it is green card holders or citizens, or others still there. In Connecticut, we have a resettlement organization called IRIS. Chris George, who heads it, has told us of individuals who are still there, more than 40 in Kabul, and I am sure other organizations similarly know of such Americans who are still there. Thank you.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.

Senator Cotton, please.

Senator COTTON. Thank you.

General Milley, it is your testimony that you recommended 2,500 troops, approximately, stay in Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. As I have said many times before this Committee and other committees, I do not share my personal recommendations to the President, but I can tell you my personal opinion and my assessment, if that is what you want.

Senator COTTON. Yes, please.

General MILLEY. Yes, my assessment was, back in the fall of 2020 and it remained consistent throughout, that we should keep a steady state of 2,500, and it could bounce up to 3,500, maybe, something like that, in order to move toward a negotiated gated solution.

Senator COTTON. Did you ever present that assessment personally to President Biden?

General MILLEY. I do not discuss exactly what my conversations are with the sitting President in the Oval Office, but I can tell you what my personal opinion was, and I am always candid.

Senator COTTON. Okay. General McKenzie, do you share that assessment?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, I do share that assessment.

Senator COTTON. Did you ever present that opinion personally to President Biden?

General MCKENZIE. I am not going to be able to comment on those executive discussions.

Senator COTTON. Did General Miller ever present that opinion personally to President Biden?

General MCKENZIE. I think it would be best to ask him. I believe that his opinion was well heard.

Senator COTTON. Secretary Austin, President Biden last month, in an interview with George Stephanopoulos, said that no military leader advised him to leave a small troop presence in Afghanistan. Is that true?

Secretary AUSTIN. Senator Cotton, I believe that—well, first of all, I know the President to be an honest and forthright man, and secondly—

Senator COTTON. It is a simple question, Secretary Austin. He said no senior military leader advised him to leave a small troop presence behind. Is that true or not? Did these officers and General Miller's recommendations get to the President personally?

Secretary AUSTIN. Their input was received by the President and considered by the President, for sure. In terms of what they specifically recommended, Senator, as they just said, they are not going to provide what they recommended in confidence.

Senator COTTON. I mean, it is shocking to me. It sounds to me like maybe their best military advice was never presented personally to the President of the United States about such a highly consequential matter.

Let me move on to another recommendation they are reported to have made. General Milley, Joe Biden has said that it was the unanimous—the unanimous recommendation of the Joint Chiefs that we not maintain a military presence beyond August 31st. We have heard testimony to that effect today as well. When was that

unanimous recommendation sought and presented to the President?

General MILLEY. You are talking about the 31 August?

Senator COTTON. Yes, the 31 August deadline for getting—

General MILLEY. So on 25 August, I was asked to make an assessment and provide best military advice on—

Senator COTTON. I am sorry. My time is limited here. You gave me the answer to that I needed to hear. August 25th?

General MILLEY. Correct.

Senator COTTON. Kabul fell on August 15th.

General MILLEY. That is correct.

Senator COTTON. You were not asked before August 25th?

General MILLEY. On August 25th, I was asked to provide best military assessment as to whether we should keep military forces past the 31st.

Senator COTTON. Secretary Austin, was anybody asked before August 25th if we should keep troops at the Kabul airport?

Secretary AUSTIN. The President tasked us to provide an assessment on whether or not we should extend our presence beyond August 31st. As General Milley just said, we tasked them to make that assessment on the 25th, and he came back and provided his best military advice.

Senator COTTON. Secretary, Kabul fell on August 15th. It was clear that we had thousands of Americans—it was clear to Members of this Committee, we were getting phone calls that we have thousands of Americans in Afghanistan behind Taliban lines on August 15th and it took 10 days to ask these general officers if we should extend our presence. I suspect the answer might be a little different if you were asking them 16 days out, not 5 days out.

Again, my time is limited. I want to move on to another matter. President Biden's botched evacuation screwed things up coming and going as it relates to Afghan evacuees. We left behind thousands of Afghans who serviced alongside of us who were vetted and approved to come here.

We brought out thousands who really have no particular connection, about whom we know nothing and cannot be effectively vetted. You now have female troops who have been assaulted. You have Afghan evacuees committing sex crimes at Fort McCoy. What are we to make of this? What steps are we taking to ensure that thousands of Afghans about whom we know nothing are not going to be a menace to our troops and our military bases and into the communities into which they are about to be released?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, Senator, I am certainly aware of the allegations and I take the allegations very seriously. I can assure you that our commanders at our bases have what they need to be able to protect our troops and our families that work and live at those bases. I am in contact with General VanHerck, the Northern Command (NORTHCOM) commander, who has overall responsibility for the operation on a routine basis. This is an area that he remains sighted on.

Senator COTTON. All right, I have just got one final question. General Milley, I can only conclude that your advice about staying in Afghanistan was rejected. I am shocked to learn that your advice was not sought until August 25th on staying past the August 31

deadline. I understand that you are the principal military advisor, that you advise, you do not decide. The President decides. But if all of this is true General Milley, why have you not resigned?

General MILLEY. Senator, as a senior military officer resigning is a really serious thing, and it is a political act if I am resigning in protest. My job is to provide advice. My statutory responsibility is to provide legal advice or best military advice to the President, and that is my legal requirement. That is what the law is. The President does not have to agree with that advice. He does not have to make those decisions just because we are generals. It would be an incredible act of political defiance for a commissioned officer to just resign because my advice is not taken.

This country does not want generals figuring out what orders we are going to accept and do or not. That is not our job. The principal civilian control of the military is absolute. It is critical to this Republic. In addition to that, just from a personal standpoint, my dad did not get a choice to resign at Iwo Jima, and those kids that are at Abbey Gate, they do not get a choice to resign and I am not going to turn my back on them. They cannot resign, so I am not going to resign. There is no way.

If the orders are illegal, we are in a different place, but if the orders are legal from civilian authority, I intend to carry them out.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Cotton.

Senator Hirono, please.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Do I understand you correctly, General McKenzie and General Milley that your personal recommendation was that the troops who remain in Afghanistan, a certain number of them beyond the August 31st deadline?

General MILLEY. No, Senator. Our recommendation, this was the Joint Chiefs of Staff, this is myself included, General McKenzie, Major General Donahue, the Ground Tactical Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, and Admiral Vasely. Every single one of us were in a tank. I brought them up. Secretary Austin did not show up. There was no political pressure. There was no expectation of consensus. Every one of us evaluated the military conditions at the time on the 25th, and we made a unanimous recommendation that we end the military mission and transition to a diplomatic mission.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you. So while you testify that you may have had the personal recommendation, and I think in your case, General McKenzie, in the fall of 2020, or it might have been General Milley, that by the time we are evacuating everyone, that was not a recommendation that you personally held—

General MILLEY. Absolutely not. At that point on the 25th of August, no. On the 25th of August, we recommended that the mission end on the 31st.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you for that clarification.

General MILLEY. Thank you.

Senator HIRONO. So the evacuation was chaotic, and yes, we are really grateful that our military performed magnificently in evacuating over 120,000 people. But Secretary Austin, Secretary Blinken acknowledged to my colleagues on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that no one believed the Afghan Government and military could collapse as rapidly as it did, especially in the first weeks of August. However, United States forces conducted at least a couple of airstrikes in the middle of July aimed at blunting the Taliban's rapid advance.

Secretary Austin, in July you were aware, or the DOD was aware that the situation was deteriorating rapidly by July. Why was an action not taken to secure the Kabul airport or retake Bagram then?

Secretary AUSTIN. Thank you, Senator. You are right, the tempo had picked up significantly and the Taliban continued to make advances. Our entire chain of command—myself, the Chairman, General McKenzie—routinely engaged the Afghan leadership to encourage them to solidify their defensive plans, to make sure that they were providing the right logistics to their troops, and further, stiffen their defenses, to no avail. To compound that, President Ghani continued to make changes in the leadership of the military, and this created further problems for the Afghan Security Forces.

Senator HIRONO. Mr. Secretary, I do not mean to interrupt you, but my time is elapsing. So this gets to the overestimation, I think the overly optimistic assessment, because even as late as July, you are still encouraging the Afghan Special Forces, you are expecting the Ghani Government to remain, but that was not the case.

In December 2019, the Washington Post reported that the United States military commanders privately expressed a lack of confidence that the Afghan army and police could ever fend off, much less defeat the Taliban on their own.

General Milley, you noted that there were some specific military lessons to be learned. This is not the first time that I think we have relied upon overly optimistic assessments of conditions on the ground or conflict conditions. It certainly happened in Vietnam. My question to you is what specific steps can we take to make sure that our assessments are not overly optimistic, so we can avoid the reliance on assessments that are not accurate?

General MILLEY. I think in the case of working with other countries' armies, it is important to have advisors with those units, so that you can do a holistic assessment of things that are very difficult to measure, the morale factors, leadership will. I think that is one key aspect.

Another part, I think it is really important, and this is a lesson from Vietnam and I think today, is do not Americanize the war. We learned that in El Salvador, or in Colombia, for example, where we did assist and help other countries' armies fight insurgencies, and we were quite effective, but it was their country, their army that bore the burden of all the fighting. We had very, very few advisers

and it was quite effective. Now, every country is different, every war is different, and it has to be evaluated on its own merits, but I think those are some key points that are worth thinking about.

Senator HIRONO. I agree. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Hirono.

Senator Rounds, please.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, first of all, thank you for your willingness to appear before this Committee to answer questions on the withdrawal from Afghanistan. You have received and will continue to receive tough questions on what led to this decision. This is an important constitutional requirement of the jobs that you have agreed to serve in, and I thank you all for your many years of service to our Nation.

I want to underline the fact that every single Member of this Committee, regardless of party, is grateful for the dedication and bravery exhibited by our servicemembers, especially those who gave their last full measure of devotion at Abbey Gate.

General McKenzie, General Miller told this Committee that he recommended keeping 2,500 troops in Afghanistan, and this is back in January 2021, because he felt that Afghan forces would not hold out long without our support. It seems to me that there would have been a process to convey General Miller's recommendation to the President. Can you share the process and who conveyed General Miller's recommendation, and was that recommendation delivered to both President Trump at the time and also to President Biden?

General MCKENZIE. There is a process for delivering recommendations to commanders in the field. I was part of that process. While I have been very clear that I will not give you my recommendation, I have given you my view, which I think you can draw your own conclusions from, and my view is that 2,500 was an appropriate number to remain, and that if we went below that number, in fact, we would probably witness a collapse of the Afghan Government and the Afghan military. So—

Senator ROUNDS. General McKenzie, I guess my question is would it be fair for the Committee to assume that both President Trump and President Biden received that specific information that had been assumed to be delivered by General Miller?

General MCKENZIE. I believe it would be reasonable for the Committee to assume that.

Senator ROUNDS. Would General Miller have been able to deliver that directly to the President, or would someone else have had to have delivered that for him?

General MCKENZIE. I would leave it to General Miller to express an opinion on that, but he and I both had the opportunity to be in executive session with the President, and I cannot share anything beyond making that statement.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. Secretary Austin, this Committee was briefed on the series of rock drills, rehearsal of concept drills that examined the many potential scenarios that could arise through the execution of different types of actions and counteractions. We have been briefed by multiple leaders that the worst-case scenario, an un-forecasted collapse of the Afghan Government, was not something that these drills factored in as a possibility.

Is it true that we actually did tabletop exercises and we actually went through these drills, and we never assumed that there could be an immediate collapse of the Afghan Government?

Secretary AUSTIN. We planned for a range of possibilities. The entire collapse of the Afghan Government was clearly one of the things that if you look at the intel estimates and some of the estimates that others had made that could happen. But in terms of specific planning, especially with respect to NEO, we planned for a contested environment or an un-consented environment, the requirement to evacuate a moderate amount of people versus a large amount of people. So there was a range of possibilities that we addressed.

Senator ROUNDS. But never with an immediate collapse of the government?

Secretary AUSTIN. We certainly did not plan against the collapse of a government in 11 days.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. General Milley, I think Senator Cotton made a very good point with regard to the timing, the collapse of Kabul and the time in which you were asked for your professional military opinion about the path forward. What seems to be the real challenge for many of us is that it appears that in your professional military opinion it would have been prudent to have used a different approach than a date certain with regard to a withdrawal from Afghanistan.

If that is correct, and if there were other alternatives presented to the President, I am certain that the frustration that you felt in not having your professional military advice followed closely by an incoming President, that you were then tasked, in a very short period of time, with handling what was a position in time for the people that were on the ground there to respond in an emergency basis. Would it be fair to say that you changed from a long-term plan of gradual withdrawal based on conditions to one in which you had to make immediate changes based upon a date certain?

General MILLEY. Senator, as a matter of professional advice, I would advise any leader, do not put dates certain on end dates. Make things conditions based. Two Presidents in a row, put dates on it. I do not think that is a—my advice is do not put specific dates. Make things conditions based. That is how I have been trained over many, many years.

With respect though, to the 31st and the decision on the 25th, the risk to mission and the risk to force, and most importantly, the risk to the American citizens that are remaining, that was going to go up, not down, on the 1st of September. The American citizens, I know there are American citizens there, but they would have been at greater risk had we stayed past the 31st, in our professional opinion.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Senator Kaine, please.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair. To the witnesses, I want to return to a point that Senator Wicker made. I informed a DOD witness about 10 days ago that we would expect an answer to the question of how many Americans are still in Afghanistan, and that we would not appreciate an answer that that was deferred to State. I am going to ask the question during my second round of ques-

tions after lunch and with the number of staff who are here in this room and in the ante room, we ought to be able to get an answer. If we cannot, it will suggest to the Committee, and I do not think you want to suggest this to the Committee, that you do not want to be responsive to that question, or that you do not talk to the State Department, or that the number of Americans in Afghanistan is something that you are indifferent to. I do not think any of those are true, so I will ask the question again after lunch, and I hope we can get an answer.

Two compliments and then a critical observation and inquiry. First, thanks to President Biden for ending the United States combat mission in Afghanistan after 20 years. It took guts and it was the right thing to do, and it should have been done earlier. A Virginia servicemember, whose wife is expecting, said this to me recently: "I am so glad that my baby is not being born into a country at war."

Some want us to sustain on permanent war footing in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Some will point out that U.S. troops are still deployed, still in harm's way, still carrying out limited militarized strikes around the world.

But to the families of those who have been deployed over and over again into Iraq and Afghanistan over the course of the last 20 years, they are relieved that America is now turning the page and rejecting the notion that we should be a Nation in permanent war.

Second, the effort to evacuate more than 120,000 people to safety under chaotic circumstances was remarkable. I visited the Dulles Expo Center, the principal arrival point for about 80 percent of the Afghans. I also visited Fort Lee, the first of the eight forts that process Afghans, and I visited with Afghans, our troops, the many Federal Agencies working together, NGOs. The competent and compassionate service on the American side and the deep gratitude among Afghans made a deep impression on me. We should do all we can to make that transition to safe life in America as productive as possible.

My chief criticism and question is this. Why did the Afghan Security Force and civilian government collapse so quickly, and why did the United States so overestimate their capacity?

The second half of the question, why we overestimated their capacity, is very important. To any who have said we could not see this coming, the Members of this Committee know that is wrong. An immediate collapse may not have been the most likely outcome, but we have heard for years, particularly from the intel community, that DOD estimates of Afghan strength were way too optimistic.

I believe that the United States Government had a good evacuation plan, but it was premised on an Afghan civilian and military government that showed high resistance to the Taliban, and so, we did not adequately plan for the real possibility of a quick collapse. We need to explore both military and inter-agency decision-making processes to understand why we were unrealistic, and how to correct that going forward.

But the most important part of the question is why a military we had trained for 20 years at a cost of \$800-plus billion dollars collapsed so quickly. I can think of three reasons, but after I put

them on the table, I would like each of you beginning with General McKenzie to address the question, and if we cannot, we can do it when we come back after lunch.

First, the lightning collapse may show that our training was insufficient, and that it did not prepare the Afghan military to defend the country on their own. That should have been our goal, but we failed to accomplish it. If so, how must we change our thinking about training foreign militaries?

Second, the lightning collapse may not prove that the National Security Forces (NSF) were poor fighters, but that they were demoralized. Did they lack confidence in their own political and military leaders? Were they demoralized by a 2020 peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban that did not even include the Afghan Government?

Mr. Chair, I would like to introduce the peace agreement for the record.

Chairman REED. Without objection.

[The information follows:]

**Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan
between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States
as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America**

**February 29, 2020
which corresponds to Rajab 5, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar
and Hoot 10, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar**

A comprehensive peace agreement is made of four parts:

1. Guarantees and enforcement mechanisms that will prevent the use of the soil of Afghanistan by any group or individual against the security of the United States and its allies.
2. Guarantees, enforcement mechanisms, and announcement of a timeline for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan.
3. After the announcement of guarantees for a complete withdrawal of foreign forces and timeline in the presence of international witnesses, and guarantees and the announcement in the presence of international witnesses that Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will start intra-Afghan negotiations with Afghan sides on March 10, 2020, which corresponds to Rajab 15, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 20, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar.
4. A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations. The participants of intra-Afghan negotiations will discuss the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms, which will be announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.

The four parts above are interrelated and each will be implemented in accordance with its own agreed timeline and agreed terms. Agreement on the first two parts paves the way for the last two parts.

Following is the text of the agreement for the implementation of parts one and two of the above. Both sides agree that these two parts are interconnected. The obligations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban in this agreement apply in areas under their control until the formation of the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations.

PART ONE

The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel within fourteen (14) months following announcement of this agreement, and will take the following measures in this regard:

- A. The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will take the following measures in the first one hundred thirty-five (135) days:
- 1) They will reduce the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to eight thousand six hundred (8,600) and proportionally bring reduction in the number of its allies and Coalition forces.
 - 2) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will withdraw all their forces from five (5) military bases.
- B. With the commitment and action on the obligations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban in Part Two of this agreement, the United States, its allies, and the Coalition will execute the following:
- 1) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will complete withdrawal of all remaining forces from Afghanistan within the remaining nine and a half (9.5) months.
 - 2) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will withdraw all their forces from remaining bases.
- C. The United States is committed to start immediately to work with all relevant sides on a plan to expeditiously release combat and political prisoners as a confidence building measure with the coordination and approval of all relevant sides. Up to five thousand (5,000) prisoners of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and up to one thousand (1,000) prisoners of the other side will be released by March 10, 2020, the first day of intra-Afghan negotiations, which corresponds to Rajab 15, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 20, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar. The relevant sides have the goal of releasing all the remaining prisoners over the course of the subsequent three months. The United States commits to completing this goal. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban commits that its released prisoners will be committed to the responsibilities mentioned in this agreement so that they will not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.
- D. With the start of intra-Afghan negotiations, the United States will initiate an administrative review of current U.S. sanctions and the rewards list against members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban with the goal of removing these sanctions by August 27, 2020, which corresponds to Muharram 8, 1442 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Saunbola 6, 1399 on the Hijri Solar calendar.
- E. With the start of intra-Afghan negotiations, the United States will start diplomatic engagement with other members of the United Nations Security Council and Afghanistan to remove members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban from the sanctions list with the aim of achieving this objective by May 29, 2020, which corresponds to Shawwal 6, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Jawza 9, 1399 on the Hijri Solar calendar.

- F. The United States and its allies will refrain from the threat or the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Afghanistan or intervening in its domestic affairs.

PART TWO

In conjunction with the announcement of this agreement, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will take the following steps to prevent any group or individual, including al-Qa'ida, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies:

1. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as 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.
2. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will send a clear message that those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies have no place in Afghanistan, and will instruct members of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban not to cooperate with groups or individuals threatening the security of the United States and its allies.
3. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will prevent any group or individual in Afghanistan from threatening the security of the United States and its allies, and will prevent them from recruiting, training, and fundraising and will not host them in accordance with the commitments in this agreement.
4. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban is committed to deal with those seeking asylum or residence in Afghanistan according to international migration law and the commitments of this agreement, so that such persons do not pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies.
5. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban will not provide visas, passports, travel permits, or other legal documents to those who pose a threat to the security of the United States and its allies to enter Afghanistan.

PART THREE

1. The United States will request the recognition and endorsement of the United Nations Security Council for this agreement.

2. The United States and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban seek positive relations with each other and expect that the relations between the United States and the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations will be positive.
3. The United States will seek economic cooperation for reconstruction with the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations, and will not intervene in its internal affairs.

Signed in Doha, Qatar on February 29, 2020, which corresponds to Rajab 5, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar calendar and Hoot 10, 1398 on the Hijri Solar calendar, in duplicate, in Pashto, Dari, and English languages, each text being equally authentic.

Senator Kaine. Did U.S. and allied funding deepen a culture of corruption that long predated our involvement? Even the best fighting force may give in if they have no confidence in their leadership.

Third, the lightning collapse may show that we wanted things for Afghans that Afghan leadership did not want for themselves. We celebrated gains in public health and women's education, and we assumed that Afghans would fight to preserve those gains rather than allow the Taliban to take over. In other words, we thought we knew what Afghans wanted, what they feared, and what they would fight for.

But was our belief, though well intentioned, incredibly naive? We cannot get one-third of Americans to take a COVID vaccine, or accept the results of a presidential election. Do we really think we can transform the culture of another nation?

So to each of our witnesses, when we return in the second round, I will ask you this question: Why do you believe the Afghan military and civilian government collapsed so quickly?

With that I will yield back, Mr. Chair.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much. Senator Kaine.

Senator Ernst, please.

Senator ERNST. Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair and gentlemen, thank you very much for being here today.

Unfortunately, this morning's hearing is required due to the haphazard withdrawal of United States forces, American citizens, and many of our Afghan partners. However, we do want to thank the men and women in uniform that assisted the evacuation of those that were able to make it out, and of course, to those that have given their service and sacrifice over the past two decades of the global war on terror.

The loss of our servicemembers and abandonment of Americans and Afghan allies last month was an unforced, disgraceful humiliation that did not have to happen. The President put a cheap political victory, a withdrawal timeline timed to the 20th anniversary of 9/11 on his calendar and executed his vision with little regard for American lives or the real threats that we face.

I do appreciate your open, your honest and expert participation in communicating to this Committee what went wrong. I think our American citizens are at a real crossroads right now where they are questioning the leadership from this President and this administration. President Biden's blunders cannot be erased, but the United States must now account for them through a revamped counterterrorism strategy that recognizes the newfound momentum of terrorists and new threats emanating from the Middle East, in addition to rising challenges that we see coming from China and Russia. Pretty high stakes.

Secretary Austin, I would like to start with you. Did President Biden or any of his national security advisors express any military or diplomatic conditions for the American withdrawal from Afghanistan beyond the looming date of 9/11? What were those military conditions or diplomatic conditions that were outlined to you?

Secretary AUSTIN. Again, once the President went through a very deliberate decision-making process and made his decision to exit Afghanistan, there were no additional conditions placed on it.

Senator ERNST. Can you tell me that he did take into consideration military or diplomatic conditions, and what were those conditions that he was weighing as he was making those decisions?

Secretary AUSTIN. Sure. One of the things that all of us wanted to see happen was for this conflict to end with a diplomatic solution, and so one of the thing that we certainly wanted to see was progress being made in the Doha negotiations. We did not see, or he did not see any progress being made, and there was really not much of a bright future for that process.

Senator ERNST. General Milley had stated earlier that his recommendation is always, as any military commander should do, should be conditions based. We have to be able to evaluate whether those conditions are achievable, and if we can successfully complete those. It sounds like there were very little consideration given to diplomatic or military conditions. The diplomatic, again, going to conditions based, the diplomatic end to it, I think General Milley, you also said that the military mission would end on the 31st, and transition to a diplomatic mission. But I do not understand how we fulfill a diplomatic mission after August 31st, when there are absolutely no diplomats on the ground in Afghanistan. They are gone. They have been evacuated. Who do we hand that mission off to when there is nobody there to complete it?

So can you then say that the President directed you, Secretary Austin, to execute an unconditional withdrawal from Afghanistan? Unconditional. August 31st, done.

Secretary AUSTIN. Once he made the decision to withdraw, I mean, that was the decision, to leave. We certainly wanted to make sure that we shaped conditions so that our embassy could maintain a presence there, and continue to engage the government of Afghanistan. So protection of the embassy was pretty important.

Senator ERNST. Yes, Secretary Austin, you are extremely diplomatic in your answers. I can appreciate that, but this was not a conditions-based withdrawal. I think all three of you have stated that you made your best opinion known to the President of the United States. He had no conditions other than to get our people out of Afghanistan, which he failed at, because we still have Americans as well as Afghan partners in Afghanistan.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Chairman REED. Thank you. Senator Ernst.

Senator King, please.

Senator KING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am finding this a very interesting hearing. It is really two hearings at once. One is on the question of should we leave Afghanistan, and if we should not, what should be the nature of our troop commitment and our commitment to the country? The other is the withdrawal, which I thought was the subject to the hearing.

The decision to leave Afghanistan was made by President Trump in his administration on February 29, 2020, where we committed to leave by a date certain. There was a particular provision, or a condition, if you will, about negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan Government. There was even a date specified—March 10, 2020, less than two weeks after the signing of the Doha agreement.

Clearly that condition was not met. My question is, and General Milley, you were the only one who overlapped the two administrations, were there any efforts on behalf of the prior administration to enforce that condition of negotiation with the Afghan Government and the Taliban?

General MILLEY. Senator, as I said in my opening remarks, the conditions that were required of the Taliban, none of them were met except one.

Senator KING. My question is, did we attempt to enforce those conditions? Did we inform the Taliban, for example, we will not advocate for the release of 5,000 prisoners, unless you begin negotiations, or something similar?

General MILLEY. I do not have personal knowledge of that, whether or not Zal Khalizad or others were personally saying that. I do not have personal knowledge of that. But I do know that none of the conditions were met except the one, which is do not attack American forces and coalition forces. That condition was.

Senator KING. The conditions were not met, but you testified that the troop withdrawals and the release of the 5,000 Taliban prisoners did proceed, even though the conditions had not been met. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. That is correct.

Senator KING. You have testified you provided your best military advice to President Biden, that there should be a residual force left in Afghanistan. Did you provide the same advice to President Trump when they were negotiating the Doha agreement?

General MILLEY. Again, I am not going to discuss precise advice.

Senator KING. Was it your best military judgment that a residual force—

General MILLEY. At that time, yes, and that is what that a series of memos, and advice and meetings, et cetera, in the September, October time frame, that is exactly what they were, and you can talk to Secretary Esper and he can tell you the same thing.

Senator KING. So your military judgment did not change on January 20th.

General MILLEY. No.

Senator KING. Thank you. General McKenzie, you touched on something that you were the only one to mention it in this entire hearing. In my judgment, one of the key moments was the fleeing of President Ghani, and that that is, in fact, what really pulled the rug out from under the military and demoralized the entire government. That was really not the beginning of the end but the end of the end. Do you have some thoughts on that?

General MCKENZIE. I think, when we consider what happened to the Afghan military, you have to consider it completely linked to what happened to the Afghan Government. When your president flees literally on no notice in the middle of the day that has a profoundly debilitating effect on everything else.

Now, events were pretty far along on 15 August, so I would note that it, but I do believe it is possible they could have fought and held parts of Kabul had the president stayed. I think that really demoralized those remnants of Afghans, and there were still considerable Afghan combat formations around Kabul on 15 August. I believe they were really disorganized by that, and led to the

Taliban really pushing in as fast as they wanted to go into the center of the city.

Senator KING. I do want to point out for the record that, to my knowledge and memory, this Committee never had a hearing on the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan in February of 2020. It now appears that would have been a beneficial hearing because we could have discussed all of these issues, but we were already on the path for withdrawal. The withdrawal date under that agreement was May 1, 2021. President Biden extended that—I do not know whether it was a negotiation or some kind of understanding—until the end of August.

General Milley, in questioning from Senator Cotton, you talked about your military advice about leaving on August 31st versus staying to try to help additional Americans leave. Was it the unanimous recommendation of the Joint Chiefs that the August 31st date should be observed? If so, why was that the military advice?

General MILLEY. It was of the Joint Chiefs plus General McKenzie, Admiral Vasely, and General Donahue. The reason is risk to force, risk to mission, and risk to the American citizens.

On the 1st of September, we were going to go to war with the Taliban—of that there was no doubt—and we were already in conflict with ISIS. So at that point in time, if we stayed past the 31st, which militarily is feasible but it would have required an additional commitment of significant amounts of forces, probably 18th Airborne Corps, 15,000, 20,000, maybe 25,000 troops, we would have had to re-seize Bagram, we would have had to clear Kabul of the 6,000 Taliban that were already in Kabul.

That is what would have happened, beginning on the 1st. That would have resulted in significant casualties on the U.S. side, and it would have placed American citizens that are still there at greater risk, in my professional view and in the view of all the other generals. So on the 25th, we recommended that we transition to a diplomatic option beginning on the 31st.

Senator KING. Thank you, General. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator King.

Senator Tillis, please.

Senator TILLIS. General Milley, you said that the Taliban had not lived up to the terms of the agreement. Give me a rough date of when they first breached terms of the agreement. When you said they were not living up to the terms of the Doha agreement, what was the first evidence that they were not living up to the terms of the agreement?

General MILLEY. Yes, the memo signed 29 February, so through, really the fighting season of the summer of 2020. One of the requirements, for example—

Senator TILLIS. Okay. So more than a year ago?

General MILLEY. Absolutely.

Senator TILLIS. Okay. I do not buy the idea that this President was bound by a decision made by a prior President. This was not a treaty, and it was clearly an agreement where the Taliban were not living up to it. This President, President Biden, could have come in, reasserted conditions, and completely changed the timeline. He is not bound by the President's prior agreements any more than he was bound by President Trump's decision to exit the

Iran Deal or the Paris Climate Accords. So, that to me is a false narrative.

I also have to say that this President, moving forward, with a failed construct, has cost American lives or has cost lives of North Carolinians. We were working on a case with an SIV holder who had a sister who worked for an NGO, Save the Children, and a father who was in the Afghan police force, and as we were working to get through them, the Taliban—Taliban 2.0 is every bit as ruthless as the one that we replaced in 2001—they sent pictures of the slit throats of people that we were working personally with. They killed this pregnant woman, they killed this police officer, and they are killing countless other people now, that we should have gotten out.

Secretary Austin, I think we do owe a debt of gratitude to the people that got 120,000, 124,000 people out. It was a logistical success, but this is a strategic failure.

General McKenzie, General Miller said 2,500. I have heard you and General Milley also say you agreed with the idea. You personally agreed. You did not necessarily say that you recommended to the President, the 2,500. I understood from General Miller that there was a broader context within that recommendation. There were 2,500 fighters, United States fighters, but I understand almost 5,000 NATO allies, or 5,000 others that were willing to remain on the ground, and as General Miller said, “Keep the hand on the shoulder of the Afghan national forces, so that we could have a counter to the Taliban.” Is that correct, that it was bigger than that, it was probably the 7,000 range?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, you are correct. Our NATO allies would have been on board for—

Senator TILLIS. Also a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) presence with bases out there for human intelligence, to help us be more precise, more exquisite with the execution of whatever operations we had on the ground?

General MCKENZIE. That is correct, sir.

Senator TILLIS. Okay. Now I know that you will not say that you advised the President, but is it fair to say that when General Miller, he said that he advised all of you on his recommendations, it sounds like two of the three of you agreed with it. Is it at least fair to say that in the interagency discussion that those recommendations were made and that in your best military advice it would have kept the situation stable in Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. Well, I have stated consistently that my position was if you go below 2,500, you are going to look at a collapse of the Afghan military. I did not foresee it to be days. I thought it would take months. But the rest of the ecosystem would go out with it too, that the NATO partners are going to leave, the inter-agencies are going to leave, and you are going to leave the Afghans by themselves.

Senator TILLIS. Did any of you embrace the notion that the 2,500 plus the several thousand, I think an estimated 5,000 NATO allies and partners who were willing to stay there as well, did any of you agree with the President’s assessment, that if he acted on that recommendation that he would ultimately have to send tens of thousands more United States servicemembers to Afghanistan, that if

we held that one that it would ultimately just delay the day where we would be back to 100,000 or 50,000 United States Forces in Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, these discussions were occurring in January, February, March. They are separate from the late August discussions, so I want to make that point clear.

Senator TILLIS. But in your best military judgment, do you believe that the recommendations that General Miller put forth, with some 2,500, and I think General Milley said maybe flex up at 3,500, do you believe that that would have sown the seeds for ultimately having to send tens of thousands of United States servicemembers back to Afghanistan, as the President has said, publicly?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, I believe there was a risk you would incur increasing attacks by the Taliban. That was a risk with-holding at 2,500. That was a very clear risk. But I will tell you, Senator, I am really humbled recently by my ability to deduce what the Taliban would or would not do, so I think it is hard to know.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, and next round I will get onto the fate of the SIV holders and people that are stranded in Afghanistan. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Tillis.

Let me recognize Senator Warren, and I am going over for the vote. Senator Hirono will preside in my absence.

Senator Warren, please.

Senator WARREN. Thank you Mr. Chairman.

I want to begin by zooming out because it is not possible to understand our final months in Afghanistan without viewing them in the context of the 20 years that led up to them. Anyone who says the last few months were a failure but everything before that was great clearly has not been paying attention.

In 2015, the Taliban conquered its first province since 2001. By October 2018, the Afghan Government controlled only 54 percent of the 407 districts, and by May 2020, the Afghan Government controlled less than a third of Afghan's 407 districts. We poured money and support and air cover, and the Afghan Government continued to fail.

By 2021, it was clear that 2,500 troops could not successfully prop up a government that had been losing ground and support to the Taliban for years. Secretary Austin, I understand that you advised President Biden to stay in Afghanistan, but as you acknowledge, staying or withdrawing is a decision for the President alone. So I want to focus on what happened next. Once President Biden made the decision to have U.S. Forces leave the country, who designed the evacuation?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well Senator, again, I will not address the advice I gave the President. I would just say that, in his calculus, this was not risk free, and the Taliban, as we said earlier in this hearing, were committed to recommencing their operations against our forces. His assessment was that in order to sustain that and continue to do things that benefited the Afghans, that would require at some point that he increase our presence there in Afghanistan.

So once he made the decision, then of course, from a military perspective, in terms of the retrograde of the people and the equip-

ment, that planning was done by Central Command, and certainly principally by General Miller. Very detailed planning, and then we came back and briefed the entire interagency on the details of that plan.

Senator WARREN. Okay, so the military planned the evacuation. Did President Biden follow your advice on executing on the evacuation plan?

Secretary AUSTIN. He did.

Senator WARREN. Did President Biden give you all the resources that you needed?

Secretary AUSTIN. From my view, he did.

Senator WARREN. Did President Biden ignore your advice on the evacuation at any point?

Secretary AUSTIN. No Senator, he did not.

Senator WARREN. Did he refuse any request for anything that you needed or asked for?

Secretary AUSTIN. No.

Senator WARREN. So the President followed the advice of his military advisors in planning and executing this withdrawal. As we have already established, the seeds for our failure in Afghanistan were planted many, many years ago. So let me ask you one more question, Secretary Austin. Knowing what you know now, if we had stayed in Afghanistan for another year, would it have made a fundamental difference?

Secretary AUSTIN. Again, it depends on what size you remain in at, and what your objectives are. There are a range of possibilities, but if you stayed there at a force posture of 2,500, certainly you would be in a fight with the Taliban, and you would have to reinforce yourself.

Senator WARREN. I appreciate your looking at it as a fighter, but I would also add, one more year of propping up a corrupt government, and an army that would not fight on its own was not going to give us a different outcome. Anyone who thinks differently is either fooling himself, or trying to fool the rest of us.

I believe President Biden had it exactly right. Withdrawing was long overdue. The withdrawal was conducted in accordance with the advice of his military advisors, who planned and executed every step of this withdrawal.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Senator HIRONO. [Presiding.] Thank you, Senator Warren.

Senator Sullivan, you are recognized.

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Madam Chair. Gentlemen, this Committee recognizes that your constitutional duty is to follow the lawful orders of the President or resign if you do not agree with his decisions and policies like Secretary Mattis did. But I want to emphasize you do not have a duty, constitutional or otherwise, to cover for the Commander in Chief when he is not telling the truth to the American people. With that, I have a few questions that I would like you to keep short, concise answers to.

On August 18th, in a media interview to the American people, the President said that none of his military advisors told him that he should keep United States forces in Afghanistan. General Milley, that was a false statement by the President of the United States, was it not?

General MILLEY. I did not even see the statement, to tell you the truth.

Senator SULLIVAN. I am reading you a truthful statement. That was a false statement.

General MILLEY. Yes, look——

Senator SULLIVAN. Look, I do not have a lot of time.

General MILLEY. Okay.

Senator SULLIVAN. Was that a false statement to the American people?

General MILLEY. I am not going to categorize a statement of the President of the United States.

Senator SULLIVAN. General McKenzie, was that a false statement? The President said none of his commanders said that he should keep troops in Afghanistan. Was that a false statement by the President of United States? Remember you do not have a duty to cover for the President when he is not telling the truth. Was that a false statement or not?

General MCKENZIE. I have given you my opinion on the matter. I have given you my judgment on it, and I will let——

Senator SULLIVAN. I think we all know it was a false statement. Okay, that is number one. President also said, "If there is an American citizen left behind in Afghanistan, the military is going to stay until we get them out." General Milley, was that statement—did that statement turn out to be true or untrue by the President?

General MILLEY. I think that was the intent, but we gave him a recommendation on the 25th of August to terminate the mission on the 31st of August.

Senator SULLIVAN. The statement was untrue.

Let me ask another question. General Milley, General McKenzie, the President, around the same time said, quote, "al Qaeda was gone from Afghanistan," told the American people that. Was that true or not true? Was al Qaeda gone from Afghanistan in mid-August? True or not true?

General MILLEY. Al Qaeda is still in Afghanistan. They were there in mid-August. They have been severely disrupted and attrited over many, many years. They are not——

Senator SULLIVAN. So it was not true.

General McKenzie, was that true or not?

General MCKENZIE. Al Qaeda was present in Afghanistan.

Senator SULLIVAN. Okay, so it was not true.

Let me make one final one. The President called this entire retrograde operation, "an extraordinary success." General Miller, in his testimony, disagreed with that assertion. General Milley, was this Afghanistan retrograde operation an extraordinary success?

General MILLEY. There were two operations, Senator.

Senator SULLIVAN. Just yes or no. I have a lot of questions. Was this an extraordinary success?

General MILLEY. Senator with all due respect, there were two operations. There was the retrograde, which Miller was in charge of, and there is the NEO, which CENTCOM was in charge of. The retrograde was executed, and ended by mid-July, with a residual force to defend the embassy, the NEO——

Senator SULLIVAN. You and I have discussed this. Would you use the term “extraordinary success” for what took place in August in Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. That is the non-combatant evacuation, and I think one of the other senators said it very well. It was a logistical success, but a strategic failure, and I think those are two different terms.

Senator SULLIVAN. Look, I think—here is the problem. I think the whole world knows—this is the cover of *The Economist* magazine, “Biden’s debacle,” that had stories in it, articles in it called, “The fiasco in Afghanistan is a huge and unnecessary blow to America’s standing.” That was one article. “Joe Biden blames everybody else.” That is another article. “China sees America humbled.” That is another article.

Gentlemen, the problem here, these are not marginal misstatements by the President to the American people. These are dramatic, obvious falsehoods that go to the very heart of the foreign policy fiasco we have all witnessed. These are life and death deceptions that the President of the United States told the American people.

I have one final question. I might leave it because it is a long one for the follow up, but here is the anger. I have never seen my constituent more angry about an issue than this, and it is the combination of everybody knowing that this is a debacle, and yet people defending it as a, quote, “extraordinary success.” Here is the biggest: no accountability. No accountability. You gentlemen have spent your lives, and I completely respect it, troops in combat. You have been in combat. You have had troops under your command killed in action. You have been part of an institution where accountability is so critical, and the American people respect that, up and down the chain where there are instances, commanders get relieved up and down the chain. We see it. The *McCain* incident, the *Fitzgerald* incident, the AAV incident with the Marine Corps, three-star, four-star flag officers, all relieved of duty.

But on this matter, on the biggest national security fiasco in a generation, there has been zero accountability, no responsibility from anybody. So I will ask this final question of all of you. Senator Cotton talked about it.

Senator HIRONO. Senator Sullivan?

Senator SULLIVAN. Madam Chair, if I—

Senator HIRONO. Could you submit your question for the record, please? We are trying to keep to a 5-minute questioning round. You can ask the question in your second round, if you would like. Thank you.

Senator Peters.

Senator PETERS. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to each and every one of you for your service to our country.

I want to return to some of the comments made by Senator Warren, and looking at over the last 20 years. I think if ever we are going to have a strategic assessment of what happened in Afghanistan, it is important that any kind of strategic assessment is not just to look at the present, but to look at the past, and look at the future, and look at all three of those elements as we are making that kind of assessment. If we are going to do that, we have to look

over the 20 years that we were in Afghanistan, and we are going to have to have a pretty hard-nosed assessment of that. General Milley, you mentioned that strategic decisions have consequences, and there are a lot of lessons to be learned over 20 years of our involvement in Afghanistan.

I sat at this table here at Armed Services for many years, served in the House before. I have had an opportunity to travel to Afghanistan on a couple of occasions, and when we have ever asked our military leaders the situation in Afghanistan, we often heard, "Well, it is a stalemate right now, but this year coming up is going to be different. This year will be different." I heard that year after year. "This year is going to be different. Yeah, I know we were in a stalemate but this year is going to be different."

There is one commentator that said, and Secretary Austin, I want you to comment on this, he said that we did not really have a 20-year war in Afghanistan. We had 20 one-year wars in Afghanistan. How would you respond to that?

Secretary AUSTIN. I would certainly say, Senator that is something to think about. You know, you have heard me say in my opening comments that we have to ask ourselves some tough questions. Did we have the right strategy? Did we have too many strategies? If you are reshaping that strategy every year, one year at a time, then that has consequences.

So I think that is something we got to go back and look at, and we also have to look at the impact, the effect of the corruption that was in the environment, weak leadership, changes in leadership, and a number of factors.

Senator PETERS. Well, I want to build on that, because I think it is important, Secretary Austin. For example, General Milley, when you commanded NATO ground forces in Afghanistan 8 years ago, you called 2013 a critical year for the Afghan security forces because it was the first time they had taken responsibility for their security across the country. Secretary Austin, you offered similar assessment in 2015 and 2016, during testimony before this Committee. As CENTCOM commander, you emphasized that there were 326,000 ANSF forces, and they were ready to lead security operations.

I will just say, from most my experience, especially when I was in Afghanistan, the input that I got from our commanders was that "This year is going to be different. We are going to be able to do things better." But I got a completely different assessment when I went to the mess hall and ate with the soldiers and the marines and the folks on the ground, who said, "I do not trust these folks that we are with. I do not know if they are going to fight. In fact, they do not even show up. They get their paycheck, but they do not show up."

Now there may have been some instances where they have performed, and I know you have highlighted some of those, but my question from a strategic standpoint is, did we just become fixated perhaps on some tactical performance from our forces, their forces, and forget to measure the Afghan Security Force's actual institutional health as a fighting force that could sustain a fight, even though they were in an incredibly weak economy and a whole host of complicated cultural issues?

Secretary AUSTIN. Clearly questions that we have to drill deep on. At one point, as you know, Senator, we had a number of advisors down to fairly low levels. As we began to lift the numbers of advisors that we had there and scale back on the people that we had interfacing with the Afghans on a daily basis we began to lose that fingertip feel. So our ability to assess, with some degree of certainty, continue to erode, the smaller that we got.

Senator PETERS. My sense is that that was what we were hearing for years. It was not just at the end, that this was an endemic problem for over a decade. So hopefully we will have the opportunity to do that.

That is my final question, Secretary Austin. What are we actually doing to learn from the conclusion of these military operations, particularly from a strategic assessment point of view, when it comes to end-of-conflict transition? We are going to have potentially other operations like this, even in great power competition.

Secretary AUSTIN. Yes, so as we always do, Senator, we are going to take a hard look at ourselves in terms of what we did over the last 20 years, what worked, what did not work, and we are going to learn from those lessons and make sure that we incorporate that into our planning, and our strategic assessment going forward.

Senator PETERS. Thank you.

Chairman REED. [Presiding.] Thank you very much, Senator Peters.

Senator Cramer, please.

Senator CRAMER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, thank all three of you for your service and for being here, and God bless the men and women under your command.

General McKenzie, is it true that United States Forces had the ISIS-K cell under surveillance prior to August 26th, and could have struck them before the deadly terrorist attacks at Kabul, but were not given the authority to strike?

General MCKENZIE. No, that is not true.

Senator CRAMER. I noticed that the President was quick to take a victory lap after the first strike and push this tough guy image he is so famous for. He once threatened to have union bosses beat me up. He said things like, "Just do it. If we find more, we will strike them." Of course, this was after he said of the ISIS-K leaders, "We will hunt you down." He talks tough. He is going to go get them.

I also noticed he has been equally silent, taking no responsibility for the strike on innocent civilians, including children, that was in part caused by, in my view, his insecure need to appear tough. He just let you take the blame, General McKenzie. But what I really worry about is the air crews who actually were pressured into pulling the trigger that terrible day.

Secretary Austin, as you know, the North Dakota Air National Guard operates reapers around the world, and I know what kind of pressure those air crews are under, and the level of responsibility they feel to accomplish their missions properly. I am worried that whoever was operating the aircraft involved in the tragic 29th August strike was set up to fail by an administration that wanted a political victory more than they wanted an American victory.

Have you reached out to the air crew to make sure that they understand it is not their fault, that there are seven dead children?

Secretary AUSTIN. I have not, Senator. As you probably know, I have directed a three-star review of this incident. General McKenzie did an initial investigation and I have directed a three-star review, and so I will not make any comments.

Senator CRAMER. There certainly seemed to be a lot of indications that a terrorist event was likely, if not imminent, leading up to the ISIS-K bombing on the 26th. Why were our military members still exposed after that threat was known, General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. The purpose of our force at the airfield was to bring American citizens and Afghans at risk out. In order to do that, you had to have the gates open. You had to process people.

You are right, there were a lot of threats, and we worked very hard to minimize those threats, and you try to balance it. Every once in a while, the bad guys sneak one in on you. This is an example of where that occurred. It was not through any lack of attention to trying to find those cells or looking hard for them. We did find a number and we did, in fact, which I will be happy to talk about in closed session, we did, in fact, enable and stop those attacks from occurring. This one we were not successful on.

Senator CRAMER. So speaking of that I want to drill down just a minute since I have a couple. The Taliban was controlling the checkpoints obviously around the airport, and you had indicated, General McKenzie, that the United States at that time had, you called it a pragmatic relationship of necessity with the Taliban. Did we share any information with the Taliban about the ISIS-K threat, and if so, how did the Taliban respond to it? In other words, how did they get in? Is it possible that they let them in on purpose?

General MCKENZIE. It is possible that they let them in on purpose, but the body of intelligence indicates that is not in fact what happened. One event happened and that is a terrible tragic event. A lot of other events did not happen because that outer circle, the Taliban forces, were there.

Look, I defer to no one in my disdain for the Taliban and my lack of trust for them, but I believe they actually prevented other attacks from occurring. This event, someone got through. I believe there were other times when people did not get through.

Senator CRAMER. All right. Look, the reality is there are patriotic Americans all over the country and certainly in North Dakota they are really upset. I mean, they are genuinely pissed off. They sense that there is a lot of sort of political positioning, and apologizing, and rationalizing, and no one is really saying anything other than it was not perfect, I think were your words, General Milley, but "extraordinary success" just rankles them when they hear that. Especially when they see that out of the 124,000 people that were brought to the United States, we do not know much about a whole bunch of them, and yet we know a whole bunch about people that were not brought back to the United States, and they are upset. They are really, really upset. I know you know that. I think you are seeing the reflection of that in their elected representatives, and this afternoon, we will probably drill down a little more on

some things. But I look forward to the closed session as well, General McKenzie, to learn more about August 26th.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Cramer.

Senator Manchin, please.

Senator MANCHIN. Thank you very much, and first of all, thank all three of you. I appreciate your service to our country, and I never have doubted your unwavering commitment to defend our country and our constitution.

I am having a hard time. I am old enough to understand. I remember Vietnam very well. I was in line to go there, and had an injury in my playing ball at West Virginia University (WVU), and that did not happen. Anyway, I just cannot figure out, I cannot explain to the younger generation, to my children and grandchildren, how do we get into this and never get out?

We did not learn from Vietnam? That was a horrible exit. I remember that very vividly. This was even worse than that, as far as my recall. I do not know what lessons we are taking from this right now.

But I look back at lack of an Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF). We had an open-end AUMF. We still have an open-end AUMF. If we would have had an AUMF and basically had a time-certain and specific goal, do any of you think that could have made a difference? Do you think, I mean, hindsight being 20/20, what did we learn from these mistakes? How do we prevent them again? We thought from Vietnam we learned not to go in and try to change a nation, and here we are, trading partners with Vietnam. Is that same going to end up with Afghanistan?

I cannot comprehend any of it, to be honest with you, and I have no explanation. So anybody that wants to help me, and General Milley, I know that you have a great knowledge of history, and how we have gotten into situations, and how maybe we should keep from repeating them.

General MILLEY. Yes. As I said, Senator Manchin, in my opening comment.

Senator MANCHIN. I am sorry. I was conducting an Energy and National Resources (ENR) meeting and I was not able to be here for that. I am so sorry.

General MILLEY. Okay. Sorry. I mentioned that there have been four Presidents, 20 commanders on the ground, seven or eight Chairman of Joint Chiefs, dozens of Secretaries of Defense, et cetera. Outcomes like this are not determined in, you know, the last 5 days, the last 20 days, or the last year for that matter. Outcomes in a war like this, an outcome that is a strategic failure, the enemy is in charge in Kabul, there is no way else to describe that. That outcome is a cumulative effect of 20 years, not 20 days, and there are a huge amount of strategic, operational, and tactical lessons that need to be learned from this, some of them in the military sphere, the narrow military sphere. One of them, for example, is the mirror-imaging of the building of the Afghan National Army based on American doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures. That made a military that may, I am going to wait full evaluation, but may have been overly dependent upon us, our presence, contractors, and higher tech systems, in order to fight a counterinsurgency war. That is one area that needs to be fully explored.

Another is the intel. How did we miss collapse of an army and a government that big, that fast, in only 11 days? That needs to be pulled apart. Then there are other factors that are not strictly military, but things like the legitimacy of the government, corruption, the parasitic nature of the police forces. There is a whole series of 10 or 20 that I wrote down just a week or two ago, that need to be looked at, and looked at in depth, and very seriously and comprehensively over time.

Senator MANCHIN. Do we know where the president, the former president of Afghanistan is today and how much money he took with him? Do we have any idea?

General MILLEY. Secretary Austin, do you have any idea?

Secretary AUSTIN. I think that he may be in UAE [United Arab Emirates], senator. I am not certain of that. That is what the last report that I had. In terms of any money that he may have taken with him, I have no knowledge of any amounts of money.

Senator MANCHIN. You all have not been able to—I mean there is no way that we can trace that through the banking institutions? No way that we have any insight on that whatsoever? There has to be exchanges going back and forth because I am sure he is not keeping it in the bank of Afghanistan.

Secretary AUSTIN. Defense does not have any insight on that, Senator, but certainly I am not sure if the law enforcement agencies—

Senator MANCHIN. We will check with Treasury. Maybe Treasury might. I am just looking for some answers that maybe are not answerable. Everyone has asked the questions of how do we prevent this from happening again? Why did we not see it? There is not a person that is returned that I have spoken to in special ops that were there, when they returned. I was there a couple times in 2006. I was there in 2011. I was there. But every time it got worse. It did not get better.

So this could not be a surprise. They never were going to step to the plate. It could not have been a surprise that they would not fight. They never had allegiance to a country. I mean, we knew that. The special ops people said it gets worse every day. It does not get better. Every mission was worse. We used to drive from Kabul to Bagram. After I went back the second time, hell, we could not do that. I mean, it got so bad, everything got bad.

I have got to tell this one. It drives me absolutely insane to see the television at night, and see the Taliban, and all of them wearing our uniforms, wearing our night vision, doing everything, using everything we have, our Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles (MRAPs) and everything else that we left there. I just cannot believe it. I cannot even get an accounting of how much equipment we really did leave. I know how many aircraft we left, and I know how many basically MRAPs and all the different things. But not to plan better to take that equipment out, it was unbelievable.

Secretary AUSTIN. I would just flag for you, Senator, that all of the equipment that we had, that we used, was retrograded by General Miller as a part of the drawdown. Thousands of tons of equipment, and whatever high-end equipment that we had, that we were using. The equipment that the Afghan Security Forces had as the Taliban took over is the equipment that you see. Of course, all of

the helicopters that were left on the airfield at HKIA, I asked General McKenzie to demilitarize those so that they could not ever be used again.

We took, we retrograded all of our equipment that we were supposed to retrograde as we drew down.

Senator MANCHIN. Only thing I can say in finishing up is that I would hope that God would bless America to have the intelligence not to repeat what we continually have seen does not work. With you all, expertise you have, and knowledge you are gaining from all this, please, please help us from ever, ever repeating what we have done.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Manchin.

Senator Scott, please.

Senator SCOTT. Thank you, Chairman. First of all, I want to thank each of you for being here. General Milley, one thing I hope at some point you will address is the context of your calls with regard to the Chinese and whether what has been alleged is that you would warn them if there was going to be an attack. Also, address whether there was any intelligence indicating that the Chinese were actually nervous.

One thing that surprised me about what has been going on in the last few months is the President has absolutely blamed everyone else but himself for the botched withdrawal of Afghanistan. He, as the President of the United States, he has ability to make these decisions. He can take all the advice he wants, but he gets to make the final decisions. He has blamed previous administrations. He has blamed the people of Afghanistan. He has blamed the military of Afghanistan, which I think is absolutely disingenuous. The people in the White House have even blamed our own military.

Secretary Austin, some things you have said today actually surprised me. You said you were ready, you said you exceeded expectations, you said our credibility is solid, and you have said the President followed your advice on the evacuation. Let me just ask you, the first question is, do you still believe that the most effective withdrawal strategy involves extracting the military, abandoning our military installations, and reducing our use of force and ability to use force before we got our civilians out?

Secretary AUSTIN. Thanks, Senator. First of all, the plan was to—the decision was to end our military operations and draw down all of our forces and retrograde all of our equipment, and that was accomplished. General Miller, I think, put together a great plan and executed that plan, in accordance with the plan.

Also a key part of the plan was to maintain an embassy in Kabul, and maintaining that embassy would allow us to continue to engage the government, to continue to provide resources to support the Afghan Security Forces. So the plan was to leave a diplomatic presence there. In conjunction with that plan, we also were going to leave a small military force there to help secure the embassy. So that was the plan, Senator.

Senator SCOTT. But you did not address the issue that—you all made all these—it was your plan. You have acknowledged it was your plan, and your plan said you would do all these things before we got our civilians out. I mean, when, in the history of this country, have we ever had the U.S. military say, and have a plan that

we will take our military out first before we take our civilians? I cannot imagine that.

Secretary AUSTIN. When you say civilians, are you talking about—

Senator SCOTT. American citizens.

Secretary AUSTIN.—American citizens?

Senator SCOTT. Yes.

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, the American citizens would come out once a non-combatant evacuation is declared, and until that point, typically we do not evacuate all the citizens in the country.

Senator SCOTT. But we did not here. There are American citizens still there.

Secretary AUSTIN. We continue to remain engaged and work to get those citizens out, Senator.

Senator SCOTT. Why would you propose a plan that did not get all American citizens out? I just cannot imagine ever in the history of this country, our U.S. military would propose to leave a country without our citizens coming out first. I mean, have we ever done that before?

Secretary AUSTIN. All of the American citizens would not leave, Senator, unless there was a non-combatant evacuation. The plan was to leave the embassy there, to continue to address the needs of our American citizens, to engage with the government, and so that was a part of the plan. Again, the plan was never to evacuate the American citizens and leave the embassy there.

Senator SCOTT. Did it bother you when the President went on national television and said that he would not leave until all American citizens were taken out? Did it bother you when he said that, because it clearly was not truthful?

Secretary AUSTIN. Now, Senator, you heard me say several times that we are going to work as hard as we can, for as long as we can, to get every American citizen out that wants to come out, and we continue to do that to this day.

Senator SCOTT. Well, I am running out of time, but one thing I want when we have next round, I want to understand what decisions would you make differently today to save those 13 lives of service men and women that we lost at the Kabul airport.

Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General MILLEY. Senator, if I could comment on your first opening comment, if I may?

Chairman REED. Go ahead, sir.

General MILLEY. Yes. I am happy to lay out every detail in all the intel to you as an individual, to any other member, or to a committee, or anything you want on these Chinese calls at your convenience. Happy to do it.

Senator SCOTT. Thank you.

Chairman REED. Thank you. Thank you, Senator Scott.

Senator Duckworth, please.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I share my colleagues' concerns about the rapid collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, and the Afghan Government and the failure of our intelligence. We need some answers.

After investing 2 decades, nearly \$2 trillion, and most importantly, the lives of almost 2,500 of American troops, our Nation

must conduct a thorough and honest review of the United States Government's involvement in Afghanistan since the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks.

For the sake of current and future generations of warfighters, we must capture the hard lessons from Afghanistan to ensure that these lessons are not forgotten, or worse, repeated on a future battlefield. This is our moral responsibility as a Nation.

Gentlemen, all three of you have been involved in the war in Afghanistan multiple times, in multiple different capacities throughout your careers. Secretary Austin, was the situation on the ground in Afghanistan over the last few months influenced by previous decisions made over the course of several years?

Secretary AUSTIN. I absolutely believe that, Senator. Foremost among those decisions is the Doha agreement. I think that severely impacted the morale of the military.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you. Secretary Austin, if that is the case, is it possible to have an intellectually honest lessons learned exercise that only looks at the most recent events in Afghanistan of the last couple of months, or must any effective review look at the whole 20 years since September 11th?

Secretary AUSTIN. I think you have to look at the entire 20 years. Senator, I think there are some great lessons learned that we are going to take away once we do that. But yes, I believe you got to look at the entire time span.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you. I agree that an effective review must be comprehensive. After all, the war in Afghanistan was shaped by 4 different administrations and 11 different Congresses. No party should be looking to score cheap, partisan, political points off a multi-decade, nation-building failure that was bipartisan in the making. Instead, Congress should authorize a long-term effort, solely devoted to bringing accountability and transparency to the Afghanistan war and lessons to be learned.

That is why on Thursday I will be introducing the Afghanistan War Study Commission. My bill would establish a bipartisan, independent commission to examine every aspect of the war, including the political and strategic decisions that transformed a focused military mission into a vast nation building campaign. Importantly, this commission must produce actionable recommendations designed to guide the development of real reforms. Just ask the 9/11 Commission's work inform congressional law making efforts in the years after its publication.

Secretary Austin, would you agree with me that such an independent, long-term study could serve as an effective complementary effort to the more targeted lessons learned reviews that DOD always conducts, particularly in shedding light on how Congress and civilian leaders from multiple government agencies can do a better job in defining the scope of military missions and actually enforcing legal limitations on the use of force?

Secretary AUSTIN. I would, and the point that you are making, in my view, it needs to be an interagency approach to this.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, and I do want to note that my family and I were in Cambodia until the very end. I am an American. I was born in Thailand, but my father worked for the United Nations (UN), and to answer my colleague's question, my father

chose to stay as long as possible to help the Cambodian people as long as possible, and he left after American troops had left. The American ambassador stayed behind after American troops had left. In fact, after the last military transport had left, I know this because my father was on the last military transport to leave Cambodia, and the ambassador had to travel over land.

So yes, we do leave Americans behind, but this is all tied to NEO operations and how that is planned, which is why I think it is so important that we have an independent investigation. Maybe the failure here was that we did not have a NEO plan in place, and we did not activate it before all of our troops left. But if that is the case, we need to learn that.

So I would ask for my colleagues, who considered this independent commission, we put somebody in charge of it, who was not in a decision-making capacity during the 20 years, make it non-partisan and let us get those lessons learned so we do not make these same mistakes over and over again.

Our troops deserve better, and the families of the 2,500 American troops who laid down their lives to protect and defend this Constitution, who followed the lawful order of all of those Presidents, they deserve better than partisan fights. We need to get some real answers.

Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Duckworth.

Now, let me recognize Senator Blackburn.

Senator BLACKBURN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Gentlemen, we thank you all for being here with us today.

As you have heard from all of us, the American people, Tennesseans are wanting some answers. They deserve to hear your testimony. I think it is unacceptable that this is the first time that I am hearing from you in any forum, despite attempts at outreach by both me and my staff, save a few short, all-Senator phone calls that we have had. I want to emphasize, all of us here, every one of us, answer to the American people, and they deserve transparency and information regarding this administration's botched and disgraceful withdrawal.

Tennesseans are really angry, and as you know, General Milley, Tennessee is home to the 101st Airborne, one of the most deployed divisions in the United States military. We are also home to the specialized 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), who were among the last on the ground, extracting United States citizens from danger in Kabul. Tennessee National Guard units have deployed to Afghanistan at a high-operational tempo, as well as providing vital, logistical services, such as refueling. We are home to more than 400,000 veterans, many of whom have lasting physical and psychological wounds from the time they have spent in service.

Tennesseans are heartbroken over the loss of one of our own, Staff Sergeant Ryan Knauss, a patriotic American who represented the best of all of us in the August 26th suicide bombing at Hamid Karzai International Airport. He made the ultimate sacrifice.

How did we get here and how did we get to what has been a complete letdown to most Tennesseans? I have got a few questions. These are yes-or-no questions, so quick answers are appreciated.

General Milley, were there options given for keeping American troops in Afghanistan, rather than the unconditional, chaotic withdrawal?

General MILLEY. Yes.

Senator BLACKBURN. You presented options and those options were declined.

General MILLEY. There were options presented and debated—

Senator BLACKBURN. Yes or no.

General MILLEY.—and a decision was made.

Senator BLACKBURN. Yes or no is fine. Did you at any point create options for keeping Bagram open beyond July 2nd?

General MILLEY. Yes.

Senator BLACKBURN. Did you provide options for keeping Bagram open directly to the President?

General MILLEY. Yes.

Senator BLACKBURN. Had Bagram stayed open, would our support to the Afghan Air Force have been more effective in your view?

General MILLEY. I am sorry, I did not catch the last part.

Senator BLACKBURN. If Bagram had stayed open, would our support to the Afghan Air Force have been more effective, in your view? Yes or no.

General MILLEY. Frankly, I am not sure on that one, because most of the Afghan Air Force was at different bases, specifically at HKIA.

Senator BLACKBURN. President Biden keeps calling it an extraordinary success. We have discussed some of this today. Is leaving Americans behind an extraordinary success in your view, Secretary Austin?

Secretary AUSTIN. We are not leaving Americans behind.

Senator BLACKBURN. Yes or no is fine.

Is the killing of 13 American service men and women while trying to secure a chaotic evacuation of the President's own making an extraordinary success?

Secretary AUSTIN. The loss of any civilian life is always tragic.

Senator BLACKBURN. Is the fact that we failed to evacuate most of our Afghan partners an extraordinary success, or the fact that we have Afghans bringing child brides, people who are hardly vetted, is that an extraordinary success?

Secretary AUSTIN. Again, these are issues that we continue to work to get our American citizens out and the Afghans who helped us out.

Senator BLACKBURN. Let me move on. Per Article II of the Constitution, the President may require the opinion in writing of the principal officer in each of the Executive Departments. Did the President ever require or request written recommendations related to the withdrawal of the Afghan forces? Yes or no. Secretary Austin, then General Milley, then General McKenzie. Yes or no.

Secretary AUSTIN. I provided our input as a part of a policy process—

Senator BLACKBURN. In written form?

Secretary AUSTIN.—that that was very well and then deliberately run.

Senator BLACKBURN. We will note that you did not completely answer that.

General Milley, in written form?

General MILLEY. Yes.

Senator BLACKBURN. Would you make those available to us?

General MILLEY. I will make it available to the Committee upon request in accordance with appropriate classifications.

Senator BLACKBURN. We will. We will do so.

General McKenzie, yes or no.

General MCKENZIE. Yes.

Senator BLACKBURN. You will make those available?

General MCKENZIE. Based on guidance from the Secretary.

Senator BLACKBURN. Each of you had committed to make those available when you went through your confirmation processes. We will come back to you for those.

General Milley, yes or no to this. Did you talk to Bob Woodward or Robert Costa for their book, Peril?

General MILLEY. Woodward, yes. Costa, no.

Senator BLACKBURN. Did you talk to Carol Leonning and Philip Rucker for their book, Alone Can I Fix It?

General MILLEY. Yes.

Senator BLACKBURN. Did you talk to Michael Bender for his book, Frankly, We Did Win This Election: The Inside Story of How Trump Lost? Yes or no.

General MILLEY. Yes.

Senator BLACKBURN. Were you accurately represented in these books?

General MILLEY. I have not read any of the books so I do not know. I have seen press reporting of it. I have not read the books.

Senator BLACKBURN. Let us have you read the books and then let us know if you are accurately presented and portrayed.

General MILLEY. Absolutely. Happy to do that.

Chairman REED. Senator Blackburn, we are adhering to the 5-minute rule.

Senator BLACKBURN. I yield back my time.

Chairman REED. Thank you.

Senator Rosen, please.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you, Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe for holding today's very important hearing.

A critical part of this Committee's oversight responsibilities, it is an opportunity for the American people to get answers about our withdrawal from Afghanistan and how we plan to counter terrorist threats in the future. I also want to sincerely thank the brave men and women, who served our country in Afghanistan, many who made the ultimate sacrifice, and, of course, their families as well.

Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, I appreciate you all being here to address lingering concerns we have about the last 2 decades of war generally, and the past 2 months in particular. You are all men of honor and integrity, who have served our country nobly, and I so look forward to your candid responses, to my questions, even if they require admitting that in some cases, serious mistakes were made.

Like all Senate offices, as the Taliban approached Kabul and eventually took over the city and the country, my team and I

worked to help vulnerable individuals evacuate. These were people who, in many cases, had the State Department's approval to leave Afghanistan for the United States or a third-party country, but due to crowds, Taliban checkpoints, or a legitimate fear of being killed along the way, they could just not physically get to a gate to present their paperwork, no matter how many times they tried, or no matter how long they waited. My office worked was CENTCOM and the Afghanistan Task Force to try to coordinate opportunities just to grab these people from the crowd so they could present their paperwork and flee to safety, but unfortunately, again, these efforts were to no avail.

As these individuals continue to wait for help that may never come, I remain frustrated that the United States did not set up a perimeter around Kabul, or at the very least create a safe corridor for the S-1 visa holders to get to the airport for their families' potential asylum seekers, who were attempting to escape a near-certain death.

So continued support, General Milley. I appreciate the State Department now taking the lead on evacuations, but like our military, the State Department no longer has any presence on the ground in Afghanistan. So I would like to ask you, sir, does the United States military's recent experience facilitating the evacuation from Kabul give you the confidence that the Taliban will be honest brokers in working with our diplomats to help vulnerable Afghan nationals leave the country?

General MILLEY. I think that what we have seen so far, since the 31st, is some Americans have gotten out through diplomatic means, and they have reached safety through either overland routes or through aircraft. I do not know all the details, but I cannot imagine that did not happen without Taliban facilitation.

Senator ROSEN. Well, we can get back to Afghan nationals helping them leave the country as well, those SIV holders and others who supported us. But Secretary Austin, the administration has said they will utilize every tool available to hold the Taliban accountable if they fail to meet their commitments, to provide safe passage for anyone who wants to leave the country. Certainly, we know there are economic levers, but can you elaborate on what the military tools are, and could there be a shared interest in targeting ISIS-K?

Secretary AUSTIN. In terms of military tools, Senator, as you know, we have the ability to offer a range of options, depending on what the President's objectives are. So we can do most anything that is required of us, because we have substantial resources.

But in terms of our cooperation with the Taliban to counter ISIS-K, I will not venture to make any comments on that. I would just say that we have coordinated some things that are very narrow in scope with them to get our people out, as you know, and to continue to further evacuate American citizens. But I do not think it is right to make assumptions to broader and bigger things from that coordination. They are still the Taliban.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. I would just like to, in the few seconds I have left and we can take these second round or off the record, future counterterrorism operations. We have to reorganize

our counterterrorism capabilities and our assets in the region, of course, as we move to an over-the-horizon scenario.

Secretary Austin, General McKenzie, and we will take these in the second round, think about, I would like the answer to what is the plan for an enduring counterterrorism strategy that is going to be able to address and counter the influence of the violent extremist organizations in Afghanistan.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Rosen.

Senator Hawley, please.

Senator HAWLEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me just sum up where I understand that we are, based on what has been a fairly, extraordinary hearing. Here is what I have learned so far. Number one, the President of the United States lied to the American people about the advice that you gave to him about the military judgment that you provided for him. I think you have all testified to that effect now, repeatedly.

Secondly, the State Department, and maybe the White House, appeared to have pushed back the evacuation to such a time that it became a catastrophe, apparently against your advice, although I would like to learn more about that.

Third, for some reason we still do not quite understand the Pentagon failed to plan for the potential collapse of the security forces or the collapse of the Afghan Government, despite there being quite a lot of warnings—Senator Kaine referred to this earlier—quite a lot warning for really, frankly, years that the Afghan security forces were ill-equipped, ill-trained, and frankly, not up to the job. I do not understand any of that. I would like to explore those things with you in this round and the next.

But first before I do, Secretary Austin, I have to take issue with something you just said. I know this is an administration talking point. I have heard it out of the mouth of the Press Secretary and others. “We are not leaving Americans behind.” That was your quote of just a minute ago. With all due respect, sir, you have left—past tense—Americans behind. We have no presence any longer in Afghanistan. There were hundreds of—and not just Americans generally, civilians you left behind, against the President’s explicit commitment not to leave until all American citizens were out and to safety.

That is not what happened and now we have people who are desperately, frantically trying to get out of this country, coming to me, coming to Members of this Committee asking for help. They cannot get that help. They are stuck behind enemy lines. So please do not tell me that we are not leaving Americans behind. You left them behind, Joe Biden left them behind, and frankly, it was a disgrace.

Let me ask you this though.

Secretary AUSTIN. Senator, thanks for your help in continuing to help get American citizens and Afghans who have helped us out of the country, but as you have seen, we have continued to facilitate—

Senator HAWLEY. Well actually, I did not ask you a question, but since you seem to want to address the issue, so since you do, is it not true that you left Americans behind on August 31st?

Secretary AUSTIN. There are Americans, there were Americans that were still in Afghanistan, and still are.

Senator HAWLEY. Yes.

Secretary AUSTIN. We continue to work—

Senator HAWLEY. Correct.

Secretary AUSTIN.—to try to get those Americans out.

Senator HAWLEY. Yes, that is a yes. Let us not repeat, please, the frankly falsehood that we did not leave Americans behind.

Let me ask you this. Secretary Austin, you have alluded to several times the fact that the military was ready—you say this in your prepared remarks—by late April. You say military planners had crafted a number of evacuation scenarios. You refer later in your remarks to the fact that you were waiting for the State Department to make a decision about evacuations. NBC News is reporting this morning that the military wanted to begin evacuations earlier, but the State Department and the White House intervened and by May 8th said, “No, we are delaying the evacuations of our civilians.” Can you just help us get to the truth here? Was it your judgment and opinion that the evacuations of civilians should have begun before the middle of August?

Secretary AUSTIN. We provided our input to the State Department and again, it is the call of the State Department to—

Senator HAWLEY. I understand that. I understand that, Mr. Secretary. I am asking for what your judgment was, and I am asking specifically about your testimony that in April you develop evacuation scenarios, and this is reported by multiple sources this morning in the news. I just wonder, as of last April was it your opinion that the evacuations of civilians should begin, should have begun before, should begin earlier than they did?

Secretary AUSTIN. We provided input to try to get out as many Afghans who have helped us along the way as early as possible, but again, the State Department made its decisions based upon the fact that even President Ghani had engaged them and said, “Hey, we are very concerned about the mass exodus of civilians from the country.”

Senator HAWLEY. General Milley, let me direct this to you. Did you ever advise, in the interagency process, that the rapid withdrawal timeline that the White House and Pentagon signed off on, General Miller proposed effectively getting us to zero by the middle of July, that that would negatively impact any effort to get out our civilians? In other words, if we had drawn down to zero by July, if we then had a civilian evacuation order, we would be in a lot of trouble. Did you ever advise to that effect during the interagency process? Did you warn about that possibly of drawing down so quickly before a civilian evacuation was underway?

General MILLEY. Yes, but it is more complicated than that. The drawdown of the forces under Miller, those guys are advisors. They are not the NEO kind of guys. The NEO troops are Marine Expeditionary Unit, Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF), and elements of the 82nd Airborne Division. That is what you need in order to do the NEO.

Those are the plans, I believe, that the Secretary is referring to that were developed early on, and there are specific triggers that are required in the State Department calls “the time of the NEO.”

The Secretary in fact on the 12th of August, started pushing forward forces in orders and on the 14th, the ambassador, Ambassador Wilson, called the NEO.

Should that have been called earlier? I think that is an open question that needs further exploration based on a series of meetings. But the April piece and the drawdown of the advisors, that is a separate and distinct task than the retrograde of those forces. Those 2,500 advisors were not the guys bringing out the American citizens anyway. Those were the advisors to the Afghan Security Forces.

There were concerns that we raised throughout the interagency that when those advisors, if the advisors were to stay then there is a possibility that the Afghan Security Forces would hang in there. We all knew that when we pulled the advisors out, when we pulled the money out, that at some point in the future, most said it was in the fall, that the Afghan Security Forces were going to fracture and the government would collapse.

The speed at which that happens in August is a different animal. The advisors are already gone by mid-July. There is still a government. There is still an Afghan army, and the assumption was that it would remain and the mission was to keep the embassy open, secure the embassy, transition that off to contractors, and then all the military would be out and it would be a diplomatic mission and there would be money in the over-the-horizon fund.

None of that happened because that army and that government collapsed very rapidly. As soon as those indicators came of fracture, Secretary Austin and others throughout the government executed and implemented a NEO plan for which there was contingencies that were built, that was a plan for a rapid collapse, and that was the NEO plan that General McKenzie had come up with, and that is what was executed. That is why those 6,000 troops could deploy as rapidly as they did. That is why all those aircraft showed up. That was not done without planning. That was done with planning and that was done—from an operational and tactical standpoint that was a success. Strategically—strategically, the war is lost. The enemy is in Kabul. So you have a strategic failure while you simultaneously have an operational and tactical success by the soldiers on the ground.

I think we are conflating some things that we need to separate in this after-action review process so that we clearly understand what exactly happened.

I am sorry for taking all that time, but I thought it was necessary.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Hawley.

Senator Kelly, please.

Senator KELLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, let me begin by expressing my gratitude to each of the over 800,000 Americans, many of them Arizonans, who served in Afghanistan over the past 20 years, and to their families. I also commend our servicemembers' support of one of the largest airlifts in our country's history. We will never forget the achievements of the men and women who worked 24/7 in Kabul, managed impossible conditions on the ground, and above all, those who made the ultimate sacrifice protecting innocent civilians. One hundred

twenty-four thousand people are safe today because of American troops and diplomats.

Still, after decades of conflict, 2,500 American soldiers killed, and billions invested in security cooperation, the American people deserve to know why the Afghan Government and security forces collapsed in a matter of days and how there was a failure to prepare for this scenario and ensure that our people were out of the country before it fell. I think we have established here that the withdrawal and evacuation did not account for real-world conditions and that the intelligence was flawed.

The United States wields incredible power as a global leader, and our accountability must match our influence. For our own national security and for each of those who served in Afghanistan during our longest war, we must understand what happened, but also look forward to ensure that our posture allows us to provide for our national security and prevent Afghanistan's use as a base for terrorist activity.

So I want to transition and look forward and not ask you questions that you have already answered. General McKenzie, America's armed forces have been on the front lines fighting terrorists for the past 20 years. During this time, al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations have been degraded. While our military presence in Afghanistan has ended, our commitment to fighting terrorism has not. With our withdrawal complete, the Afghan Government collapsed, and the Taliban seeking to fill the power vacuum left behind, how is Central Command postured to prevent terrorist organizations from gaining strength in the region?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, probably the details of this would be best left to the classified session which we will have later this afternoon. But I would tell you that I have today headquarters that has the ability to look into Afghanistan, albeit limited, and we have the ability to fuse the different disciplines of intelligence to look particularly at ISIS-K and al Qaeda. We are still refining that, the best practices on that, but we do have a way forward. I have told this committee before it is very hard to do this. It is not impossible to do this.

Senator KELLY. Well I am looking forward to seeing those details in the closed hearing. Are you confident that we can deny organizations like al Qaeda and ISIS the ability to use Afghanistan as a launchpad for terrorist activity?

General MCKENZIE. I think that is yet to be seen. I think we are still seeing how al Qaeda and ISIS are configuring themselves against the Taliban. We are still seeing what the Taliban is going to do. I think it is early. I would not say I am confident that that is going to be on the ground yet. We could get to that point, but I do not yet have that level of confidence.

Senator KELLY. You might have to share this in the closed hearing, but do you have the resources necessary to accomplish this, even as our national security pivots towards great power or near-peer threats like China and Russia that are seeking to expand their influence and compete with our military?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, I will just say I am in a constant dialogue with the Secretary about requirements in CENTCOM and I will give you some more details in the closed session.

Senator KELLY. Good. Well, thank you. I know you cannot go into much detail about the analysis that led to the August 28th drone strike in Kabul in this open setting, but I would like to note my serious concerns and give you the opportunity to make any comment on how the American people can know that the military will be able to adequately assess targets before conducting future strikes and operations, even as we have even fewer local intelligence and surveillance resources to leverage.

General MCKENZIE. Senator, again the matter is under investigation, but what I can tell you broadly and to restate some things I have said earlier, I am responsible for that. It happened in my area of responsibility so I am the responsible officer for that strike. Moreover, I was under no pressure and no one in my chain of command below me was under any pressure to take that strike. We acted based on the intelligence read that we saw on the ground. We acted several times on intelligence that we saw and we were successful in other occasions in preventing attacks. This time, tragically, we were wrong and you are right to note that as we go forward in our ability to create what we call the ecosystem that allows you to see what is going on on the ground and put all that together, it is going to get a lot harder to do that, particularly in places like Afghanistan, but I can share a little more with you later.

Senator KELLY. Well thank you, General.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Kelly.

Senator Tuberville, please.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, thanks for being here today. You are part of the most powerful military in the world. I will ask all three of you this question, and I know how you are going to answer this. Is this any enemy that could defeat the strongest force in the world, the United States military? I know all of you are going to say no.

Secretary Austin, since your confirmation in January, have you been denied any resources with regards to Afghanistan? I think I heard you say earlier you got everything you needed.

Secretary AUSTIN. That is correct, Senator.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Yes, thank you. On August 18th, you were asked why the U.S. would not rescue Americans who could not reach the airport. You responded, quote, "I do not have the capability to go out and extend operations currently in Kabul," end quote. We saw the Germans, the French, the British rescue citizens in Kabul, but from this administration, which commands the world's most lethal fighting force, we saw nothing but blame, weakness, and our American citizens were left to fend for themselves. Our fighting men and women have the courage, training, and discipline to defeat the enemy any time anywhere and there are people all over this country wondering why in the heck would we let our allies get their people and we did not get ours?

I want to thank all of the hundreds of thousands of veterans and their families who sacrificed over the past 20 years, and I truly believe our soldiers did not fail us. A lot of our leadership did.

Secretary Austin, before President Biden even took office, you thought we needed to leave Afghanistan. On January 19th, you told my colleague Senator Shaheen, quote, "I think this conflict

needs to come to an end and we need to see an agreement reached and in accordance with what the President-elect wants to see,” end quote. You testified that General Milley and General Miller had adequate resources to secure Afghanistan at a troop level of 2,500. But you told Senator Hawley you wanted to, quote, “assess the situation to make recommendations to the President,” end quote.

I know how you are going to answer this. Did you give advice to the President on the withdrawal from Afghanistan without conditions, or is that the direction you got from him?

Secretary AUSTIN. Again, my recommendations were a part of a very deliberate process where we presented a range of options for the President.

If I could, Senator, I would like to go back to the first comment that you made about the question that I answered for a reporter who asked, “Why don’t you go out and establish cordons and create safe passageways for our people just to move into the airport?”

At that point early on in our deployment, we only had less than 4,000, or about 4,000 troops to secure and defend the airport. Our troop presence continued to grow as we flowed people in. We used a number of innovative approaches to go out and pick up and facilitate the entry of American citizens into the airport as the situation continued to develop. But I just wanted to give you a little context for that answer.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Well, thank you. We are all talking about did President Biden know all this and, you know, my question about withdrawal. Basically there are two options. I can answer that. Either the President was given bad military advice or he gave his military the terrible decision and direction to surrender Afghanistan without condition.

I will have some more here in a few minutes. I just wanted to make a couple of statements. The American people, especially people I represent, they are disgusted by how this United States surrender happened in Afghanistan, and I know you have heard that yourselves, all three of you. America’s veterans are pissed off that their service was squandered, America’s allies are in disbelief, but America’s enemies are delighted. The Taliban are euphoric that the job that happened with our military given the orders to retreat. President Biden abandoned our allies who fought alongside us for 20 years. This administration left American citizens behind enemy lines. We left \$85 billion worth of equipment that the American taxpayers paid for, and this administration created a sanctuary for terrorists to plot against United States for years and years to come. It is just absolutely amazing that we did this.

So I will end it there. I know these guys need to probably take a break, but we will see you after the break.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield my time.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Senator Tuberville.

We have completed the first round, and as I indicated we will break at 1:00 for lunch, so we will begin the second round.

Secretary Austin, you said in response to Senator Warren that if we stayed past August 31st, we would certainly be back at war with the Taliban and that you would have to reinforce yourself. Do I interpret your testimony to mean that staying at 2,500 past the 31st was not sustainable at an acceptable level of risk to American

personnel and that we would be seeing today casualties which could be accumulating at an unacceptable rate?

Secretary AUSTIN. Chairman, I think the point that is been left out of a lot of the conversation is that, you know, had we stayed past that date that was agreed upon early on, that the Taliban would begin to attack us, attack our forces there. We would have to make some decisions on how to reinforce our forces so that we could continue to operate and that would include quite possibly increasing the force there.

Chairman REED. Now, in the Doha agreement, President Trump agreed to leave with certain conditions on May 1st. Those conditions have been testified by the panel that were really never achieved, never challenged by the Trump administration. Would you consider that an abdication of or a surrender of that agreement?

Secretary AUSTIN. I certainly believe that the conditions were preset, and again, we met—lived up to all the things that we were obliged to do. We did not attack them and we drew down our forces. But the Taliban, the only thing that they lived up to was that they did not attack us.

Chairman REED. We saw a great deal of difficulty in meeting the deadline which was August 31st. Would it appear to you that a May 1st deadline, as President Trump imagined, would have caused more complications in terms of getting our equipment out, getting our personnel out, identifying Americans who were eligible to leave and getting them the paperwork, since you would be doing it at a much shorter time frame?

Secretary AUSTIN. Yes, I do not think that would have been feasible to do that in an orderly fashion, Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much. General Milley, regardless of whether the Taliban had met the conditions required under Doha, were you not already in a trajectory to go to zero forces, as I said, by May 1st, as required by the agreement when the President took over, so that you actually would have accelerated the process of withdrawal and complicated it more, similar to my question to the Secretary?

General MILLEY. Yes, we were actually given an order to go to zero by 15 January which was changed to go to 2,500 by 15 January and then taken down to zero by 1 May, depending on the decisions of the new administration.

Chairman REED. Thank you, and General Milley, your prepared testimony indicates that the Biden administration, through the National Security Council process, conducted a rigorous interagency review of the situation in Afghanistan in February, March, and April, in which the views of senior military leadership were all given serious consideration by the administration. You also testified that you received an order in November 2020, you just referred to, to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan by January 15, 2021. Was that November order similarly informed by a rigorous interagency review?

General MILLEY. No.

Chairman REED. So that was basically, I think—

General MILLEY. Secretary Esper submitted his recommendations in a written format on the 9th, the day that he was relieved,

and 48 hours later we received a written order to go to zero by 15 January.

Chairman REED. General McKenzie, again, your advice with regard to maintaining 2,500 troops has been reiterated repeatedly, but you also recommended in the fall of 2020, 4,000 troops. Was that correct?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, that is correct. I recommended that in the fall of 2020, when we were having deliberations, I recommended that we hold at that level.

Chairman REED. That was rejected by the Trump administration?

General MCKENZIE. Sir, it was.

Chairman REED. There was no recriminations against you or anyone else? That was the President of the United States making a decision based on his view of the world?

General MCKENZIE. In so far as I know, that is correct, sir.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much.

Again, adhering to the 5-minute rule, I will cede back 8 seconds to Ranking Member Inhofe.

Senator INHOFE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. One good way to judge any President's decision is whether it has made American people safer. Generals, I will ask all three of you. You have both noted that the Taliban has not severed its relationship with al Qaeda. President Biden stated on July 8th that al Qaeda is gone from Afghanistan. I would ask you, is al Qaeda gone from Afghanistan? Generals?

Secretary AUSTIN. Senator, I think there are remnants of al Qaeda still in Afghanistan.

Senator INHOFE. Does anyone believe that al Qaeda is gone from Afghanistan?

President Biden stated at the United Nations recently that this Nation is no longer at war. Is it your personal view that al Qaeda is no longer at war with us?

Start at the right, General.

General MILLEY. I believe al Qaeda is in Afghanistan. I believe they have aspirations to reconstitute, and if they develop the capability I believe that they have aspirations to strike. It is too early in the process right now, Senator, to determine the capability, but I do believe they—

Senator INHOFE. Do you believe the personal view that was stated, that al Qaeda is no longer at war with us right now? Okay.

General MILLEY. I think al Qaeda is at war with the United States, still, and never has not—

Senator INHOFE. Thank you. Does the withdrawal from Afghanistan increase or decrease the likelihood of an al Qaeda or ISIS attack on the United States Homeland?

General MILLEY. You asking me, Senator?

Senator INHOFE. Sure.

General MILLEY. My view is that it makes it much more difficult for us to conduct intelligence surveillance reconnaissance find-fix functions and then we can strike almost from anywhere in the world, but the find-fix function, it is more difficult. We can still do it. It is not impossible—

Senator INHOFE. Okay.

General MILLEY.—but it will make it more difficult.

Senator INHOFE. General Milley and General McKenzie, we entrusted security to the Taliban, but they failed to prevent the ISIS-K suicide bomber on August 26th. We do not really even know if they wanted to prevent it. Now, we are in the same situation, trusting the Taliban to prevent attacks. The Senator from Missouri brought up and talked again about the fact of what is the situation right now, and I think we do not really after this several hours, have an answer to that.

I do want to bring something in the record that I do not think has been put in the record already, and that is the conditions under which the previous President, after making the statement about the Taliban, not only did the previous President have conditions, and the conditions included having a presence, a military presence, but they also had four other things that were stated that was conditions. One, to prevent al Qaeda and the terrorists from threatening the United States from Afghanistan. Secondly, to make statements and commandments to its members against threatening the United States. Thirdly, deny residence and visas and passports to those threatening the United States' allies. Fourthly, begin negotiations with the Afghan Government.

Those were conditions that were made at that time, and this has been stated several times. It is my opinion and the opinion of many who have testified at this hearing that there were no conditions. I believe that is the case.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Inhofe.

Senator Shaheen, please.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Secretary Austin, I am going to go back to my question earlier about the records that Special Immigrant Visa applicants really need in order to qualify for those visas, and there has not been a real—a good process through DOD to ensure that they get those records. Is that something that the Department is looking at, and would you be willing to work with this Committee or others to see if we could set up a process that would ensure that those folks who worked with our men and women actually have the documentation they need to show that? I know that one of the challenges is that many of those records have been destroyed, but I would hope there is some way that we can ensure that those people are able to get the documentation they need to come to this country.

Secretary AUSTIN. Senator, let me first say that I absolutely agree with you that the process is onerous and that we need to do something to make it easier for those people that have helped us to prove that they have in fact worked with us before.

One of my departments in defense is working to propose ways to truncate the process or come up with alternative means to demonstrate that they have worked with us in the past. To answer your question, we would absolutely welcome working with the committee on this.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. I assume we should contact your office to find who the appropriate contact person would be.

Secretary AUSTIN. Well we will contact your office and let you know who he is, Senator.

Senator SHAHEEN. Okay. General Milley and General McKenzie, it is long been publicly reported that the Pakistani intelligence services have maintained a close and continuing relationship with the Taliban. Do we expect that relationship to become more complicated now that the Taliban is in power? Are we concerned about Pakistan's nuclear weapons and the potential that terrorist groups might be able to get access to those weapons? Can you talk a little bit about how you see the relationship with Pakistan and the Taliban playing out and the challenges that presents for the United States?

I will start. Which one of you would like to answer that?

General MILLEY. Go ahead, Frank. I will follow you.

General MCKENZIE. Senator, some of this we can talk in a little bit more detail in the closed session.

Senator SHAHEEN. Okay.

General MCKENZIE. But I would tell you that I believe Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban is going to become significantly more complicated as a result of the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan. In fact, they are going to see pressure moving into Pakistan from Afghanistan in ways that they have been able to deflect before because of the pressure that we and our allies had then. So I think that is a significant problem that Pakistan is going to face. I would like to talk about their special weapons perhaps in the closed session.

As has been noted by several people, in order to get to Afghanistan, you have to fly over Pakistan unless you come from the north and that is a subject of continuing deliberation with Pakistan, and I can shed a little bit more light on that going forward. But they have actually, over the last 20 years, we have been able to use what we call the "air boulevard" to go in over western Pakistan and that is become something that is vital to us, as well as certain landlines of communication. We will be working with the Pakistanis in the days and weeks ahead to look at what that relationship is going to look like in the future. But I can again talk a little more in the closed session.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. General Milley, did you want to add to that?

General MILLEY. Yes, I have had several conversations over the years and also recently with Pakistanis and there is no question in my mind that the relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban is going to become increasingly complex. There are a whole series of issues there that have national security interest for the United States that are best handled in a different session.

Senator SHAHEEN. Okay. Thank you. Well can you, and Secretary Austin, can you talk about what we are doing to work with our European counterparts who, based on conversations that I have had with some of the civilians from our NATO allies, there was some frustration about the communication that led to the withdrawal and the evacuation? Are we working to rebuild those relationships? Do you see that frustration reflected in the military relationships that you have?

Secretary AUSTIN. I do not, Senator, and I understand that there will be concerns. But as I engage my counterparts, they are very willing to work with us, and I do not want us to sound Pollyannish

on this, but they have been very, very thankful for the fact that we helped them get their people out and we helped them get thousands of evacuees out that had worked for them, because of what we did.

So I think, as I look at the major players, that there is still a strong willingness to work with us, and relationships are things that we just have to continue to work at.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Shaheen.

Before I recognize Senator Wicker, at the conclusion of Senator Wicker's questioning we will adjourn, as I said, the 1:00 adjournment, a little early, a couple of minutes, and then we will promptly return at 1:30.

Senator Wicker, please.

Senator WICKER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General McKenzie, let me ask you, as I understand it one of our primary missions in Afghanistan was training the Afghan armed forces. We also equipped them with approximately \$83 billion in military equipment, we always provided them extensive support in the form of intelligence and surveillance, air support, logistics, including contract aircraft maintenance, and special operation advisors.

General McKenzie, were the Afghan armed forces ever trained to fight the Taliban without United States support of any kind?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, some elements of the Afghan military could fight very well without our support, some of the elite commando units. Obviously, we know from the example that we saw in August that other elements were unable to do that. In fact, as we began to withdraw our support during the withdrawal operation we began to see the effects of that. We shift to an over-the-horizon model for aviation maintenance. That is difficult to do—

Senator WICKER. It really is difficult to do.

General MCKENZIE.—with a technologically literate population. It is harder to do in Afghanistan. We were having some small success with that, and actually Afghan Air Force continued to fly strikes up until well into August. But they were, nonetheless, on a general negative attrition.

Senator WICKER. What percentage would you term as elite?

General MCKENZIE. Oh, I would say less than 5 percent.

Senator WICKER. Okay, and so really, for 95 percent it was unrealistic for us to expect them to be able to fight alone at that point, in July and August of this year.

General MCKENZIE. The combination of the obvious withdrawal of the United States, which had a profound psychological effect—because I think in the mind of the soldier, you know, the Taliban and the Afghan military, they have the same DNA, so it comes down to the fighting heart of the man on the ground. I think that the Taliban were heartened by what they saw happen at Doha and what followed, and our eventual decision to get out by a certain date. I think the Afghans were very weakened by that, morally and spiritually.

Senator WICKER. Thank you. Good. Let me rush on then to try to get another question in.

Secretary Austin, the reports in The New York Times are that you warned the President all the way back in March that there could be dire outcomes in which the Afghan military folded in an aggressive advance by the Taliban, and that you drew comparisons between that and our experience in Iraq, where disaster unfolded and we were required to go back in. According to the same article, you warned the President, we have seen this movie before.

I know you do not want to tell us what advice you give to the President. Was that your feeling, and did you make known the comparison with Iraq, and did you feel we had seen this movie before?

Secretary AUSTIN. Thanks, Senator. Again, you are right. I will keep my conversations, my recommendations to the President confidential. But I would say that as we worked our way through the process here we laid out, you know, all potential consequences that could result from any course of action that we took, and we were clear-eyed about that.

There were inputs coming—

Senator WICKER. With regard to Iraq—that is my question, Mr. Secretary.

Secretary AUSTIN. Well certainly, then we get back to the specific conversation that I would have had. But it is clear that I have a history with Iraq. It is clear that I have learned there are lessons to be learned from Iraq, and I would certainly—

Senator WICKER. Was it your feeling that we had seen this movie before?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, there are certainly some of the same kinds of things could transpire as we look to transition.

Senator WICKER. Okay. Speaking of things transpiring, one was that we had to go back into Iraq. Secretary Austin, does the Department of Defense have plans in place to redeploy United States combat troops to Afghanistan in the event that our intelligence estimates proved true and our Homeland security is, in fact, threatened?

Secretary AUSTIN. Currently, the President's decision, Senator, as you know, is that we have left Iraq—excuse me, Afghanistan, and so we have not been tasked to construct any plans to go back into Afghanistan.

Senator WICKER. So there are no such plans in place.

Secretary AUSTIN. No.

Senator WICKER. General Milley, of the conditions that were required of the Taliban in the agreement only one was met. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. That is correct. The condition was, the one that was met was the most important one, which was do not attack us or the coalition forces, and they did not.

Senator WICKER. President Trump made a recommendation, gave an order that we leave on 15 January.

General MILLEY. Correct.

Senator WICKER. The advice came back from the military strongly that that was not a good idea. Based on that advice, the President rescinded that order. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. That is correct.

Senator WICKER. None of those conditions that President Trump based his decision on had been met in 2021, when President Biden made, in fact, the same decision. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. Those conditions were never met. That is correct.

Senator WICKER. All right. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Wicker.

At this point the Committee will stand in recess until 1:30. Thank you very much.

[Recess.]

Chairman REED. Let me the call the hearing back to order, and I will recognize Senator Blumenthal for a second round.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for your testimony earlier and your continuing testimony now.

Secretary Austin, I would like to go back to the topic of my first round of questions, the evacuation of Americans and our Afghan allies, translators, guards, and security officers who sided with us, put their lives on the line, and who now literally have targets on their backs, along with their families. I asked you who, at the Department of Defense, is in charge of our efforts to evacuate them and, with all due respect, you did not give me the name of the person at DOD leading these efforts, but you pointed me instead to the Department of State and interagency efforts.

I have been involved in working on this evacuation issue and on the refugee question for some time, along with coalition of veterans, NGOs, concerned citizens, and some government officials, and the frustration I have encountered is that I have been directed, repeatedly and constantly, from one agency to another. DOD sent me to State, who then sent me to the National Security Council, who would send me back to the Department of Defense. It was a Kafka-esque exercise in bureaucracy and red tape with no clear lines of authority while lives were on the line. This private network or coalition was doing the work that the United States Government would have done if it had maintained a presence there, but it had none, and that is why, at Mazar and Kabul it was doing that work.

I am concerned that despite this Committee's efforts to call attention to the looming crisis in the evacuation, we were unprepared. As I mentioned earlier, a number of Members of this Committee went to the White House in the spring, asked for a plan, a strategy, and none was forthcoming. I am concerned we will repeat that mistake as we work to avoid a humanitarian crisis during refugee resettlement, and that will be a huge undertaking, with hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees who are literally escaping torture and murder coming to this country, many of them with nothing more than the clothes they had when they left.

We currently have tens of thousands of those individuals on your bases, Department of Defense bases, both overseas at Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and domestically, as you well know, Virginia, Wisconsin, New Mexico, and Texas. This is a Department of Defense responsibility. It is a moral imperative. These people risked their lives for us, as you know on this panel better than any of us, and it will be shared with the State Department, the Depart-

ment of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, numerous other Federal agencies. We own it. It is our responsibility.

I am a United States Senator and I continue to have difficulty ascertaining who is in charge. I think we need an evacuation czar, a point person on refugee resettlement, whose mission is public, and who is known to the American people to be in charge here.

I would like to ask you, how do we ensure that there is an official in charge, a point person, someone to ensure that Afghan children receive schooling, that there are language services that they received medical care, and can you give us an update on what the status is?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well again, Senator, thanks for your sustained interest and for all that you have done to continue to help get people out. There is a process. There is a mechanism. State has responsibility, as you know, for being the lead to continue to evacuate American citizens and SIV applicants out of Afghanistan. That process is being run by Ambassador Bass as an interagency effort, and we contribute to that with a dedicated general officer as a part of that.

In terms of the evacuees or the guests that are being housed on our installations, Department of Defense has responsibility for housing them and for their care and feeding. In terms of integrating them into our society, DHS and State really are leading that process, and I agree with you, it is very important that we do this the right way, and it is very important that we do this carefully but as rapidly as possible, because we do have children that need education and all those kinds of things.

In the meantime, DOD will remain sighted on making sure that they receive the very best care and we provide for their safety as well.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you.

Chairman REED. Senator Fischer, please.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General McKenzie, at the beginning of this hearing Chairman Reed made a comment about the goal and mission that we are going to be looking at now in the future is to assure that Afghanistan never again can be used as a base for terrorists. As we look at that goal, as we look at that mission, I think we need to be honest with the American people on how that will be accomplished. I do not think the American people should be misled about capabilities that are needed to make sure that we can conduct over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations.

President Biden has pointed out that we conduct over-the-horizon CT operations to go after terrorists in other places in the world, including ISIS in Syria, al Qaeda in Yemen, al-Shabab in Somalia.

General McKenzie, in those three locations we have either a U.S. presence or reliable partners on the ground. Is that correct?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, that is correct.

Senator FISCHER. In those three locations, do we have strike assets or basing agreements in nearby countries?

General MCKENZIE. At the level of this briefing, yes, we do.

Senator FISCHER. General McKenzie, when the Department developed its initial plans for an over-the-horizon approach to

counterterrorism in Afghanistan, did those plans assume that the Afghan Security Forces would serve as our partner on the ground?

General MCKENZIE. We developed plans that were neutral on that. We developed a spectrum of options, ranging from we would have robust help from some future government in Afghanistan to a situation, which is what we have now, where we would have no help from the government of Afghanistan. So we developed options across that entire span of future possibilities.

Senator FISCHER. But as we developed the options, you developed the options and the reality is now that we did not see this collapse coming so quickly then we do not have partners on the ground. Is that correct?

General MCKENZIE. We always had a—one of the options for CT in Afghanistan would be that we would be at a state where there would be no diplomatic presence there and there would be no help from the government of Afghanistan. So from the beginning we always saw that as one of the possible futures.

Senator FISCHER. That is the situation we are in right now?

General MCKENZIE. That is correct.

Senator FISCHER. You stated that during the evacuation we developed a pragmatic relationship with the Taliban, but you are not saying we should consider the Taliban to be a reliable partner, by any means, are you?

General MCKENZIE. I do not trust the Taliban. I do not consider the Taliban to be a reliable partner. Any time you deal with the Taliban you have to look at what they do and not what they say.

Senator FISCHER. General McKenzie, Yemen, Syria, and Somalia all border an ocean or a sea and we can use carriers or other sea-based assets to conduct CT operations. Afghanistan, however, is a landlocked country, so we cannot use our sea-based assets in the same way. Our nearest strike base, or our nearest base in Qatar is about 1,600 miles away from northern Afghanistan, so our strike assets are significantly further from potential targets than they are in other operating locations.

Is it fair to say that it is more difficult to hit targets that are further away from where the strike asset is based?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, in general that is a factor, but I would tell you because of our ability to refuel aircraft, to position—for example, during the withdrawal we positioned a carrier off the Makran coast of Pakistan, which shortened the range considerably. So there are ways to get to that finished solution.

Senator, if I could just add, it is not the finished part of the problem that is the most difficult part of the problem. It is the finding and fixing the target where we have run into great difficulties, particularly associated with Afghanistan, because of, as you noted, it is a landlocked location, it is a great range from our bases. While we do have platforms that can fly in there, it eats up a lot of time and a lot of platforms to conduct that mission. That is why I said from the beginning, it is hard to do, very hard to do. It is not impossible to do. But we can talk more about it in the closed session.

Senator FISCHER. Right, and it is hard because of a lack of partners on the ground?

General MCKENZIE. That is a significant factor that you look at when you look at any CT operation of this specter.

Senator FISCHER. To even reach Afghanistan, our strike assets, they have to fly over other countries. So without an agreement from central Asian nations north of Afghanistan is it accurate that we are reliant on the continued use of Pakistani air space for our over-the-horizon strategy?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, you are correct.

Senator FISCHER. That is not a sure thing for the future. Correct?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, I would not predict the future. I know they were very supportive during the last phase of our engagement in Afghanistan. I think we are now talking to them at various levels about how we might maintain the ability to do that in the future, but I would not want to get out ahead of the Department, the Secretary, and the policy people on this.

Senator FISCHER. But they also have a strong relationship with the Taliban. Would you consider that that is going to grow?

General MCKENZIE. I would consider that they are going to be very conflicted about this, as they have been for the last 20 years.

Senator FISCHER. Thank you.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Senator Fischer.

Senator KAINE, please.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the witnesses.

I guess I will direct this to Secretary Austin. What is the administration's current best estimate of the number of Americans that are in Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. Senator, according to State there are currently fewer than 100 American citizens who want to depart and are ready to leave. We got out 21 American citizens today, along with their family members, and we will continue to work this, as you have heard us say earlier.

The numbers fluctuate daily because more people come to light as time goes by and they see opportunities to safely leave, and so this has been a dynamic process. But again, we will stay focused on this.

Senator KAINE. I understand that. I am aware that you had success in getting Americans out because I have advocated on behalf of some of them and I have seen the results of your effort, and I know you will continue that.

If I remember correctly, there started to be communiques to Americans in Afghanistan that they might possibly consider returning to the United States as early as March. Is that correct?

Secretary AUSTIN. I do not have knowledge of those communiques.

Senator KAINE. I think that may be from a foreign relations, State Department standpoint. Obviously, you cannot bring folks home who do not want to come home, but the number that you are currently looking, and I understand that it changes, who want to come home is now less than 100, and I trust that you will continue to be diligent about that.

To the question that I posed in my first round of questions—and, General McKenzie, I would like to start with you—all three of you are leaders but you also have on-the-ground experience, and I know you have a deep connection to Afghanistan and people that you fought together with and your partners and colleagues there, as well as the Americans who sacrificed so bravely. For the purposes

of the Committee, we really want to dig into this question about why did the security force and government fail so quickly? Because it bears upon future train-and-assist efforts or future humanitarian efforts.

Beginning with you, General McKenzie, what are your own thoughts about the speed of the collapse of both the military and civilian government?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, I believe that the collapse of the military and the government are completely linked. You cannot consider one without looking at the other, and I believe probably the primary accelerant to—I will take the military side first—the primary accelerant to lowering moral and general efficiency of the Afghan military was what they saw coming in the heels of the Doha agreement, what they believed was forced upon them, and so I think that had a negative effect.

Plus as we get closer to the date that we are leaving, the clear vision that the United States is going to leave, and we are going to apply a system of, at best, partial remedies, from their perspective, to continue the maintenance of not only the main force, the conventional force on the ground, but also the really high-priority items like their air force. As I have noted before, we had an over-the-horizon solution to do that. It was not a perfect solution but it was our best attempt to do that. So I think that affected the military.

But I would tell you what I think—the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) of those Afghan soldiers is the same DNA the Taliban had, and the Taliban fought pretty hard. I think it comes down to the will to combat and fighting spirit, and I think that is where you get the link to the government of Afghanistan. When your president leaves suddenly in the middle of a campaign for the capital, I think that finishes any chance at all you might have had of making a stand there.

There were signals before then of disaffection and fractures in the Afghan Government—you know, probably better people than me to talk about that—but I think all those came together and had a very powerful negative synergy towards the end.

This is not new. We have been able to see it for years. But you know, Senator, one point I would make is, this is not inherently a military problem. There are larger factors here than just the United States military and what we did or did not do training the Afghans. So I will pause there.

Senator KAINE. To your last point, of the two points you made, you had the best fighting force in the world. But if they do not have confidence in their military or political leadership it is hard for them to put it all on the line for a leadership if they lack confidence in the leadership.

To Secretary Austin or General Milley, any additional thoughts?

Secretary AUSTIN. The three choices that you laid for us was, your questions were was it because of insufficient training, was it because the troops were demoralized, or was it because we wanted thing for them more than they wanted it for themselves. I would agree with General McKenzie that the Doha agreement had a significant impact on the morale of the troops, but I would say that is compounded by weak leadership, corruption in the government,

and the fact that the Taliban made a concerted effort to really reach out to provincial leaders and convince them that the Taliban was going to be in charge so they might as well side up with them early on.

Senator KAINE. My time has expired. I yield back. Thank you.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Caine.

Senator Cotton, please.

Senator COTTON. General Milley, in the final two pages of your written statement you lay out some detailed circumstances of your phone calls with the Chinese counterparts on October 30, 2020, and January 8, 2021. You also say you would be happy to make available various documents. I want to ask for three sets of documents, if we can get them. I think the first two should be fairly straightforward. One, could we get the list of people who joined you on those calls, by name and by title?

General MILLEY. Yes.

Senator COTTON. United States officials.

General MILLEY. Yes.

Senator COTTON. Two, could we get a list of similar calls you have made to your military counterparts around the world from, say, September 1, 2020, to January 20, 2021?

General MILLEY. Sure. Yes.

Senator COTTON. Again, I think there should not be an issue, have any classified information.

Third, you mentioned in that written statement that shortly after those two phone calls with General Li you circulated readouts within the Pentagon and inside the interagency partners you have. Could we get those readouts as well?

General MILLEY. Yes.

[The information referred to follows:]

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CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20318-9999



MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

MWB 27 Sept 2021

SUBJECT: General Milley's Engagements with the People's Liberation Army Leaders

1. In order to clearly establish the facts related to my 30 October 2020 and 8 January 2021 phone calls with my People's Republic of China (PRC) counterpart, General Li Zuocheng, I am submitting for the record supporting information to address requests for information from multiple members of both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives.
2. This information is provided in the context of my role as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) in the execution of policy and procedure of the "Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the PRC for Calendar Year 2020" and Calendar Year 2021 as published by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD).
3. This memorandum for record provides specific details on:
 - The roles and responsibilities of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS)
 - The requirements and guidelines as directed in U.S. Government and Department of Defense (DoD) instructions and directives
 - The processes followed for PRC counterpart engagements
4. This memorandum also outlines specific key details related to my 30 October 2020 and 8 January 2021 phone calls with my PRC counterpart, General Li Zuocheng. This includes:
 - A detailed timeline of key actions and events
 - Establishes the causal relationship between U.S. intelligence community reporting and the DoD engagement with senior members of the PRC
 - Highlights preparatory actions taken by OSD
 - Confirms interagency involvement
5. Statutory Directive and Guiding Documents

Role of the CJCS. Per Sections 151, 153, and 163 of Title 10, U.S. Code (U.S.C.), the CJCS is the principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense (SecDef). The CJCS is not a member of the chain of command, but *is integral in the chain of communication, as directed by the*

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President in the Unified Command Plan. Pursuant to this requirement, the CJCS regularly communicates with the President, the National Security Council, and the SecDef and transmits guidance and orders on their behalf to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Combatant Commands. Specifically:

- Section 163 of Title 10, U.S.C.
 - The President may direct communications between the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the commanders of the combatant commands be transmitted through the CJCS.
 - The President may also assign duties to the CJCS to assist the Secretary of Defense and President in their command functions.
 - Subject to Secretary of Defense authority, direction, and control, the CJCS is the spokesperson for the combatant commanders especially on operational requirements of their commands.
 - Responsibilities assigned by the President or Secretary of Defense do not confer any command authority on the CJCS, nor does it alter a combatant commander's responsibilities as prescribed in 10 U.S.C. §164.
- Section 153 of Title 10, U.S.C.
 - CJCS performs "such other duties as may be prescribed by law or by the President or the Secretary." (10 U.S.C. §153(a)(7))
- Section 151 of Title 10, U.S.C.
 - CJCS is the principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the SecDef.
 - CJCS shall provide dissenting or differing advice from the Joint Chiefs to the President, National Security Council, Homeland Security Council, or SecDef.

Unified Command Plan. The Unified Command Plan (UCP), signed by the President, establishes the missions and responsibilities for Commanders of Combatant Commands (CCMDs) (CCDRs). The UCP further defines the roles and responsibilities of the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, as it pertains to the CCMDs. Specific to the CJCS:

- **General.** *The CJCS (the Chairman) is the principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense.* Although the Chairman does not have command authority, in matters requiring global military strategic and operational integration, the Chairman, as global integrator, is responsible for providing advice to the Secretary on the arrangement of cohesive military

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actions in time, space, and purpose, executed as a whole to address trans-regional, all-domain, and multi-functional challenges. The Chairman's advice to the Secretary on the allocation and transfer of forces and responsibilities occurs through routine dialogue among senior leaders for optimal implementation of the Secretary's direction.

- ***Communications between the President or the Secretary (or their duly deputized alternates or successors) and the CDRs "will be transmitted through the Chairman unless otherwise directed."***

Department of Defense Guidance.

- **National Defense Strategy (NDS).** The 2018 National Defense Strategy identifies long-term strategic competition with China as the principal priorities for the Department. Both the National Security Strategy (NSS) and the NDS recognize the PRC as a strategic competitor vying for economic, diplomatic, and military advantages globally. The most far-reaching objective of this defense strategy is to set the military relationship between China and the United States on a path of *transparency and non-aggression*. The current administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance also recognizes that we are in an era of strategic competition with China, but also directs that we will work with China when it is in our national interests to do so.

- **Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC).** The Department of Defense Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs (ASD (IPSA)), produces an annual document titled *Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC)*. This document, in support of the NSS and the NDS – Implementation, provides direction and guidance to Department of Defense leadership and staff with respect to engagement with the Peoples Republic of China.

The CY2019 and CY2020 Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the PRC *directed the DoD to routinize and prioritize DoD contacts and exchanges with the PLA to enhance predictability, stability, and prevent an incident between U.S. and PRC operational forces from inadvertently escalating to crisis.*

The guidance document for CY2020 was signed and distributed within the Department in 2019 by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo Pacific Security Affairs, Mr. Randall G. Schriver. The guidance document for CY2021 was signed and distributed in December 2020 Mr. David F. Heivey performing the duties of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo Pacific Security Affairs.

The 2020 annual guidance establishes a **Policy Dialogue System (PDS)** that routinizes DoD contacts and exchanges with the PLA that drives toward the NDS objective of setting the military relationship between China and the United States on a path of *transparency and non-aggression*. The PDS prioritizes the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and the Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command for Key Leader Engagements with their PLA counterparts.

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In my first call with General Li in 2019, he and I agreed to conduct quarterly calls, which my staff incorporates into annual defense engagement planning, as directed by the annual guidance, in coordination with the Secretary's staff.

Engagement Processes and Methods.

- Since becoming Chairman in 2019, I have engaged with the PLA Chief of the Joint Staff Department, General Li, on four occasions: in December 2019, April 2020, October 2020, and January 2021. These four engagements were conducted via a Defense Telephone Link (DTL) connection, which is a dedicated secure video teleconference link between Washington and Beijing.
- These DTLs do not occur automatically. They must be pre-coordinated with the PLA via requests sent through our Defense Attaché Office at our embassy in Beijing, who send requests to the PLA's Office for International Military Cooperation. I have no other means of communicating with the PLA. My requests to speak with General Li takes days if not weeks to coordinate.
- Prior to sending any request to the PLA, my staff coordinates with the Secretary's Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China and his staff to ensure my objectives for the call are aligned with that of the Secretary of Defense. Briefing materials, talking points, and other background information is shared with the Secretary's staff, USINDOPACOM, the State Department, and others as necessary.
- During the calls, only General Li and I are visible on screen, but staff is present on both sides. Routine participants on my staff include my State Department Political Advisor, my Director for Intelligence, my Director for Strategy, Plans and Policy, among others.
- Immediately following the calls, my staff prepared readouts for distribution and I informed the Secretary of Defense and other Cabinet officials.

Appendix 1: PLA Engagement Timeline (November 2019 to January 2021)

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Appendix 1: PLA Engagement Timeline (November 2019 to January 2021)**November 2019**

5 Nov: SecDef Esper conducted his first video teleconference (VTC) with Chinese MINDEF General (GEN) Wei.
18 Nov: SecDef Esper and GEN Wei met during ASEAN's Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) conference.

December 2019

Dec: ASD Schriver published guidance for U.S. DoD contacts and engagements with PRC.
2 Dec: GEN Milley prep session prior to VTC with GEN Li.
3 Dec: GEN Milley VTC with GEN Li.
3 Dec: Joint Staff (JS) published a press release of GEN Milley and GEN Li's engagement.
12 Dec: GEN Milley provided OSD an e-mail readout of his 3 Dec 2019 engagement with GEN Li.
15 Dec: JS sent DASD China, Mr. Sbragia, and INDOPACOM GEN Milley's 3 Dec readout.

March 2020

03 Mar: SecDef Esper VTC with PRC MINDEF GEN Wei.

April 2020

08 April: GEN Milley VTC with GEN Li.
09 April: GEN Milley provided OSD an e-mail readout of his 8 Apr 2020 engagement with GEN Li.

May 2020

Mid-May: PRC and India begin to surge troops and clash in largest cross-border altercation since 2017.

July 2020

14 Jul: A PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson publicly condemned the "irresponsible" shift in the U.S. policy towards South China Sea (SCS) claims.
21 Jul: State Department ordered closure of China's Consulate in Houston due to PRC-sponsored "influence operations."
24 Jul: PRC told the U.S. to close the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu.

August 2020

6 Aug: SecDef Esper called Chinese MINDEF General Wei.
9-12 Aug: U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Azar visited Taiwan and met with senior Taiwan officials.
Aug: Multiple PRC scholars expressed alarm the Trump administration would provoke a conflict with the PRC to win the November election.
Aug: The PLA delivered multiple demarches condemning U.S. activities near the PRC that Beijing viewed as provocative.

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September 2020

Mid-Sep: PLA officials claimed that PRC leadership remains concerned of a plot to provoke a conflict with the PRC.

Late Sep: PRC state media speculated the Trump administration might seek to create a military crisis with the PRC as an "October Surprise" to boost its reelection challenges.

October 2020

Early Oct: PLA issued a demarche condemning U.S. activities near PRC SCS claims.

Mid-Oct: PLA accused the U.S. of 'saber-rattling' and preparing to attack PRC interests in the SCS.

19 Oct: USINDOPACOM noted tense strategic environment with PLA.

20 Oct: DASD China and his PLA counterpart VTC.

21 Oct: Foreign media claimed that all five PLA theater commands are on 'high alert' status as a response to regional tensions.

22 Oct: SecDef, CJCS, and Admiral Davidson VTC; SecDef Esper directed GEN Milley to contact his counterpart.

26 Oct: JS coordinated with Beijing DAO for a VTC between GEN Milley and GEN Li.

Late Oct: PRC scholars claimed the PRC remains concerned of a potential U.S.-PRC conflict.

28-29 Oct: DoD and PLA officials conducted a Crisis Communications Working Group to improve mil-to-mil coordination.

29 Oct: A PLA spokesperson publicly acknowledged rumors of an "October Surprise," claiming SecDef Esper assured the PRC the U.S. has no plans to start a military crisis against the PRC.

29 Oct: GEN Milley prep session prior to VTC with GEN Li.

30 Oct: GEN Milley VTC with GEN Li; GEN Milley provided e-mail readout to OSD.

November 2020

1 Nov: CJCS Milley directed the JS to coordinate another VTC with GEN Li before 20 Nov 20.

3 Nov: JS requested DAO Beijing coordinate a VTC with GEN Li on 18 Nov.

Early Nov: PLA issued a demarche condemning announced U.S. weapon sales to Taiwan.

9 Nov: President Trump relieved SecDef Esper and Mr. Miller assumed Acting SecDef position.

December 2020

14 Dec: PLA refused to attend the USINDOPACOM initiated Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) Meeting.

14 Dec: Acting SecDef Miller received NDS -Implementation briefing on U.S.-China Defense relations policy. Acting SecDef Miller carefully reviewed the slides and read ahead material and approved the Policy Dialogue System as a framework for U.S.-China defense relations to include prioritizing key leader engagements for the Chairman.

22 Dec: DASD-China, JS, and DAO Beijing coordinated to reengage with PLA for VTC with GEN Milley.

23 Dec: PDASD Helvey published guidance for U.S. DoD contacts and engagements with PRC.

31 Dec: PLA requested a VTC with GEN Milley on 8 Jan 21 or 15 Jan 21.

UNCLASSIFIED

January 2021

- 4 Jan: GEN Milley's VTC was confirmed to occur on 8 Jan 21
- 4 Jan: OSD requested a VTC between DASD China, Mr. Sbragia, and Maj Gen Huang to occur on 6 Jan 21.
- 5 Jan: JS coordinated with DASD China office to review GEN Milley's talking points for VTC on 8 Jan 21.
- 6 Jan: DASD China, Mr. Sbragia, conducted VTC with Maj Gen Huang.
- 8 Jan: GEN Milley's VTC with GEN Li; readout provided to OSD and interagency.
- 11 Jan: Joint Staff provided a verbal readout of GEN Milley's 08 Jan VTC to DASD China's Director of Defense Relations.
- 30 Jan: Reports indicated PLA are reducing operational readiness levels.

UNCLASSIFIED

Senator COTTON. Secretary Austin, could I get your commitment that you will work with General Milley and his team to get that to us, both as quickly as possible and without unnecessary classification?

Secretary AUSTIN. Yes, Senator.

Senator COTTON. Thank you. Secretary Austin, on May 8th you conducted, at the Pentagon, what is known as a rehearsal concept drill, also called a rock drill. Is that right?

Secretary AUSTIN. That is correct.

Senator COTTON. That is pretty important, especially for such a significant decision as withdrawing from Afghanistan. Is that right?

Secretary AUSTIN. That is correct.

Senator COTTON. It has been reported that you attended, General Milley attended, Jake Sullivan attended, Bill Burns attended. Is that correct?

Secretary AUSTIN. That is correct.

Senator COTTON. Did Tony Blinken attend?

Secretary AUSTIN. His deputy attended, Senator.

Senator COTTON. His number two deputy, Wendy Sherman?

Secretary AUSTIN. No. Yes, McKeon.

Senator COTTON. His number three deputy, Brian McKeon. Do you know where Tony Blinken was on Saturday, May 8th?

Secretary AUSTIN. I do not. I do not.

Senator COTTON. Do you know if he used any DOD resources to travel between May 7th and May 10th?

Secretary AUSTIN. I can certainly find out, but that is not something I would—

Senator COTTON. Yes, I understand it is not right at your fingertips, but I think we could probably get it pretty quickly. I would like to know if Secretary Blinken used any DOD assets, whether aircraft or air bases, or personnel, air crews or ground crews, to travel between May 7, 2021, and May 10, 2021. Thank you for that.

Secretary Austin, who chose September 11th as the date by which we would withdraw from Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. I am not sure that—well, certainly that was not a military recommendation. But the military, when asked to provide an estimate of how long it would take to retrograde our people and equipment, that number fell in the range of possibly up to 120 days, but certainly much shorter than that if we were uncontested. As it turned out we were uncontested.

That date takes you to the end of August.

Senator COTTON. I am sorry, Secretary. My time is limited. So can you tell me who it was that directed you, the Secretary of Defense, that September 11th was the date by which you would complete the withdrawal?

Secretary AUSTIN. Nobody directed us that September 11th was the date that we would complete it. I think that was an objective that was laid out by the administration.

Senator COTTON. I believe that President announced that in mid-April, when he announced the decision. Someone had to come up with that date. You cannot recall who it was that recommended September 11th?

Secretary AUSTIN. That was not a military recommendation.

Senator COTTON. General Milley, is there any military significance to withdrawing by September 11th?

General MILLEY. I do not know who came up with it, but sure there is significance of September 11th.

Senator COTTON. General McKenzie, it has been reported by NBC News that you told Taliban leader Baradar, on August 15th, that if they took Kabul we would bomb them. They obviously took Kabul on August 15th. We did not bomb them. Is the report that you told them that correct?

General MCKENZIE. That report is incorrect.

Senator COTTON. It is incorrect. Thank you.

General McKenzie, why did we not conduct ground patrols into Kabul? The French did. The British did. The Germans did. We stepped outside the gates. We flew Chinooks out to police up our people. Why did we not conduct ground patrols?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, actually, I do not believe any of those nations conducted ground patrols into Kabul from HKIA. I believe that the British went out to what they call the Baron Hotel, which is a facility located about 150 meters off the HKIA compound, and they did business there. But no one conducted ground patrols from HKIA going out. In fact, I am very confident of that, based on—I looked into it with my commander on the ground, so I am quite confident when I make that assertion.

Senator COTTON. Thank you. Secretary Austin, one final question. Obviously, this is an issue on which many of our troops and our veterans feel very passionately, on both side of the issue. One of those servicemembers, Marine Colonel Stuart Scheller, posted a very critical video on social media last month, and he was received of his command for that posting. Media reports today indicate that he is being held in pretrial confinement. Why is that?

Secretary AUSTIN. I do not have any specifics of what caused him to be held in pretrial confinement, and I would certainly ask the Marines to provide that insight.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Cotton.

Senator King, please. Do you need a moment?

Senator KING. The discussion that we have had thus far today is a peculiar one about decisions, and the assumption seems to be that you could make a different decision, for example, on August 31st, and everything would have been okay and we would have gotten more people out.

My understanding, General Milley, is that it was your view that making that decision to go beyond August 31st—and I am using this as an example—would have had consequences which you and your colleagues judged would be far more damaging and dangerous to American lives than the decision to leave on August 31st, including being back at war with the Taliban, subject to terrorist attacks, and subject to perhaps airplanes being shot down by the Taliban. Am I right about this, where the risk calculus was?

General MILLEY. That is correct, Senator. We said risk to mission, risk to force, and risk to remaining American citizens in Afghanistan was going to go to extremely high, beginning 1 September if we stayed past 31st with United States military forces.

Senator KING. You used that term, “risk to mission, risk to force” as a kind of—that is a descriptive phrase. But we are talking about potentially hundreds of American lives, are we not?

General MILLEY. Well, when we talk risk to force, we are specifically talking casualties, killed and wounded, and our estimate, my estimate at the time—this is 25 August we are talking about—is if we go to war with the Taliban on the 1st of September—there were 6,000 Taliban and 56 checkpoints in Kabul at that time—we would have had to clear Kabul, we would have had to re-seize Bagram and the 30 miles of road between Bagram and Kabul. That would have taken a significant amount of force. You are looking at probably a core operation.

We probably, my guess, is that we would have had significant amounts of killed and wounded. Exact numbers are always imprecise when you are doing those kinds of estimates, but it would have been significant U.S. military killed and wounded, and the remaining American citizens would have been at greater risk.

Senator KING. You mentioned we would have had to have retaken Kabul. Then had 6,000 troops. As I remember discussions in this Committee when we were talking about retaking Mosul, the generally accepted rule of thumb is that it takes 10 troops to dislodge 1 in a city, that dislodging of troops in a city is very difficult and takes a large number of attacking troops. Is that correct?

General MILLEY. It is, but the disposition and composition of the Taliban in Kabul at that time was not the same as ISIS in Mosul. Mosul was a prepared defense. They were dug in. They were ready to go, underground positions, et cetera. The Taliban had just moved in. So it would have been not that level of fight that you saw in Mosul, but it still would have been significant—6,000 is 6,000—and you are in an urban area of about 5 million people. So it would have been a significant level of effort, and it would have resulted in significant U.S. casualties.

Senator KING. Thank you. Do you know—and I want to be clear on this. There was a deadline in the Doha agreement of March 10th for the beginning of negotiations. Did the administration, the former administration, make any objections or raise problems with the Taliban because of their failure to meet that deadline, or indeed, to ever meet that deadline in terms of negotiations with the Afghan Government?

General MILLEY. I do not have personal knowledge of that. Zal Khalizad might be a good one, or former Secretary of State, but I do not know personally know.

Senator KING. General McKenzie, I do not want to go over the same ground, but do you agree with General Milley that had we gone beyond August 31st, that decision was not just, oh, we are going to abandon Americans. It was, if we stay until September 1st we would have to make an additional troop commitment, and our troops would be at risk. Is that correct?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, that is exactly correct. Actually, in the meeting in the tank with the JCS I was the principal briefer who advanced that argument, and that does reflect my position.

Senator KING. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator King.

Senator Rounds, please.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

In listening to your testimony today, and I have appreciated the amount of effort that you put into being very clear with us, it seems to me that we have left a power void in central Asia that has already increased the threat of terrorism and has provided significant opportunities to our adversaries.

Secretary Austin, a little while ago you indicated that—and I believe your term was that if we would have had to have made an earlier withdrawal, perhaps in April or May, that it would have been very, very difficult to have had that completed in an orderly manner, and I think that is the way that you described it. Is that correct, sir?

Secretary AUSTIN. That is correct, sir.

Senator ROUNDS. I think also, sir, you would probably agree that the withdrawal on the August 30, August 31 deadline, was probably not an orderly—done in an orderly manner either, was it?

Secretary AUSTIN. There are two issues here, Senator, if I may. First of all, you will recall that we stated that General Miller planned for an orderly evacuation of people and retrograde of equipment. That plan was laid out, it was rehearsed, and it was executed so that by early July all of the equipment that we wanted to retrograde had been retrograded, and most of the people were out, except for a small element that was in around the embassy and on HKIA.

Senator ROUNDS. Mr. Secretary, the American people watched with horror on TV, during the last days in August, in which our young men and women in uniform not only died but they were in the middle of huge throngs of individuals desperately trying to get out. I do not believe that you would suggest that that was being completed in an orderly manner.

Secretary AUSTIN. No. So that is the second. The second operation was a non-combatant evacuation, which was—I think you heard me say early on, Senator, was—we had some challenging times early on. We recovered from that and were able to—

Senator ROUNDS. But Mr. Secretary, you would not consider that to have been done in an orderly manner, would you?

Secretary AUSTIN. I would say overall we endured challenges, but again, we were able to get out an enormous amount of people.

Senator ROUNDS. I do not disagree that the young men and women who wear the uniform of this country, on that particular, very challenging time period, did everything they could. But clearly it was not in an orderly manner. They were in a very disastrous, and I think we would all agree, a very deadly situation. Would you agree, sir?

Secretary AUSTIN. You heard me say so, Senator, that it was a very dangerous situation that we were in, and despite that they were able to fight through the challenges. Because of their heroic efforts, we were able to do what we did.

Senator ROUNDS. Mr. Secretary, the reason why I asked this is because I think not only American citizens saw this but I think our allies saw it as well, and I think what they saw was, first of all, that because of the date certain rather than a conditions-based withdrawal, because of a decision that was made by our President, because of that we left American citizens behind, and we did leave

Afghans behind who had served directly with our United States forces. It appears that many of them believe that we did not appropriately consult with them about our activities in a timely fashion.

Finally, to look at and to see American equipment being left there, even if it is not quite ready for use but most certainly there in the hands of the Taliban did not help our position with our allies, sir.

Let me just move on very quickly. General Milley, I have got just less than a minute left on this, and I just wanted to comment. I think your second statement in which you shared with the American people and with us today an expression of how, in a very unclassified way, how the nuclear chain of command works. Part of this—and some of us have had the opportunity to observe, in a tabletop exercise, how that actually works with the processes working their way through what the President on down and the questions that are asked and the responses required, and so forth. The 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) has some very specific exercise requirements that the White House and other members are required to follow through. Do you know if either President Trump or President Biden had the opportunity to do a tabletop exercise and actually listen to the questions that were going to be asked of them should there ever be the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons?

General MILLEY. I do not know if either one, President Trump or President Biden, has gone through that tabletop exercise.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you. Once again, thank you, gentlemen, for your service to our country.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Rounds.

Senator HIRONO, please.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Austin, my colleague, Senator Duckworth, mentioned the idea of an independent commission to evaluate what happened before, during, and after the war in Afghanistan. So, Secretary Austin, are you open to such an effort?

Secretary AUSTIN. Senator, I will always, as you would expect, always cooperate with my oversight committee.

Senator HIRONO. Yes, because I, for one, very much agree that this was a 20-year war and there were four Presidents involved, and I would like to ensure that there are some lessons learned from a 20-year forever war.

At the same time, I feel some of the Republicans have made a total about-face, a U-turn regarding the war. I thought that they wanted the war to end and they were very supportive of President Trump when he made the deal with the Taliban to get out. So there is that, and clearly there are lessons to be learned in terms of an evacuation, but I think the decision to get us out of this forever war was a good one.

Secretary Austin, the President—I want to move to a different topic—the President has touted the Afghanistan pullout as necessary to free up time and money to deal with near-peer competitors like Russia and China, but that stated rationale is somewhat, I think, at odds with the administration's budget, which fails to align funding priorities with the lines of effort identified in the

Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) Pacific Deterrence Initiative.

Secretary Austin, I have brought this up before when we had a posture hearing. So you do not have to get into it now, but I would very much appreciate the efforts and where we are in terms of meeting the five lines of effort under the Pacific Deterrence Initiative. Could you provide us with that?

Secretary AUSTIN. We can, and I would just add, Senator, that I have spent a fair amount of time with our combatant commander since we last talked. He has laid out his plans and his intent, and I am fully behind the effort that he wants to undertake. We look forward to discussing that with you.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you. Along those same lines, nuclear disarmament talks with North Korea remain stalled, and I am concerned that steps taken by the DOD, including zeroing out funding for the Homeland Defense Radar Hawaii, HDRH, and objecting, just last week, to congressional action to reauthorize funds to keep that program on track put Hawaii at risk in the near future.

What is DOD's credible alternative to HDRH Hawaii, going forward? This is the second time that Congress has had to put back money for that radar. So what is the alternative that the DOD has that will protect Hawaii?

Secretary AUSTIN. The capability that we currently have, Hawaii is protected, and again, this is an issue that we continue to look at. You can rest assured that Hawaii will not be unprotected.

Senator HIRONO. Well, I know that we are protected as of today. I am looking at the future.

So a lot of us have concerns about what is going to happen to the Afghani women and girls with the Taliban coming back. I would be interested, Secretary Austin, to hear your perspective about concrete steps the United States can take to influence a future for Afghan women and girls that honors their human rights and freedoms.

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, I certainly share your concern, Senator, and Taliban's track record on this is absolutely horrible. We will have to continue to—we will have to work to use economic levers and also international pressure to hold the Taliban accountable for some of the things that they said they are going to do. Again, I think this will have to be an international effort to maintain pressure on the Taliban.

Senator HIRONO. At some point I think we would like to know specifically what kind of international efforts are bearing fruit with regard to what the Taliban is doing with women and girls in their country.

Regarding our relationship with Pakistan, so I think I will submit that for the record, because I know we are trying to keep to 5 minutes. But the relationship with Pakistan going forward with regard to the Taliban.

Thank you.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Senator Hirono.

Senator ERNST, please.

Senator ERNST. Thank you, Mr. Chair. General Milley, in a previous round we established that the withdrawal achieved no security conditions other than an unconditional withdrawal. We had to

withdraw by a time certain, a date certain. These are yes-or-no questions, please, General Miller. Has the military's task to defeat terror threats from Afghanistan gotten harder?

General MILLEY. Yes.

Senator ERNST. Does the Taliban and its other terror partners have more ability to train and prepare in Afghanistan now that we have left?

General MILLEY. More ability, yes.

Senator ERNST. Has President Biden or his policy staff provided any—any—updated guidance or direction for countering terror from Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. Yes.

Senator ERNST. Are we at a greater or lesser risk of terror attack from Afghanistan as a result of our withdrawal?

General MILLEY. Too early to tell.

Senator ERNST. Too early to tell.

General MILLEY. Yes. I think we have got about—to elaborate a little bit, we have probably got about 6 months here to really sort this out and see which direction things are going to go. It is not much time, but that is my personal estimate. It could be out to 12, and then we are going to have some indicators and warnings of what direction this is going to go. But that is where I would put it.

Senator ERNST. In the previous round—and this is a comment—but in the previous round each of you had admitted that your best recommendation was to leave a residual force in Afghanistan. Clearly the President disregarded that opinion, that recommendation, that advice. I do believe that this has left us less safe.

A number of my colleagues have mentioned over-the-horizon. General McKenzie, you referenced the fact that we do not know yet how effective that will be. We do not have partners on the ground. We talked about the airspace that would have to be used for over-the-horizon capabilities.

There is still a terrorist threat in Afghanistan. Now on August 20th, President Biden had stated, “What interest do we have in Afghanistan at this point with al Qaeda gone?” First, I did not recognize that al Qaeda was gone. General McKenzie, is al Qaeda gone?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, al Qaeda still maintains a presence in Afghanistan.

Senator ERNST. Secretary Blinken had said, on August 22nd, that “the threat of terrorism metastasized out of Afghanistan a long time ago.” General McKenzie, is there any terrorist threat in Afghanistan now?

General MCKENZIE. What we see is ISIS nearly rejuvenated with the prisoners that came out of Harwan and Pul-e-Charkhi prison. They are gathering their strength. We have yet to see how that is going to manifest itself. But we know for a certainty that they do aspire to attack us in our Homeland, and we know the same for al Qaeda. So that threat, it has metastasized, and it is resonant in other parts of the world. In my part of the world, though, it certainly is in Afghanistan.

Senator ERNST. Yes, and it has been reported that the top 22 officials of the new Taliban Government are known associates of al Qaeda, including five terrorists who were once imprisoned at Guan-

tanamo Bay, and 13 more who were sanctioned by the U.N., the United Nations, as terrorists post-9/11. I am very alarmed, Secretary Austin, that your Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Colin Kahl, claims there is a minimal threat. He called the terror threat from Afghanistan “insignificant” on a call with Senators less than a month ago.

He is wrong. I think all of you would admit he is wrong. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director even said that he was wrong last week. He is in denial or he is lying. I would hope that his testimony and comments are not indicative of your own thoughts, and if they are different, I just truly hope they are. Let us just leave it at that.

So if the Department of Defense cannot get their lead policy official off the couch, which is where he told me he was during closed testimony last week, that he was sitting on the couch, he did not really care what General Miller’s opinion was, if that is the type of thought process that we put into decisions that are made at the Department of Defense, with this lead policy official, maybe he needs to go back to the couch.

I do think that there is still a threat in Afghanistan. I think we all need to acknowledge that, recognize it. al Qaeda is not gone. I hope we all make that very clear to the President. We will have to have additional discussions about over-the-horizon as things develop in the upcoming months.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Ernst.

Now let me recognize Senator Gillibrand, please.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In continuing on my line of questions from the first round, Secretary Austin and General Milley, are you aware of any internal audits that are being conducted within the Department of Defense on the execution of the war over the last 20 years?

Secretary AUSTIN. I am not, other than the after action review (AAR) activity that we will conduct within the Department.

Senator GILLIBRAND. What is that?

Secretary AUSTIN. After-action review.

Senator GILLIBRAND. What will make up that review?

Secretary AUSTIN. We will focus on the things that have occurred as a part of this latest operation. But I think your initial question was is there a review of the last 20 years—

Senator GILLIBRAND. Correct.

Secretary AUSTIN.—and the answer to that is no.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Do you think a review of broad scope would be useful to the DOD and useful to policymakers in the future, particularly this Committee?

Secretary AUSTIN. I do, Senator, and I also think that, as I mentioned earlier, that that should have an interagency flavor as well.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Do you have any recommendations for an external independent review of the war in Afghanistan. For example, what do you think Congress’ role should be and how would such an audit be conducted? What U.S. agencies, countries, and organizations should be included in the review of America’s longest war?

Secretary AUSTIN. Yes, I do not have any recommendations at this point. I can certainly take that for the record, Senator.

Senator GILLIBRAND. I would be grateful for that.

Secretary Austin and General Milley, this is something that hits a little closer to home. A number of our diplomats, intelligence officers, and servicemembers who assisted with evacuation, including the 10th Mountain Division from Fort Drum, New York, were subjected to acute trauma and chronic stress, a problem we are not unfamiliar with after the last 20 years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Families at Fort Drum have told my office it felt like a full deployment compressed into the time of a few weeks. Further, so many of our servicemembers have lost their lives to suicide, which has been devastating. What is DOD doing to ensure that our combat veterans and their families are getting adequate mental health assessment and the resources they need?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, thanks, Senator. I will make a comment and I will let General Milley comment as well. I think you asked him as well.

But you have heard me say before that, you know, my belief is that mental health is health, period, and there should be no stigma associated with seeking help if you are dealing with issues. I have encouraged the entire force, all of our leadership, to make sure that, number one, we have adequate resources available for our troops and our families, and number two, that they destigmatize the issue of assisting help with mental health issues.

General MILLEY. Senator, as you know, I commanded the 10th Mountain Division, as well as Secretary Austin at one point, and that division is one of the most deployed divisions, along with the 101st Airborne Division out of Senator Blackburn's state. There is significant mental health capability there to help the soldiers that were on this non-combatant evacuation, and they will get immediate assessments upon redeployment. It is the normal procedure. Then those that need counseling, it is there.

The key that we have to do is emphasize a culture of non-stigmatizing any sort of mental health issues that a soldier, sailor, airman, or marine have, and so that they feel free they can seek out the counseling we have available.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you. I would like to follow up on the line of questioning that Senator Ernst started. Can you describe for us the al Qaeda threat today—where it is located, where you believe it will be going, what the strength is compared to the strength over the last 20 years? Please answer the question for ISIS, ISIS-K and other variations of ISIS across the world.

General MILLEY. You are asking me, Senator?

Senator GILLIBRAND. Yes. General Milley first and then Secretary Austin.

General MILLEY. Okay. So first, I think it would be good to handle it in some detail in the classified session, but in an unclassified session I would say that the al Qaeda threat, globally, is still there. The threat in Afghanistan has an opportunity now to potentially reconstitute, although it has been ripped apart pretty steadily over 20 years. Al Qaeda has displaced to other parts of the world, with their affiliates in East Africa, for example, al-Shabab, or al Qaeda

in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) down in Yemen, also in the Maghreb, et cetera.

So there are several affiliates worldwide, some of which are quite capable and definitely have aspirations to attack the United States.

With respect to ISIS, we saw ISIS core in Iraq and Iran and all that. That was all ripped apart, but they still exist up there, by the way. ISIS has found a new home in parts of Afghanistan, although right now they are at war, essentially, with the Taliban. But ISIS has affiliates as well, in other parts of the world, because of their brutality.

So there are other regions of the world which have high concentrations of very lethal terrorist organizations that have aspirations to conduct operations against the United States, and we have operations and intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), et cetera, in all of those parts, to continue to watch that. But it has moved in various parts, and we can cover that in some detail in the classified session, if that is okay.

Senator GILLIBRAND. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will pursue both questions in the classified setting.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Gillibrand.

Senator Tillis, please.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley and General McKenzie, I ran out of time before I could thank you for some of the work that your staff did in August. We were working several cases. I was involved. I remember a conversation with one of your staff, General McKenzie, at about 3:00 in the morning, while we were trying to shepherd someone out, and we did get them out successfully, along with some American citizens.

But unfortunately we have a much longer list of people that we were not successful with getting out. Between SIV holders and family members, my office alone has over 900 people still on a list of people who are still in Afghanistan. We communicate with these people through WhatsApp. We were trying to shepherd them to HKIA and then back and forth, and ultimately operations were shut down and they were stranded and left behind.

So what role—and, Secretary Austin, maybe I will start with you—what role, if any—and actually, before I ask that, on the mental health issue, we were working with a marine who was trying to get an interpreter out, had been maintaining contact for years. We had all the authenticating documentation. We were not successful in that case. That marine committed suicide about 3 weeks ago, a retired marine. So this is having real-life consequences, not only in Afghanistan but here in the United States.

So, Secretary Austin, what role, if any, does the DOD play in helping us draw down this list of people that we believe we have documentation that suggests they should somehow get shepherded out of Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. Senator, first of all, my deepest condolences on the loss of our marine. I am really saddened to hear that. Thoughts and prayers to his family.

DOD continues to work as a part of the cell that you may have heard me mentioned earlier, that is actually run, or headed up by the State Department, and Ambassador John Bass is running that.

We are trying to pull in as much information from every corner that we can and refine lists, and refine contact information so that we can reach out and make sure that people have the right credentials to be able to leave the country.

We continue to work as a part of the State effort on this issue.

Senator TILLIS. I think it would be helpful to find out what our point of contact was. It was literally me reaching somebody to see if they could help me or moving it up the chain of command to where I was able to personally intervene in several cases.

General Milley and General McKenzie, some people have said we are glad that we have ended this war. Is the war on terror over? General Milley?

General MILLEY. Absolutely not.

Senator TILLIS. General McKenzie?

General MCKENZIE. The war on terror is not over, and the war in Afghanistan is not over either.

Senator TILLIS. Has the exit from Afghanistan made the war more challenging for us or less challenging, with respect to continuing to try and protect the Homeland and United States interests abroad?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, it has made it more challenging.

Senator TILLIS. General Milley, do you agree?

General MILLEY. Yes, absolutely.

Senator TILLIS. A related note. A Wall Street Journal article published on August 31st said, "United States official acknowledge the military has lost 90 percent of the intelligence collection capabilities it had using drones before the drawdown." Do you agree with that?

General MILLEY. I did not see the report. It said—say again what it said?

Senator TILLIS. It said that we have lost 90 percent of our intelligence collection capabilities it had using drones before the drawdown.

General MILLEY. I would have to go look at the actual math. I have got my J-2 actually doing that right now, to determine the level of ISR assets and the statistics. It is significant. I do not know if it is 90 percent.

Senator TILLIS. On the SIVs and folks that are stranded in Afghanistan, is it fair to say that our human intelligence network, given the current status and fact that many were left behind, is it fair to say that that has been stressed even more so than our drone surveillance capabilities? I mean, do we have much in the way of human intelligence on the ground in Afghanistan today?

General MILLEY. We can explain that, I think, in good detail in a classified session—

Senator TILLIS. Okay.

General MILLEY.—but there is still, yes.

Senator TILLIS. Back to Secretary Austin, I think it is so important for us to show that we are going to move heaven and earth to try and get these other out of Afghanistan, because this not only has an impact in Afghanistan, it has an impact anywhere. SIVs are not unique to Afghanistan. People working with us, human intelligence on the ground keeping our forces safe, is something that standard operating procedure in a lot of dangerous areas.

So I hope that we recognize that we owe it to the people of Afghanistan, but we owe it to our men and women in uniform to get this right. Thank you.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Tillis.

Now let me recognize Senator Warren.

Senator WARREN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General Milley, our military executed a massive operation during the month of August. As I understand it, it was larger than the Berlin airlift. For the record, can you just tell us how many Americans you evacuated?

General MILLEY. Almost 6,000. I can get you a precise number for the record, but it was about 6,000.

Senator WARREN. Let us get the right number for the record, but that is helpful. How many people, in total, did the United States and coalition forces evacuate?

General MILLEY. One hundred twenty-four thousand total. Forty-four thousand went out on non-U.S. aircraft and the rest came out on U.S. aircraft.

Senator WARREN. Okay. An extraordinary effort, but still it is hard to get everyone out.

General MILLEY. The largest airlift in history.

Senator WARREN. Right. Hard to get everyone out. One problem, of course, is that there were so many Afghan SIV applicants in Kabul waiting to be evacuated because the Trump administration had essentially shut the program down.

Withdrawal was a massive operation, conducted in a chaotic, unpredictable environment, and some people have criticized you for leaving on August 31st. But I just want to explore that for a minute. General Milley, once the Afghan Government collapsed in August, would you say that staying past the date of their collapse would have exposed the force on the ground to substantial and additional risk?

General MILLEY. Yes, and that is exactly what we assessed, that if we stayed past the 31st the risk to force, U.S. military casualties, the risk to the mission, the ability to continue to execute the NEO, and most importantly, the risk to the Americans citizens that are still there was going to go to, we assess, very high levels, and we thought that that was a level of risk that was unacceptable.

Senator WARREN. Okay, and just so I am sure and everybody has got this on the record, so if we had stayed another week or two or three then it is likely there would have been another attack that killed American servicemembers. Is that what you are saying?

General MILLEY. I would say that that is a near certainty.

Senator WARREN. All right. For years, we poured money into the Afghan Government, and for years we trained their army, we outfitted them with all the best American equipment, we provided them with overwhelming air power. Even so, both the Afghan Government and the army collapsed almost instantaneously. So General Milley, let me ask you, given how quickly the Afghan Government and the Afghan army collapsed, do you think that either or both would have been able to stand on their own with just another few months or another few years of American assistance and training?

General MILLEY. I think at this point that is unknowable, but my estimate at the time was if you kept advisors there, kept money

flowing, et cetera, that we probably could have sustained them for a lengthy or indefinite period of time. Whether or not you would have had a different result at the end of the day that is a different question.

Senator WARREN. You know, when I hear you say that it reminds me of all the years that I have sat now in the Senate Armed Services Committee and how many times the generals have come in front of us, and when you point out every way in which the Afghan Government was failing and Afghan army was failing, the generals respond with, "But we are turning the corner now."

General MILLEY. I did not say we were turning the corner, Senator. I said we could sustain them.

Senator WARREN. That we would be able to keep them, and somehow, when we got ready to withdraw, they would be so well sustained that they would not have collapsed instantaneously, the way they did after 20 years of sustenance and training?

General MILLEY. Well, I think the end state probably would have been the same no matter when you did it.

Senator WARREN. Well, you know, I believe that leaving a force behind would have necessitated that force staying indefinitely.

General MILLEY. That is right.

Senator WARREN. Many of those servicemembers would have been exposed to unnecessary risk and harm.

General MILLEY. That is exactly right.

Senator WARREN. We agree, and I also just want to say, this week we will have our fifth hearing on Afghanistan in the 8 months since President Biden took office. During the Trump years, as the Afghan Government and the Afghan Army racked up one failure after another, the Republicans seemed far less interested in this topic, holding one public hearing a year. The Republicans' sudden interest in Afghanistan is plain old politics. It is not the kind of oversight that we should have been exercising in years past.

So thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this hearing.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Senator Warren.

Senator Sullivan, please.

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and just to my colleague's statement, it is a little bit rich coming from one of my colleagues on this committee who wants to gut the military and its readiness. But that is a whole other issue.

I want to get back to my line of questioning from this morning, and I will tell you again, gentlemen, I have never seen so much anger, at least from my constituents, who witnesses a fiasco, a humiliation, a President who is consistently telling falsehoods to the American people and the issues that there is no accountability.

You, gentlemen, have spent decades serving your country, honorably in combat. I have the utmost respect for your service, your fidelity to America. Importantly, you have dedicated your lives to an institution that has a culture of strict accountability and responsibility up and down the ranks. I mentioned a few examples this morning, the collisions of the USS *McCain* and *Fitzgerald*. Everybody up and down the ranks, including the three-star admiral, was relieved. The recent, very tragic, Marine Assault Amphibious Vehicle (AAV) accident—everybody up and down the ranks, including the commanding general of the 1st Marine Division was relieved.

If you are a Marine or Army second lieutenant training your platoon on patrol and one of your soldiers loses his night vision goggles (NVGs) or his rifle, that lieutenant is going to get relieved.

But on this issue, one of the biggest national security fiascos in a generation, no one is accountable, and the American people are livid because they saw it. They see it. They know it is a debacle.

General Milley, this morning you called the Afghan retrograde a logistical success but, quote, “a strategic failure.” I appreciate your honest assessment. I believe the President of the United States is solely responsible for this.

Mr. Secretary, do you know if anyone—the National Security Advisor, the Secretary of State, or Under Secretary for Policy of DOD—has offered their resignation to take responsible for this fiasco?

Secretary AUSTIN. I do not.

Senator SULLIVAN. Okay.

Secretary AUSTIN. I do not, but I do not believe they have.

Senator SULLIVAN. Okay. Thank you. Given the military culture of accountability that all of you gentlemen come from—and again, I respect that more than almost anybody—have any of you offered your resignation to the President at any time since his decision to withdraw? General Milley, I understand your earlier answer to this question that senior military advisors and officers cannot resign every time they disagree with the President. I actually agree with that. But after the President’s decision, when the American people see such a strategic failure, as you called it, that is undermining our national security, they expect accountability, and there has been none. So have any of you accepted that accountability or responsibility?

General MILLEY. I am accountable for my actions, and—

Senator SULLIVAN. No. I am just talking about a resignation.

General MILLEY. I have not submitted my letter of resignation.

Senator SULLIVAN. Mr. Secretary?

Secretary AUSTIN. No.

Senator SULLIVAN. General?

General MCKENZIE. I have not submitted a letter of resignation.

Senator SULLIVAN. Mr. Secretary, I want to know, what will it take for someone, anyone, in the Biden administration to take responsibility or accountability for this national security fiasco? Anyone.

Secretary AUSTIN. Senator, from a DOD perspective, again, you heard me say that we will continue to review our actions, and we will not hesitate to be critical of ourselves. If there is someone that should be held accountable for an action then we will certainly do that.

Senator SULLIVAN. I want to switch topics here very quickly. General Milley, do you think if the Chinese Communist Party decided to invade Taiwan, would their military leadership call and give you a heads-up?

General MILLEY. I think there would be a period of increased tension, indicators, and warnings, and I think there would be an exchange of various communications at all levels, Department of State and—

Senator SULLIVAN. Do you really think—

General MILLEY.—and I think——

Senator SULLIVAN. Do you really think the Chinese Communist Party, head of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), would call and say, "Hey, General, FYI [for your information], we are going to get ready to invade Taiwan. I just thought I would give you a heads-up"? Do you honestly think that?

General MILLEY. I know I would call him and ask him.

Senator SULLIVAN. No, I am asking——

General MILLEY. I would call him and ask him outright.

Senator SULLIVAN. Do you think he would give you a heads-up——

General MILLEY. I think——

Senator SULLIVAN.—on the invasion of Taiwan?

General MILLEY.—I think an invasion of Taiwan would be a fairly obvious thing to pick up on, and there would be a lot of communications——

Senator SULLIVAN. No, that is not what I asked.

General MILLEY.—going back and forth.

Senator SULLIVAN. Let me ask a related question.

General MILLEY. Sure.

Senator SULLIVAN. I think the answer to that is no. I think if the PLA called you and said, "Hey, we are getting ready to invade Taiwan," and Xi Jinping found out about it, he would be shot. But let me ask a related question.

You said you were, quote, "certain that President Trump did not intend on attacking China." That is what you just said.

General MILLEY. That is correct.

Senator SULLIVAN. Yet you are quoted in the Woodward book as telling the top Chinese communist military commander, quote, "If we are going to attack, I am going to call you ahead of time." Is that true, General Milley?

General MILLEY. Let me tell you what I actually said.

Senator SULLIVAN. So that is not true. I hope that is not true.

General MILLEY. Let me tell you what I actually said, Senator. What I said, if there is going to be a war, if there is going to be an attack, there are going to be a lot of calls and tension ahead of time.

Senator SULLIVAN. But what you——

General MILLEY. You are going to get calls.

Senator SULLIVAN.—said in your testimony was that you were——

General MILLEY. You are going to get calls.

Senator SULLIVAN.—you thought President Trump would not attack. That was your testimony this morning.

General MILLEY. That is true. That is absolutely true.

Senator SULLIVAN. Okay. Then why would you——

General MILLEY. I was communicating to my Chinese counterpart on instructions, by the way, to de-escalate the situation, and I told him that we are not going to attack. President Trump has no intent to attack. I told him that repeatedly, and I told him if there was going to be an attack there will be plenty of communications going back and forth, your intel systems are going to pick it up. I said, "I will probably call you. Everybody will be calling you.

We are not going to attack you. Just settle down. It is not going to happen." I did it twice, in October and January.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Sullivan.

Senator SULLIVAN. You are giving a heads-up to the Chinese Communist Party—

General MILLEY. I did not give him a heads-up we were going to attack because we were not going to attack. I was telling him we were not going to attack—

Senator SULLIVAN. If we are going to attack I am going to call you ahead of time.

Chairman REED. Senator Sullivan?

General MILLEY.—which was the President of the United States' intent.

Chairman REED. Time.

General MILLEY. I was being faithful to his intent, Senator.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much.

Senator Peters, please.

Senator PETERS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Austin, in your confirmation hearing you spoke focusing on our shared interest with Pakistan. A readout from your August call with Pakistan's chief of army staff contained some similar language that you expressed.

My question to you, could you please elaborate for this Committee on what you view as our shared interest with Pakistan today? I am particularly in how this relates with the Pakistani Government's relationship with the Taliban, now that the Taliban are in power in Afghanistan.

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, thanks, Senator. I think that one key shared interest is the prevention of a humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan or in the region, and so I think we will continue to share that interest. I do think there is some intersection in terms of certain types of terrorist activity that I think we can both remain focused on. Again, an in-depth conversation about Pakistan probably would be better suited in a closed hearing.

Senator PETERS. Very well. I understand that there were certain airplanes, helicopters, and ground vehicles that were disabled as forces left and as the Afghan forces were overrun. Right now I do not want to talk about the operability of a Humvee or an MRAP or the pictures we saw of Taliban sitting on grounded C-130s. What concerns me more is the potential for our strategic adversaries to have some time and space to examine the technology inside those vehicles, to find vulnerabilities. Even if a system has been disabled, in some ways destroyed, reverse engineering can still be used on those systems and can provide information to sophisticated adversaries that may get a hold of this. As all of you know, we harden our supply chains to protect military technology. It is a matter of national security.

So my question for you, Secretary Austin, is the Department now conducting an extensive counterintelligence assessment of equipment to get a sense of what might be reverse engineered and how do we protect against any use of that information against our forces?

Secretary AUSTIN. We will continue to assess what is exploitable, Senator. I would flag for you that all of this equipment is not high-

end equipment. Again, equipment that we had for our use was retrograded as General Miller drew down the retrograded equipment and drew down our forces.

I would also like to flag for you, sir, that while the number, \$84 billion, has been bounced about quite a bit, that is the number that we invested in Afghan Security Forces over a 20-year period of time, and less than 20 percent of that was dedicated towards Afghan equipment. Most of that money was focused on sustainment and salaries and those types of things.

Senator PETERS. General McKenzie, if you could go back in time and change one thing about the strategy in the last 6 months of operations in Afghanistan, which could have alleviated some of the chaos that we saw at the end, what would it be?

General MCKENZIE. In the last 6 months, Senator, would of course infer that decisions made were going to zero. I go back to, could we have gotten more people out earlier in the process. By that I mean U.S. citizens, and I know the embassy put out at least a dozen notices to U.S. citizens to leave. I know that the ambassador was very aggressive on that. But I would have liked to maybe have seen done more there, more done in that regard.

Additionally perhaps to try to get more of the SIV population out. But, Senator, I think we need to recognize that if you are asking the Afghans to fight, and, at the same time you are bringing out the best and the brightest, that is clearly a conflicting message that you are sending them. So I do not say that lightly or recognize there would not be inherent risk in taking that course of action.

Senator PETERS. So there would have been risk doing those things.

General MCKENZIE. There would have been, in my judgment, yes, but that is the way that we could have been more forceful with our citizens, although there are very strict limitations on what you can say or do to an American citizen abroad, for good reason. So I think, you know, you have got to trust the good judgment of the people, of the American citizens that are in Afghanistan.

Senator PETERS. Right. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Peters.

Senator Cramer, please.

Senator CRAMER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Secretary Austin, why did the Committee not get the testimony for today until 10:35 last night? Were you guys not prepared?

Secretary AUSTIN. We were prepared, and again, I do not know the specifics of what last-minute adjustments were being made at what level. But we were prepared.

Senator CRAMER. Well, it must not have been a level below you then or you would be aware of it, right? So it would have to be a level above you. In other words, did the White House withhold your testimony? General Milley, did you have your testimony done before 10:35 last night?

General MILLEY. We did, but the White House was not withholding my testimony, no.

Senator CRAMER. Who was?

General MILLEY. Nobody. You have to submit—when you submit written documents, as you well know, you have to submit them to Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

Senator CRAMER. Right.

General MILLEY. They reviewed them in the afternoon. We got them back, I do not know, 1800, 1900, something like that, and then we made the changes and submitted them, and yes, we were late.

Senator CRAMER. But it was not you?

General MILLEY. No.

Senator CRAMER. It was OMB—

General MILLEY. There was not any intent to block.

Senator CRAMER. Yes. It was somebody's strategy, is my guess. It just might not have been yours. But it clearly was somebody's.

General McKenzie, about a half hour ago you said, "We know for certain ISIS intends to attack us at home," or something to that effect, right? Is that correct?

General MCKENZIE. That is correct.

Senator CRAMER. So 20 years ago, on September 11th, when the terrorist hijackers took over four aircraft and attacked the Homeland, all of them came here on a visa. Correct? Now in the last 20 years, Al Qaeda, ISIS, Taliban, they have not acquired intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) or a navy or an air force, as far as we know. So if they are going to carry out that intent they are going to have to get here themselves, and that means either through a visa program or as refugees across the southern border.

My question to all of you is, is not national security tied directly to good immigration security, and do you feel like we are adequately prepared to protect the Homeland from visa holders and refugees?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, in the case of ISIS I think we have done a remarkable job over the last 2 decades about hardening the entry process and making it very difficult for them to get their agents into the United States, and that is a matter of record, just based on performance. The same thing with AQ. The larger discussion about immigration I would defer to the Secretary in the Department.

Senator CRAMER. But I would submit to you that as good as the work that has been done in the last 20 years, the last 6 or 7 months it has been pretty well degraded, I would say. Others? Is immigration policy pretty important to national security?

Secretary AUSTIN. It absolutely is, Senator, and again, I would not want to—again, that is the domain of Secretary Mayorkas, and I know that he and the interagency are continuing to work that very hard.

Senator CRAMER. All right. According to a CENTCOM press release, General—this is a quote—"Post-strike reflections indicate that Kabir Aidi was directly connected to the ISIS-K leaders that coordinated the August 26th attack at the airport." The way I read that the actual ISIS-K leaders who coordinated the attack are still out there. Is that true?

General MCKENZIE. I would prefer to talk about it in a private setting.

Senator CRAMER. I thought you might. I look forward to that and I yield back.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Senator Cramer.

Now let me recognize Senator Duckworth, please.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary, I just wanted to say thank you. I just received a letter this morning in response to a letter I had written to you and Secretary Blinken asking about the process of certifying that somebody did work for the DOD as a contractor, and I do want to say that the response is a good one. I think you have made, with regards to Project Rabbit, which I will give you a couple of minutes to talk about, but it seems that you have reviewed over 7,800 employment records and matched over 3,400 of those PRECOM applicants. Would you like to talk about Operation Rabbit for just a little bit?

Secretary AUSTIN. Well, only to say that, I mentioned earlier, Senator, that when this question came up that this is important to us. We think we have to do everything we can to shorten the amount of time that it takes for somebody who has worked with us before to be able to verify that they have worked with us. We are going to continue to work on this, and again, one of my major directorates is focused on this. We will work with the Committee on this if you have further requirements. But thanks for your support in this regard.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, and I know each one of us probably does have folks who have contacted our office seeking help in verifying their employment as a contractor, not just under DOD but also with State.

I would like to shift gears a little bit and talk about Mark Frerichs. Although military operations have ended, an Illinoisian and a veteran of the United States Navy, Mr. Mark Frerichs is still being held hostage in Afghanistan. He was abducted in Kabul on January 31st of last year, and while he has been held captive too long, recent reporting in Newsweek indicates Taliban willingness to engage on his release.

Anas Haqqani, a senior Taliban official, confirmed that United States and Taliban negotiators have discussed my constituents and said about the prospect of a deal to secure Mr. Frerichs' freedom, quote, "There are attempts between the political bureau and the United States envoy which we hope will be successful in this regards. We must continue to press for Mr. Frerichs' swift and safe return. This must be a priority for our Government." In August, a Pentagon spokesperson stated the DOD is laser-focused on returning him home safely to his family and where he belongs.

Secretary Austin, I know from our numerous conversations, including just yesterday, about my constituent, that you have been personally involved in attempting to secure his return, both in your engagements with your counterparts in the region and your role as a member of the Principals Committee at the National Security Council.

Can you please update me on your discussions regarding Mr. Frerichs with your foreign counterparts as well as your interagency partners in our Government? I know his family is probably watching this testimony today.

Secretary AUSTIN. As you have indicated, Senator, I want him back, and we are going to continue to do everything we can to get him back. As you and I have talked in other sessions, I have en-

gaged the chief of the Pakistani army on multiple occasions to solicit his help. I have engaged other senior leadership, Qataris, for example, to use their influence to see if they can help us there.

We will remain focused on this. I am hopeful that we could see some daylight, some movement here in the future. I do not have anything to offer you in terms of specific readouts from the inter-agency process, and I defer to Mr. Sullivan to provide commentary there.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Mr. Secretary, and I appreciate your commitment to getting Mr. Frerichs home.

I am, however, frustrated by how little information there has been made available to congressional staff and others when it comes to everyone who is trying to get allies out of Afghanistan. General Milley, I understand from public reporting that you have been working with some veterans groups and some other NGOs who have been voluntarily offering their help in the continued effort to evacuate Americans and at-risk Afghans from Afghanistan. Can you share any details with us and the public today about that effort?

General MILLEY. Yes, so what we did, Senator, is we did a little bit of outreach to some of the groups that are probably well-known to folks in this room, had them in for some sessions in the Defense Department to get coordinated so we could have a common operating picture of what SIVs, what P-1, P-2s, and what American citizens, most importantly, are still there, try to get the information in a single database, et cetera, from the various groups.

In addition to that, get them linked into Ambassador Bass, because he is the single focal point with the Department of State, which we have done that now. We have a joint staff general officer who is involved in that working group with them, and he is our liaison and brings them all together in order to get all the information, in order to develop course of action to help bring out additional American citizens and others.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you. Will you commit to communicating with me and all of Congress about this partnership so we can help facilitate the connections with these people who still remain at risk and are contacting us through our various offices?

General MILLEY. I will. It is being run by the Department of State, but I will work with the Department of State to make sure that they get it over to you, yes.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Duckworth.

Let me recognize Senator Scott, please.

Senator SCOTT. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley, why would you, as the sitting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, talk to a reporter that is writing a book about a prior administration? Why would that be part of your job description?

General MILLEY. Well, as Senator Blackburn said earlier, I deal with the media routinely. Two, three, four times a week I am talking to the media, and the media, whether it is books, TV news, reporters, we have a lot of media here, I think it is very, very important to make sure that senior officials talk to the media in all of its various forms in order to explain what we are doing.

Senator SCOTT. But you are talking about what happened in the past.

General MILLEY. Sure, past—

Senator SCOTT. Why would you do that? I mean, what is the upside to the American public of you talking to—you have sensitive information—

General MILLEY. Sure.

Senator SCOTT.—you have a full-time job, and then you go and talk about the prior administration. I just do not get it. It does not make any sense to me. If the media wants to ask you about what we are doing right now, something like that, I get it, but the prior administration, why would you do that?

General MILLEY. I think it is important to make sure that the American people are transparent with what our Government does. That is all. Nothing more complicated than that.

Senator SCOTT. So it has been reported you discussed sensitive information, including private conversations you had with the prior President with these reporters. How is that consistent with your testimony today that you will not talk about any conversations you have had with the President. You will only talk about what your position is. But it has been reported, by these reporters, that you have told them exactly the conversations you had with the prior President. Does that seem inconsistent?

General MILLEY. I am not so sure about what they are reporting about what I said in private conversations, et cetera. I do not share private conversations with the President, with this President, former President, any President, period.

Senator SCOTT. So what these reporters are saying is completely untrue.

General MILLEY. I am not going to say whether they are—I do not even know what they have written. I have not read their books. But I can tell you that I do not share my personal conversations with the President, period.

Senator SCOTT. Senator Sullivan was asking about this conversation about whether you would give prior notice to the military in Communist China that America was going to attack. So is it your testimony you will not ever give a heads-up to the Communist Chinese military if the President of the United States—it does not matter who the President is that you are reporting—is ready to attack?

General MILLEY. Of course I would not.

Senator SCOTT. I mean, you do not feel like you did that at all?

General MILLEY. No. The context we were talking about, Senator, there was a significant degree of intelligence, and I think I put the unclassified versions in that timeline. It is not insignificant. It is not like one report or two. It is an entire body of intelligence that led us to believe that the Chinese were misinterpreting our actions and misinterpreting what was happening inside our own country, politically, and they were assessing a situation that was leading to escalation, possible incident, and it would have been quite dangerous.

Secretary Esper and I met, and we met with other members of the team, and we developed an engagement plan to ensure that we engaged at various levels. Secretary Esper had his Deputy Assist-

ant Secretary of Defense (DASD) do it and he asked me to do it, so I did that. I made a call, and the theme was to de-escalate, to lower tensions. I believe that is a faithful and loyal execution of my constitutional responsibilities, and I believe that was faithfully executing the intent of the President of the United States at the time, because I knew—I knew, with certainty, that President Trump was not going to attack the Chinese, just out of the blue. It was not going to happen. If things did happen there would be periods of tension, calls going back and forth.

Senator SCOTT. I have one more question. It has been reported that you had concerns about the prior President's fitness for office. Do you have a criteria for Presidents, and have you reviewed the existing President, President Biden, for his fitness for office, or do you think that way? Do you think you have the ability to have a right to make those decisions, and have you been doing that?

General MILLEY. I am not qualified to evaluate the mental fitness or the health of the former President, present President, or anybody else, or anybody in this room. That is not my job. That is not what I do, and that is not what I did. There was a lot of speculation going on, but I do not evaluate people's health and fitness. That is not my job.

Senator SCOTT. Okay. How did you feel when President Biden attacked the willingness of the Afghan military to fight? How did that make you feel?

General MILLEY. How did I feel—

Senator SCOTT. Yeah, when he went and attacked—he said he did not think the Afghan military had the willingness to fight. As a military officer, how does that make you feel? I mean, something that you put your life on the line—

General MILLEY. I think the Afghan military sacrificed—I mean, there were 60,000 or 70,000 Afghans that were killed in action over the last 20 years, defending their country, and I personally have witnessed to units that fought, fought well, and fought bravely, and gave their life for their country. But I would also say, at the same time, that over the summer, in those 11 days, the vast majority of the Afghan units put their weapons down, and they surrendered without a fight. Kabul was taken with a couple hundred guys on motorcycles and there was not a shot fired.

So my question to myself is how did we miss that? What happened? How did that happen? That is one of the things we have got to figure out. How is it that an army of that size—they were trained, they were manned, they were equipped, et cetera—how is it that the factors of will and leadership and morale just collapsed like that? We have to answer that to ourselves. But the Afghan army fought for their country for 20 years and lost a lot of people.

Senator SCOTT. Thank you, Chairman.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Scott.

Senator ROSEN, please.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank for being here with us throughout this long day.

I just want to speak about how, as Americans, we are really frustrated, all of us, about the way we withdrew from Afghanistan, but we, nonetheless, understand the difficult position that you and our

men and women in uniform, on the ground, were, the position you were in last month.

So what the American people fail to understand, however, and what I, too, have difficulty accepting, is the idea that the circumstances we found ourselves in were inevitable. So I would like to ask about a few areas where perhaps we might have taken a different approach that could have given us more time to accomplish the mission.

General McKenzie, why was it always the responsibility of the United States and coalition forces or contractors to maintain Afghan aircraft and equipment, and why were the Afghan forces either not trained or not given this responsibility over the last 20 years?

General MCKENZIE. I think you begin with the basic technological literacy of the country, which began when we first had dealing with them, in 2001. You are talking to people who are coming out of rule by the Taliban, in position of Sharia law, a Stone Age approach to these things. You cannot impose technological literacy quickly. So that is why it took a long time, and we were still not finished with the Afghan air force.

There is a lot of contract maintenance done for a lot of air forces around the world. The Afghan air force is not unique in that regard, although in this case it was particularly telling because they were so dependent on it.

Senator ROSEN. Understanding that, would it have been helpful to keep Bagram Air Base open in order to help with any of this going, any of the evacuation, anybody else coming through the country, another place for our citizens, people from other countries, or special SIV holders, any of those folks?

General MCKENZIE. Ma'am, I was intimately involved in all the decisions on Bagram, and in no way would Bagram have been able to contribute to either the effective use of the Afghan air force, its continued maintenance, or bringing people out. Very briefly, I can tell you that once we went below 2,500 people in Afghanistan, we lost the ability to hold Bagram Air Base. It was inevitable that we were going to have to come out Bagram, because we ended up, in late June, early July, with 650 marines and soldiers in the country. It was not feasible to hold Bagram under those circumstances.

So we were driven by the plan, which we had all had an opportunity to work, that we were going to come out of Bagram. There was no way we were going to be able to keep Bagram and go to effective zero in Afghanistan. Just not possible.

Senator ROSEN. Well, thinking of what we may have gained or may have lost as we leave, we think about countering adversaries. So again, General McKenzie, what is your assessment of the foreign influence in Afghanistan in the wake of our withdrawal, and what are the measures that we can take now to prevent our adversaries from filling the vacuum created by our departure?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, last week I was in Kazakhstan, in the capital of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, where I hosted what we call the Central and South Asian countries (CASA) Chiefs of Defense (CHOD) conference. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, the Kurdish Republic, and Pakistan, we all met and we talked about that region after the fall of Afghanistan. Generally what they want is

they want assurance, they want to continue to have ties with the United States, because they want alternatives to Russia and they want alternatives to China.

Unfortunately, because of their geographic location, they are going to always have to deal with Russia and China, but I think our partners in the region want a message that the United States is not going to turn our back on them, even though we left Afghanistan. We had a very productive two-day conference, based on those themes.

Senator ROSEN. Well, I could not agree more, because I think it makes us more vulnerable if we allow anyone else to fill that vacuum.

I would like to, in the just minute I have left, just touch briefly on the fate of Afghan women. What we have seen regarding the status of women in the territories where the Taliban had retained control prior to overthrowing the Afghan Government, we know how horrible the conditions are for women, and so what do you see, moving forward, for the fate of Afghan women? What can we do? What do you see as the future for women's rights in Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. Senator, during our long engagement in Afghanistan I think we made great strides in educational and other opportunities for women in Afghanistan. I think those are all now gravely at risk with the return of the Taliban. So the levers that we have are economic and diplomatic, which are not part of the Department of Defense. But I think that is how we have to work the problem. I do think there is opportunity. It will not be a long-lived opportunity, a matter of months perhaps, where we can force the Taliban down a certain path, based on their desire to have international financing, international recognition, the release of sanctions and other things that are very important to them.

I think we have got to be very hard-nosed as we negotiate with them going forward, to ensure these gains are not lost.

Senator ROSEN. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I really appreciate the hearing today, and I will be submitting more questions for the record.

Chairman REED. Thank you, Senator Rosen.

Senator Blackburn, please.

Senator BLACKBURN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley, I want to come back to you. We discussed that you have had conversations with Woodward, Costa, Leonning, Rucker, and Bender on their books. Correct?

General MILLEY. Not Costa.

Senator BLACKBURN. You did not on Costa.

General MILLEY. Not Costa. Woodward yes, and others.

Senator BLACKBURN. We will leave that as a point of discussion. Okay. In any of these conversations did you discuss private meetings with the President or White House officials?

General MILLEY. White House officials perhaps. President, I do not think so.

Senator BLACKBURN. So you never discussed any of your conversations with President Trump.

General MILLEY. With President Trump—

Senator BLACKBURN. With any of these authors.

General MILLEY.—no, not a prior conversation.

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay. Did you portray the Commander in Chief in a negative light or make comments that were critical of the Commander in Chief to any of these authors with which you had conversations?

General MILLEY. Not my comments or my observations, no.

Senator BLACKBURN. You did not?

General MILLEY. Others that were relayed to me from others perhaps.

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay. Well, I am looking forward to your book report on this.

Would you see these conversations as an abuse of executive privilege?

General MILLEY. I would not, no.

Senator BLACKBURN. You would not. Okay. Let me ask you this. What is your standard for determining when to leak private conversations with the President?

General MILLEY. I do not leak private conversations with the President.

Senator BLACKBURN. You did not. So you had these conversations with the authors but you do not see that as leaking information to which they were not entitled to know? See, this is the problem—

General MILLEY. No, so—

Senator BLACKBURN.—that we have. See, as a member of this committee, and as someone who represents a lot of our men and women in uniform that are there, as we have referenced today, I have really got an issue with the fact that you will talk to authors but then you all come in here and you say, “Well, we cannot tell you what we told the President.” Then I have to drag it out of you that the written documents, which, under Article II you are supposed to give those to us, you cannot go hide behind somebody’s skirts on this, and you do not want to give those to us.

So you have repeatedly told this Committee that you will not reveal your private conversations with President Biden, but then you have leaked this information from your meetings with President Trump. So it is important to us that you truthfully respond to us on this.

General MILLEY. Yes, absolutely.

Senator BLACKBURN. I think what you did with making time to talk to these authors, burnishing your image, kind of building that bluster, but then not putting the focus on Afghanistan and what was happening there. General Milley, that is really disappointing to me. I know it is disappointing to people that have served with you or under you, under your command, and it does not serve our Nation well.

You talked a little bit earlier about the damage, and you said “damage” was the right word to use when assessing what has happened in Afghanistan, when you look at America’s credibility. So how do you look the men and women in the eye that have served under your command? How do you look young men in the eye that are coming to our military Academy Days and who want to serve, and say, “You can depend on me. I have got your back”? Because you know what? I think a lot of these families right now, they do not feel like you have their back. The special ops guys I met with Friday in my office in Nashville that are taking their time, their

money, and risking their lives to do a job that the three of you could not do—maybe we are going to remember you three as the three that broke the military.

I do not know, but this is causing just a lot of anger from people who have trusted the military. They have felt like the military was one of the most trustworthy institutions. But in order to get a name in a book, in order to not be drawn into a political fight, what you have managed to do is to politicize the U.S. military to downgrade our reputation with our allies. Nobody has resigned. Nobody has submitted their resignation. We have got thousands of people watching this hearing today that are looking at you all and saying, “I cannot believe they are sitting there and not answering the questions and are trying to punt.”

I yield back.

Chairman REED. Thank you.

Now let me recognize Senator Kelly.

Senator KELLY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Earlier today I had the opportunity to ask some questions. At the time, because we were short on time, I did not have the opportunity to thank all three of you—General Milley, Secretary Austin, General McKenzie—for your service to our country, serving in combat overseas, multiple deployments. Your family has served as well, all of your families, and I want to thank you personally for that. It is a big commitment. I understand it.

Secretary Austin, since United States troops departed Kabul on August 31st, the number of evacuation flights has been very small. The State Department briefed on Friday that only four charter flights have departed with U.S. support, and the ability to leave by a land route is even less right now.

The testimony today has indicated that the mission of facilitating evacuation for Americans and vulnerable Afghans is ongoing. Can you explain what role the military has in ongoing evacuation efforts behind led by the State Department?

Secretary AUSTIN. You are correct, Senator. It is led by the State Department, and it is an interagency effort. As General Milley and I said earlier, we do have a senior officer participating in that cell that is run by Ambassador Bass, and they are reaching out to a number of different entities, veterans groups, many of your colleagues who have information that can be helpful in contacting people who have a desire to get out and have the right credentials. If they do not have the right credentials, are there things that we can do to help them obtain those credentials if they have helped us, worked with us in the past, or if they are an American citizens with expired credentials.

Senator KELLY. Do you anticipate there will be transport from third countries? Many of our Afghan allies have left and now find themselves in a third country. Should we expect that there will be flights out of those places as well?

Secretary AUSTIN. I think those individuals, as they work with our embassy personnel in those various countries to help them, again, if they qualify as one of the people who helped us in the past. Certainly either taking a routine commercial flight or taking a charter flight that we can help sponsor, I do anticipate there will be some sort of activity in the future.

But again, I do not want to speak for the State Department. I will tell you, Senator, that from a DOD perspective we are going to do everything we can to help enable this effort.

Senator KELLY. Throughout this evacuation effort, my office worked closely with groups of former Afghan pilots and women who served, in addition to American citizens and veterans working to assist them in leaving the country. These are men and women who trained with us, who fought with us, and who are at heightened risk because of it. So I am concerned that they were not a priority in our evacuation efforts, and that guidance on immigration options for them has been inadequate.

Due to the challenges and uncertainties of accessing evacuation flights, many Afghan evacuees sought alternative means of escape, flying to these third-party countries, as I mentioned. How is the Defense Department working with State right now to ensure that these individuals do not fall through the cracks with regards to resettlement?

Secretary AUSTIN. Again, I would have to defer to State in terms of outlining what the resettlement processes are, but in terms of direct activity from the Department of Defense, we do not have much—we are not a big part of that effort, that resettlement effort in third countries.

Senator KELLY. Well thank you, Mr. Secretary, and again I want to thank all three of you for being here today, and thank you for your service.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Senator Kelley.

Senator Hawley, please.

Senator HAWLEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General Milley, I have just got one more question for you about these many book interviews that you did. I Alone Can Fix It is one book. Peril is another book. Frankly We Did Win This Election: The Inside Story of How Trump Lost is the third book. It seems like that is a significant outlay of time.

General MILLEY. I do not think so. I think—

Senator HAWLEY. They were short interviews?

General MILLEY. Relatively short. I do not think it took an excessive amount of time.

Senator HAWLEY. What was the time frame on these interviews for these three different books? By the way, for folks who do not know at home, you said you did not read the books. I do not think most people probably do. These are DC insider tell-all type books. But what was the time frame, did you say, that you were doing these interviews?

General MILLEY. I would say it took a couple of hours maybe.

Senator HAWLEY. But when? What is the time frame? When were you sitting for them? Dates?

General MILLEY. I can get you the dates. I do not know.

Senator HAWLEY. This year?

General MILLEY. I do not know off the top of my head but I will get you the dates.

Senator HAWLEY. 2021?

General MILLEY. Oh yes.

Senator HAWLEY. So it was this calendar year.

General MILLEY. I think so, yeah. Sure.

Senator HAWLEY. Well, I just am wondering, clearly this is a priority for you. You did these on the record, by the way? All these interviews are on the record with these reporters? Did they quote you?

General MILLEY. I do interviews on the record, off the record, and I do background interviews, and I do all of that with print media, television media, books, documentaries, all kinds of things.

Senator HAWLEY. Why would you do background and off-the-record interviews—backgrounds means they cannot quote you—background and off-the-record interviews if the goal is transparency?

General MILLEY. The transparency goes to the fact to make sure that we are explaining ourselves and make sure that these authors have correct information.

Senator HAWLEY. Is that attributable to you?

General MILLEY. Let us take Woodward, for example. Probably 200 people interviewed and they approach my guys to say, “Are these facts true? This is what we heard,” and we clarify and mitigate any incorrect information.

Senator HAWLEY. Interesting. Well, it is interesting. I mean, you are doing these interviews. You are doing them in 2021. It just makes me wonder, all of these books, were you maybe a little distracted, maybe a little distracted about what was going on in Afghanistan?

Here is why I am asking. General Miller testified to this Committee that he warned about the rapid erosion of the military situation in Afghanistan as early as March of 2021. He further testified that he informed you about his view on this. He also testified that he said that the collapse of the Afghan Security Forces and the Afghan Government could come very fast in 2021.

General MILLEY. Hard and fast.

Senator HAWLEY. He said that he informed you of this. He also said that he informed Secretary Austin of this.

General MILLEY. He did.

Senator HAWLEY. Now at the same time, however, in June, you were saying, and I quote you now, “An outright takeover by the Taliban is unlikely.” That is at an Armed Services Committee meeting in the House, June 23rd. In July, you said the Afghan Security Forces had the capacity to sufficiently fight and defend their country. You also said that they were well equipped. On June 17th, you told the Senate Appropriations Committee the Afghan Government had a 325,000 to 350,000 person security force, which we now know is a drastic overestimate, yet a few days later you lowered that to 300,000, which we still now is a drastic overestimate.

Your generals on the ground, your commander on the ground is saying one thing, the Taliban has a massive offensive underway from May 1st on, but yet you told us very different things in public. How do you reconcile those things? What am I missing?

General MILLEY. Well, first of all, Scott Miller did say “hard and fast,” and he also meant that, at least to me and to others, that he meant that to be in the fall—October, November, maybe even December time frame.

Senator HAWLEY. I heard you say that earlier. I am curious about that. I would have to say that was not his testimony to this Committee.

General MILLEY. Well, what he said in the committee was “hard and fast.” He did not put a date on it, is the readouts to me. I do not know. Did he put a date on it?

Senator HAWLEY. No, he did not put a date on it.

General MILLEY. But he did put a date on it.

Senator HAWLEY. That is what intrigues me.

General MILLEY. But he did put a date on it with me, and to us. When pressed it was after we leave—that was point one, which was 31 August—and probably into the October time frame, maybe Thanksgiving. That is about more or less where many of the intel assessments were—

Senator HAWLEY. He said he was a dissenter on the intel assessment.

General MILLEY. He did. That is right.

Senator HAWLEY. He did not put any of those qualifies on his testimony to us. So are you saying he shifted his testimony, General Miller, that he was not—

General MILLEY. No. I am saying what he told me was it was likely to be in the October time frame. The intel assessments were centering around November, Thanksgiving, at the latest, Christmas. Some intel assessments went into the next year.

Here is my point, Senator, is the intel assessments had two basic things, in my view, was the scale and scope plus the speed. All the intel assessments, all of us, got that wrong. There is no question about it. That was a swing and a miss on the intel assessment of 11 days in August. There is nobody that called that.

Senator HAWLEY. Well, can I just—my time is about—I appreciate that you have made these points. I do not mean to cut you off. It is just that my time is about to expire. I just want to say this. It seems to me that you put a high priority on making sure that you were favorably portrayed by the DC press corps. You spent a lot of time doing that. Fair enough if that is your priority. But at the same time, we had a rapidly deteriorating, frankly disastrous situation in Afghanistan, which resulted in the death of 13 soldiers, including one from my home state, hundreds of civilians, and hundreds of Americans left behind. In my view, that mission cannot be called a success in any way, shape, or form, logistical or otherwise.

General, I think you should resign. Secretary Austin, I think you should resign. I think this mission was a catastrophe. I think there is no other way to say it, and there has to be accountability. I respectfully submit it should begin with you. Thank you.

Chairman REED. Senator, your time has expired.

Senator HAWLEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman REED. Senator Tuberville.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

General Milley, you have spoken today a lot about civilian control of the military. I appreciate the statements made about that today. On June 10th, though, I asked formal questions for the record about Bagram Airfield, and I pointed out that having a major air base within 500 miles of Iranian and Chinese borders

would be a strategically, very strategically and valuable. I asked you about the feasibility of retaining Bagram Airfield as a United States base. I am still waiting for a reply. I hope you do see today ignoring questions that might come up from civilian oversight sometimes backfires on you a little bit. You apologized for being late with your statement today, the hearing. But you have just got to understand the pattern here. I heard Senator Blackburn say about the book. You have got to see how demissive it looks to Congress that you have had time to interview and do all these interviews but questions are not answered. So I am just troubled by some of those things.

Also, on August 18th you said, quote, "There is nothing that I or anyone else saw that indicated the collapse of the army and this government in 11 days," end quote. I find it unbelievable, with your staff of 3,200 people and a budget of \$419 million taxpayer dollars that we did not see the obviously. But I do think you saw it, because July 11, 2019, you said, quote, "I think pulling out prematurely would be a strategic mistake," end quote. You also said that here today. Do you agree?

General MILLEY. I 100 percent agree.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you.

General MILLEY. May I comment?

Senator TUBERVILLE. Yes. Go ahead.

General MILLEY. On your first two points. On the intel piece, I stay with what I said. Nobody called it, 11 days in August. There was nobody who did that. I brought the intel reports, and when we go into classified session I am happy to go over all of them, on the first thing. Then the Bagram thing, I did put a very lengthy response in my written statement. I do not know if you had an opportunity to read it yet. I would encourage you to read it. It is also something that General McKenzie put in his. I can assure that we looked at that whole Bagram issue very, very carefully.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Here is what I am struggling with, General McKenzie. In 1945, we left Japan. They are one of our biggest allies today and we are still there. Germany is the same way. Korea, the same way. We had 2,500 troops. The war stopped in 2014, and we started Operation Resolute Support, and we are having all these people—we have got to get out here. Folks, we are going to pay for what we just did. I mean, I have got young kids. You all got kids and grandkids, and we are going to be back in there fighting.

What are your thoughts about that, General McKenzie? I know we are not talking about the President. You know, what do you think about the future of what we have got to do in Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. So we have very few levers in Afghanistan right now, because we have completely pulled out.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Will we be back?

General MCKENZIE. I think we are always going to reserve the right to go in, to go after ISIS and al Qaeda targets as they present themselves. We have been very clear on that. That is not going to be easy, and we will talk a little bit more about that in the closed session. It will not be easy to do that. It will be possible to do that.

As for larger engagements, with the Taliban or whatever government follows them, I mean, that is going to be hard road, from

where I sit, and I see a very small slice of that. That is really a question for diplomats and others to talk about how our future relationship with the government as a whole will be.

But I think, my judgment will be they are going to regress significantly in every sphere of activity in Afghanistan over the next few years with the Taliban in charge.

Senator TUBERVILLE. We can afford to survive with our military. We have got that kind of money. It just burns me up that we are eventually going to have to go back there. We are going to have problems here. I think we should have looked at it, and I know President Biden wanted to get out. He told people. President Trump wanted to get out. I disagreed with it. I mean, we gave up the best base in that area, and it is just amazing to me that we are going to have to go back, and hopefully we do not lose its challenge. What are your thoughts about it, as we end it up here, Secretary Austin?

Secretary AUSTIN. I do not think it is preordained that we are going to have to go back, Senator. I would tell you that what you have heard us say is that we recognize that transnational terrorists will migrate towards ungoverned spaces. We also are committed to not allowing al Qaeda to regenerate and be able to export terror from Afghanistan to the United States of America. We will remain laser-focused on that going forward, and we will do everything within our power to make sure that that does not happen.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you. Could I ask you one question? Are you against dishonorable discharges to the military for not taking a vaccine? You are the leader of the DOD.

Secretary AUSTIN. I am the leader, and again, we have a non-judicial—excuse me, a Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) that really addresses all of the issues in the military, and gives our leadership what they need to be able to enforce standards.

Taking the vaccine is a requirement, and again, I will just leave it at that.

Chairman REED. Thank you very much, Senator Tuberville. Gentlemen, thank you very much. This has been a long day, and we still have a closed session in SVC-217. There is a vote ongoing now, so I would suggest we reconvene in SVC-217 at 3:45. We will give an opportunity for a brief respite, a very brief respite.

With that I will adjourn the open session.

[Whereupon, at 3:24 p.m., the Committee adjourned.]

[Questions for the record with answers supplied follow:]

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JOE MANCHIN III

DECISIONS AT THE TIME

1. Senator MANCHIN. Secretary Austin, We have all heard the President commit multiple times to withdraw our armed forces from Afghanistan. I've supported that move for years, and like him, I am also tired of seeing American blood spilt to prop up a government that clearly was never going to be able to survive without us. After the weeks of briefings I've received from this committee, the State Department, and the Department of Defense (DOD), it appears to me that each decision made as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, was primarily to minimize risk to American life. At the end of the day it comes down to this, do you believe that if we had left any U.S. forces in Afghanistan, or committed even more personnel, that it would have put those troops in harm's way?

Secretary AUSTIN. I agree with the President that ending the military mission was the best way to reduce the risk to U.S. forces. The longer we remained beyond May 1, 2021, the date set in the U.S.-Taliban Agreement, the greater the risk to both force and mission.

2. Senator MANCHIN. Secretary Austin, while I've always supported the withdrawal from Afghanistan, I do have a problem with the disorganized start of our evacuation efforts. I know other Members have touched on this, but can you explain to me and more importantly my constituents why the airport in Kabul was a better location for evacuation than Bagram Airbase?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department of Defense, along with coalition forces, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), evacuated 124,000 Americans, Afghans, and others from Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in just 17 days. Once the President made the decision to end our military mission in Afghanistan, there was no requirement to maintain Bagram, and it was transitioned to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). The military's task, after the retrograde was complete, was to defend the American diplomatic presence in Kabul. Executing the evacuation operation from the Kabul area was the most logical choice, as the vast majority of those evacuated were located within Kabul – and the distance and logistics associated with evacuating personnel from Bagram would have required a commitment of thousands of additional U.S. military personnel, and would have required evacuees to travel through unsecured terrain.

LOST ASSETS

3. Senator MANCHIN. Secretary Austin, I would like to put a finer point on my earlier. Over the last few weeks I have heard from a large amount of my constituents about their disappointment and concern for the estimated billions of dollars' worth of armored vehicles, aircraft, defense systems, weapons, and stock piles of ammunition lost to the Taliban Government through the Afghan National Security Forces we supplied. More importantly, I would hope that we know the capabilities of the equipment we supplied to the Afghan Security Forces that is now in the hands of the Taliban, and how that may leave our own forces vulnerable when those capabilities are shared with the Chinese and Russians. While our full technological capability wasn't included in this equipment, things like armor thickness and vehicle design still pose a risk once the Chinese have these in their hands. In your opinion, do you believe these assets that the Afghans lost pose a threat to our force?

Secretary AUSTIN. Over the course of the retrograde operation, the Department of Defense removed tens of thousands of tons of equipment from Afghanistan. The equipment that remained was equipment that had been transitioned to the ANDSF. Many of the U.S. strikes that were conducted in support of the ANDSF during the spring and summer of 2021 were strikes against Taliban seized equipment. The majority of Afghan Air Force aircraft were either flown out of Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover, or were demilitarized by United States forces in August 2021. During the evacuation, United States forces disabled the other Afghan and United States equipment that remained at HKIA. The Department of Defense is currently conducting a review of the military materiel that remained in Afghanistan at the time of the Taliban takeover, and what is projected to have been expended in combat or fallen into disrepair. The majority of this equipment consists of primarily low-grade technology and equipment that will have a shortened life span without access to DOD-provided maintenance and parts.

4. Senator MANCHIN. Secretary Austin, would it be possible for your office to supply us with an assessment confirming that those lost assets aren't a threat? In a classified annex if necessary.

Secretary AUSTIN. The equipment that the United States provided to the Afghan security forces generally consisted of low-technology-level equipment. While some of the equipment did have capabilities that required enhanced end-use monitoring, such as night vision devices and laser-guided bomb computer controls—these capabilities are below the levels used by United States forces and countries with more advanced military technology, like China and Russia.

COMBATTING TERRORISTS

5. Senator MANCHIN. General Milley, Haqqani is the new interior minister and deputy leader of the Taliban. He is also just one example of many former identified terrorists that are now influencing the future of the Taliban and the country. Do you suspect we will change our approach to eliminating individuals in Afghanistan,

like Haqqani, now that the landscape of political power has changed in Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. [Deleted.]

6. Senator MANCHIN. General McKenzie, by not targeting Haqqani, and other terrorists in Afghanistan, from a commander's perspective, how does that impact our future efforts against terrorists? Specifically, how do we ensure the Taliban do not harbor terrorist organizations, as they have in the past, and what consequences face them if we discover they are?

General MCKENZIE. We have some limited capability with our OTH CT platform to monitor terrorist organizations and Taliban/Haqqani interactions with these organizations. We have the ability to strike should that decision be made, but application of the other elements of national power (Diplomatic, Information, Economic) would be more effective than strictly the military application. An absence of CT pressure almost certainly will allow some terrorists to operate in Afghanistan with near impunity, enhancing their ability to threaten the United States Homeland and interests abroad over time. This is why we are working to build a CT architecture that allows us to disrupt threats in Afghanistan from over the horizon. Speaking specifically about the Haqqani Network, Haqqani leaders have historically enabled al Qaeda leaders and members in Afghanistan, making the country an even more permissive environment for potential training, plans, and operations. The Haqqani Network's seamless integration into what the Taliban have announced as an interim "caretaker" government has the potential to challenge United States efforts to compel the Taliban to deny al Qaeda safe haven. Nevertheless, we continue to convey to the Taliban that they will be held accountable for their CT commitments and for ensuring Afghanistan does not once again serve as a base for international terrorism.

7. Senator MANCHIN. Secretary Austin, now that airstrike authority rests with you, do you believe counterterrorism strikes will be able to rise up through the chain of command fast enough to ensure we don't miss a threat?

Secretary AUSTIN. Yes. We have processes in place to move critical information in a timely manner, and to provide pre-approval for strikes that adhere to specific requirements.

TALIBAN CONTROL

8. Senator MANCHIN. General McKenzie, the Taliban stated that they would allow woman to participate in their government, but have not. They would protect the press, but have continuously arrested and assaulted them. And they have continually demonstrated that they cannot control the rank and file of their forces. What does the future of Afghanistan, under a Taliban controlled government, in the near and distant future look like to you?

General MCKENZIE. To speculate on Afghanistan's future under Taliban rule is outside my purview as a Combatant Commander. Going forward I think it will be important to look at what the Taliban do versus what they say to assess what the future will bring. However, much of the progress we saw over the last twenty years may be at risk of being reversed.

9. Senator MANCHIN. General McKenzie, please explain the rationale for using Hamid Karzai International Airport as the base of evacuations, and more specifically the thought process behind relying on the Taliban for any amount of security for United States forces?

General MCKENZIE. We did not rely on the Taliban for security. We took a measured and pragmatic approach with respect to the overall security mission for the noncombatant evacuation operation, relying on existing Coalition forces, Afghan Special Forces, and an additional 5,000 United States forces we deployed to bolster the base and inner security of HKIA. The United States and the Taliban had a mutual interest in the final withdrawal of United States forces and we leveraged that interest towards executing the mission in a manner least risky to evacuees and our forces.

10. Senator MANCHIN. General McKenzie, following the suicide bombing claimed by ISIS-K, have you seen any evidence that the Taliban checkpoints made it more difficult for that bomber, or do you believe Taliban forces had foreknowledge and allowed them through to minimize risk to themselves?

General MCKENZIE. We have no intelligence indicating that the Taliban had foreknowledge of the bomber or his whereabouts. United States forces shared threat reporting with the Taliban to increase external force protection. Beginning August 16, the Taliban were conducting broader security efforts, to include limited crowd and traffic control, sporadic searches, and security meetings with U.S. Forces at HKIA. At these meetings, we told the Taliban to push the crowds back from Abbey Gate, which they did, including on August 26. Due to the large volumes of crowds, it was difficult for the Taliban to search everyone. Following the August 26 attack, it was evident that the Taliban took a significantly more active role in crowd control and security operations through the aggressive searching of vehicles at checkpoints leading to the airport, stopping vehicular traffic along critical avenues of approach to HKIA, and searching individuals approaching the gates.

11. Senator MANCHIN. General McKenzie, what agreements have been made between the United States directly with the Taliban or indirectly, through other countries, to evacuate the remaining American citizens and Special immigrant Visa holders?

General MCKENZIE. I would defer to the Department of State to provide the answer to this question as this would be a matter under their cognizance. During the evacuation process leading up to August 31, we coordinated with the Taliban on security matters to facilitate the evacuation operations at HKIA. However, since the completion of that specific mission, I have not engaged the Taliban in any discussions regarding further evacuations.

GEOPOLITICAL SHIFT

12. Senator MANCHIN. Secretary Austin, as you know well foreign policy is a critical tool needed to provide stability, promote freedom, strengthen democracy, and to protect human rights. These are some of the principle components of our American values and ones that I feel we need to reflect upon now that we are out of Afghanistan. In the days following the President's announcement to withdrawal troops from Afghanistan, both India and Pakistan joined the United States in calling for a political settlement in Afghanistan. However, no settlement was established and the Taliban took control. What discussions are being made between Pakistan, India, and the United States for changes to the Taliban's current government?

Secretary AUSTIN. The large majority of the international community has certain expectations of a Taliban-led government before they will consider it legitimate or eligible for support. These expectations include making good on commitments not to allow Afghanistan to be used as a safe haven for external attacks, ensuring the freedom of travel, allowing unhindered humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of the Afghan people, having a more inclusive government, and upholding the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women, girls, and minorities. The United States Government has held bilateral discussions with India, Pakistan, and other countries in the region about our concerns with respect to the Taliban.

13. Senator MANCHIN. Secretary Austin, what leverage do we have going forward to influence the Taliban Government to adhere to woman's rights, allow children to attend schools of their choosing, and to participate in their future economic development?

Secretary AUSTIN. The United States Government will continue to urge the Taliban to respect the rights and freedoms of all Afghans, especially women and girls. In engagements with the Taliban, senior United States officials have emphasized the importance of the meaningful participation of women and girls in all aspects of Afghan society. The United States Government will work alongside our allies and partners to send a clear and unified message to the Taliban that respect for women and girls is necessary if the Taliban wants acceptance from the international community.

14. Senator MANCHIN. Secretary Austin, what do you assess China's and Russia's foreign policy in the near and long term in Afghanistan will be and why?

Secretary AUSTIN. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has closely monitored the situation in Afghanistan over the years. The primary objective of the PRC's foreign policy towards Afghanistan is likely to promote stability on China's borders. Russia's strategy in Afghanistan is likely tied to its long-term interests in Central Asia. Russia has kept its embassy in Kabul open, which it has been leveraging to engage with Taliban leaders, and has held multilateral talks on Afghanistan. Russia has repeat-

edly stated that it is not in a rush to recognize the Taliban as the new Afghan government and will wait to observe the Taliban's actions before making a decision.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JACKY ROSEN

PROTECTING THOSE WHO ESCAPED

15. Senator ROSEN. Secretary Austin, even those who did successfully flee Afghanistan are not necessarily out of danger. Some in the Las Vegas Afghan community have told my office that there have been instances of unaccompanied women and children being harassed by other Afghans where they are being housed on military bases—both abroad and here in the United States—and that there should be more of a security presence by military police. Is there an adequate security posture at these bases, are you aware of any such reports, and how do you plan to rectify this?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department of Defense has been proud to support Operation Allies Welcome, hosting tens of thousands of evacuated Afghans on seven military installations across the country. We work closely with the Departments of State, Homeland Security,

Health and Human Services, and Justice to provide our guests an appropriate level of support. The Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice have deployed law enforcement officers to lead Physical Security Presence Teams to respond to public safety matters that require immediate response. These teams are intended to enhance security and safety by providing visible and proactive patrols, integration into community leaders' councils, and education on law enforcement practices in U.S. communities. Of note, several installations established Women's Engagement Teams to address the unique needs of Afghan women and children. DOD installation commanders have the authority to maintain safety and security for the overall base population at these installations, including service members and their families.

COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY

16. Senator ROSEN. Secretary Austin and General McKenzie, what is the plan for an enduring counterterrorism strategy that will be able to address and counter the influence of violent extremist organizations in Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department remains committed to preventing Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist safe haven. The United States has significant operational and intelligence capability, and we will deploy our capabilities in service of that goal. Our counterterrorism objective in Afghanistan is to disrupt terrorist organizations' external operations against the United States Homeland, Americans abroad, and our allies and partners. Our plan is multi-faceted, and the Department can provide additional information at the classified level.

General MCKENZIE. We have taken an integrated approach to this mission, leveraging our existing human intelligence (HUMINT) networks, coalition partnerships, technical collect, regional engagements, and intelligence. The over-the-horizon counterterrorism (OTH-CT) platform is led by a one-star general officer and is forward located in the USCENCOM area of responsibility (AOR) to enable a regional focus with emphasis on Afghanistan. We will continually examine our methods to improve our ability to accomplish this mission.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JAMES INHOFE

SUSTAINABILITY OF 2,500 TROOP LEVEL

17. Senator INHOFE. Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie, ahead of President Biden's announcement to withdraw all United States forces from Afghanistan, did you ask for an assessment of the sustainability of retaining ~2,500 troops in Afghanistan, including under the condition that the Taliban recommenced attacking United States and coalition troops, from your experienced combat commander on the ground, General Miller, and if so, what was it?

Secretary AUSTIN. I had numerous opportunities to consult with General Miller, General McKenzie, and General Milley ahead of the President's announcement. This includes my visit to Kabul in March 2021, where I was able to discuss key issues with General Miller on the ground. During the review process, Chairman Milley, General McKenzie, and I had several opportunities to share our views with the President, and I can assure you that they were given serious consideration. My assessment, informed by my consultations with my commanders, was that staying in Afghanistan with 2,500 military forces would have resulted in a resumed fight with

the Taliban, forcing us to reevaluate whether that force level was commensurate with the mission and the need for increased force protection requirements.

General MILLEY. [Deleted.]

General MCKENZIE. It was my formal commander’s estimate that approximately 2,500 U.S. forces and other enablers could defend themselves and perform their RESOLUTE SUPPORT mission—to include providing select enablers to support the United States Embassy in Kabul—in the event the Taliban resumed hostilities against us. GEN Miller’s assessment aligned with my own. He and I communicated continuously during this entire process.

18. Senator INHOFE. Secretary Austin, both General Milley and General McKenzie testified that in their personal view, we should have kept approximately 2,500 troops in Afghanistan. Did you share that view?

Secretary AUSTIN. President Biden stated that continued United States military involvement in Afghanistan would be unlikely to produce outcomes any different from what we have seen in past years, but would come with renewed risk to United States forces. The President’s decision to withdraw came after a rigorous inter-agency review of our options in Afghanistan. I can confirm that the Department of Defense was afforded every opportunity to express views and discuss recommendations on the matter. The President was thoughtful and deliberate in considering a range of views before he made his decision to withdraw United States forces from Afghanistan. I supported his decision.

WILLINGNESS OF AFGHANS TO FIGHT

19. Senator INHOFE. General McKenzie, please provide the official United States Government estimate of Afghan National Defense Security Forces, United States military forces, and coalition military forces that died as a result of combat operations in Afghanistan between September 29, 2014 and April 15, 2021.

General MCKENZIE.

Estimates of ANDSF KIA, 2011–2021:

- 2011: (Est.) 1,800 ANDSF KIA
- 2012: (Est.) 2,900 ANDSF KIA
- 2013: (Est.) 2,800 ANDSF KIA
- 2014: 3,422 ANDSF KIA
- 2015: 6,508 ANDSF KIA
- 2016: 8,146 ANDSF KIA
- 2017: 7,567 ANDSF KIA
- 2018: 10,691 ANDSF KIA
- 2019: 9,414 ANDSF KIA
- 2020: 8,929 ANDSF KIA

01JAN21 to 23MAY21: 3,810 ANDSF KIA

U.S. military casualties: 70 United States military force deaths as a result of combat operations in Afghanistan between 29 September 2014 and 15 April 2021.

Coalition military force casualties:

	U.S.	UK	Other	Total	UK+Other
2001	12	0	0	12	0
2002	49	3	18	70	21
2003	48	0	10	58	10
2004	52	1	7	60	8
2005	99	1	31	1 31	32
2006	98	39	54	191	93
2007	117	42	73	232	115
2008	155	51	89	295	140
2009	317	108	96	521	204

	U.S.	UK	Other	Total	UK+Other
2010	498	103	109	710	212
2011	415	46	102	563	148
2012	310	44	48	402	92
2013	128	9	25	162	34
2014	55	6	14	75	20
2015	22	2	2	26	4
2016	13	0	2	15	2
2017	15	0	2	17	2
2018	14	0	5	19	5
2019	24	0	2	26	2
2020	11	0	0	11	0
2021	13	0	0	13	0
Total	2465	455	689	3,609	1,144

CONTROL OF KABUL

20. Senator INHOFE. General McKenzie, as the decision-maker on turning down the offer of Taliban leader Mullah Baradar on 15 August to have the United States retain security for Kabul during the noncombatant evacuation operation intended to take place from 15 August to 31 August, did you consider that accepting such an offer would potentially allow hundreds more American citizens and thousands more Afghan partners to be airlifted to safety?

General MCKENZIE. I did consider the possibility, but it was not supported by the facts. To the contrary, securing Kabul would have required the commitment of a reinforced combat division (beyond the forces deployed for the NEO) and would have required urban clearance operations that would have almost certainly resulted in renewed hostilities with the Taliban—jeopardizing rather than aiding the NEO. It was then and remains my assessment that Baradar knew we lacked the combat power to secure the city and was disingenuously confronting me with a false dilemma—one of us must secure it—in the hope that I would ask him to secure Kabul. I refused to take the bait, reiterated that my mission was to secure and conduct the NEO, and proposed that the Taliban could instead withdraw all its forces from Kabul and allow GIRoA forces to secure the city. He refused to engage this option but pledged that the Taliban would not interfere with the NEO or target United States or Coalition Forces. We further established the means of coordinating our activities around HKIA. These arrangements allowed us to optimize the number of Americans and Afghan partners airlifted to safety.

21. Senator INHOFE. General McKenzie, if control of Kabul by an entity other than the Taliban would significantly improve the security of the noncombatant evacuation operation, do you believe it would be worth exploring whether the offer of such an agreement was genuine or not?

General MCKENZIE. The only way to test the sincerity of the offer would have been to deploy the additional reinforced combat division required to secure Kabul and either clear the Taliban from the city or tolerate their presence inside our perimeter. Either option entailed significant risk to both forces and mission and would have likely jeopardized the NEO.

22. Senator INHOFE. General McKenzie, please provide a complete list, with dates, locations, and discussion summaries, of any meeting that you or any other United States Central Command (CENTCOM) official had with Taliban or Haqqani leaders since March 2019.

General MCKENZIE. I met with Taliban representatives in Doha on 15 August 2021 with the primary purpose of warning them that the United States would respond forcibly to any effort on their part to interfere with the NEO. They pledged not to do so. I further proposed that they withdraw their forces from the city and allow the ANDSF to secure it until the Taliban and GIROA agreed upon a transition plan, but President Ghani fled and GIROA effectively collapsed the same day as this meeting. Subsequent to this meeting, I had no further contact with any Taliban representatives. During the NEO, RADM Vasely and MG Donahue had several meetings with Taliban security officials to discuss Taliban contributions to our security efforts around HKIA. All of their discussions were tactically focused and very transactional.

23. Senator INHOFE. General McKenzie, did you or any other CENTCOM official meet with Sirajuddin Haqqani? If so, please provide the date and a summary of discussion for each of those engagements.

General MCKENZIE. No.

DRAWDOWN DECISION POINT IN JUNE

24. Senator INHOFE. Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie, the Committee understands that in mid- to late-June, as the security situation in Afghanistan was rapidly deteriorating and dozens of districts were falling to the Taliban at an accelerating rate, many without any fight by Afghan security forces, but before Bagram Air Base was closed, that there was a pause and interagency discussion to consider whether to take the near-irreversible step of closing Bagram Air Base and another location. Was there an interagency discussion on the merits of halting the drawdown given that basic assumptions about the security environment were being undermined by the events on the ground, specifically the capability and reliability of the Afghan National Defense Security Forces, and if so, was the commander on the ground, General Miller, asked for his assessment?

Secretary AUSTIN. I can assure you that General Miller conveyed his assessments on the deteriorating security environment and the pressure on the ANDSF to me through the chain of command throughout the drawdown process. In turn, I conveyed those assessments to interagency counterparts during our discussions on the withdrawal. In the course of these discussions, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the USCENTCOM commander, and I provided a range of options to the President related to the drawdown, all of which were given serious consideration.

General MILLEY. [Deleted.]

General MCKENZIE. Formal interagency discussions on this topic occurred as part of USCENTCOM's Tabletop Exercise on 29 June 2021. General Miller's assessment informed this discussion as well as internal DOD discussions on the topic. General Miller's assessment was that Bagram was not a suitable location for any potential NEO based on its location, and I concurred with that assessment. It is also worth noting that at the time of this discussion and decision, events on the ground had not yet undermined the assessment that GIROA would be able to hold Kabul.

NONCOMBATANT EVACUATION OPERATION ASSUMPTION

25. Senator INHOFE. General McKenzie, the noncombatant evacuation operation as originally planned assumed that Afghan security forces would help secure the Kabul airport, but had a plan in case that assumption proved untrue. On what day did you realize that the assumption that the Afghan security forces would help secure the airport was incorrect?

General MCKENZIE. On 29JUN21, I directed my staff to produce a NEO branch plan to account for the degraded security situation in Afghanistan and to prepare Temporary Safe Havens for evacuees. On 9JUL21, I requested 96-hour prepare-to-deploy orders (PTDO) for NEO forces. By 11AUG21, it was evident that Kabul was at risk, and I requested the deployment of a Brigade from the 82D ABN DIV, and other elements of our own alert preplanned force package including the 24th MEU, Special Purpose MAGTF, and Joint Task Force-Crisis Response to HKIA. Immediately, and over the next days, these forces flowed swiftly into theater even as the ANDSF disintegrated. Working with Afghan partners composed of elite commando units, which did not fall apart, those forces bolstered the security at the airfield at HKIA.

OVER-THE-HORIZON COUNTERTERRORISM

26. Senator INHOFE. General McKenzie, what is your estimate, in terms of percentage, of the amount of intelligence lost in Afghanistan in each of the following

categories: a) signals intelligence, b) human intelligence, and c) airborne intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance collection?

General MCKENZIE. USCENTCOM has experienced degradation in collection capabilities in Afghanistan commensurate with the reduced force posture following the retrograde. Additional details—pertaining to each specified collection category—are available above the Unclassified level.

27. Senator INHOFE. General McKenzie, how many times in the last 20 years, has Pakistan closed, threatened to close, or otherwise limited the Air or Ground Lines of Communication into or out of Afghanistan?

General MCKENZIE. USCENTCOM is tracking two instances of PAK LOC closures.

1. *GLOC Closure*: a. November 2011 to July 2012. In November 2011, Pakistan shut down the GLOC due to an incident at the AFG/PAK border involving a United States attack helicopter killing approximately 26 Pakistani soldiers. In July 2012, Secretary Clinton apologized to Pakistan on behalf of the United States regarding the November 2011 incident. This opened the door to re-establishing GLOC operations. After negotiating a new memorandum of understanding (MOU) and Terms of Reference, movement began on the GLOC in Fall 2012.

2. *ALOC Closures*: a. 26 February 2019 to 02 March 2019. This closure was due to India/Pakistan firing incidents connected to the 14 February 2019 Pulwama attack and the subsequent 26 February 2019 Balakot airstrike. Pakistan quickly established a different air route for United States assets, and the impact only lasted a day or two as Pakistan provided alternative waypoints thru the ALOC. According to ODR-P, commercial airspace disruptions continued through May 2019.

b. Several times due to internal exercises, Pakistan has established alternate waypoints for United States aircraft to utilize through the ALOC. There were no significant impacts from these very short disruptions.

28. Senator INHOFE. Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie, the errant strike on 29 August that killed 10 civilians, seven of which were children, was described as “over-the-horizon” even though it was conducted within a few miles of over 5,000 American and allied troops. In your opinion, does this example indicate that over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations, in addition to being “much more difficult” as General Milley put it, will be both riskier and less effective?

Secretary AUSTIN. The strike on August 29, 2021 was a self-defense strike, taken against what was believed to be an imminent threat to U.S. forces and civilians. It was a tragic mistake, and the Department has conducted multiple, independent reviews to look at the policies and procedures that led to it. Our over the horizon strike procedures are detailed and deliberate, with multiple methods used over time, to inform targeting and to minimize the risk of civilian casualties.

General MILLEY. [Deleted.]

General MCKENZIE. The strike on 29 August was conducted in a crisis environment under self-defense rules of engagement. This involved a different methodology for target development than will be applied for over-the-horizon CT (OTH-CT). This important difference makes the regrettable outcome of the 29 August strike an imperfect predictor of the success of OTH-CT. There is no doubt OTH-CT is difficult; however, it is not impossible.

29. Senator INHOFE. Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie, what are the conditions regarding the resurgence and reconstitution of al Qaeda and ISIS-K or other terrorist organizations in Afghanistan with international ambitions and capabilities, that would, in your opinion, require you to alert the President that we have a real and growing terrorism problem that requires a revised course of action including a potential revision to your over-the-horizon posture and strategy?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department remains committed to preventing Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist safe haven. We will use the full range of our capabilities in service of that goal. Our counter terrorism focus in Afghanistan is to disrupt terrorist organizations’ external operations against the United States Homeland, Americans abroad, or our allies and partners. Our over-the-horizon strategy is designed to take emerging threats into account.

General MILLEY. I would notify POTUS to reassess our OTH-CT posture if we observe AQ and ISIS-K establishing training camps, receiving increased financial support, increasing the number of foreign fighters traveling to Afghanistan, or indications that the groups are using safe havens within Afghanistan to plot external operations unimpeded by Taliban.

General MCKENZIE. There are several conditions we believe would require alerting the President of the need to adjust the OTH posture or strategy, including:

- ISIS–K eclipses previous highwater mark by establishing a dedicated external operations (EXOPs) element with plans to target the United States Homeland.
- Legacy al Qaeda members return to Afghanistan and leverage the safe haven to direct and oversee EXOPs by globally-dispersed affiliates.
- If our intelligence collection posture proves insufficient to provide timely indications and warnings.
- If strike capability is limited or outpaced by the growth of the violent extremist organization (VEO) threat.
- If the Taliban’s relationship with VEOs changes.

RAPID DETERIORATION OF AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES

30. Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie, you testified that the Doha agreement was demoralizing for the Afghan security forces. In your assessment, was the announcement by President Biden on 14 April more or less demoralizing than the Doha agreement?

Secretary AUSTIN. Our assessment was that the most significant blow to the morale of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces was the signing of the United States–Taliban Agreement in February 2020.

General MILLEY. There was not one single action that demoralized security forces; however, several incidents led to a decrease in morale of the Afghan security forces. The sequence of United States policy announcements with regard to the military retrograde, compounded by rapid Taliban advances during the same period, almost certainly caused a steady decline of morale across the Afghan security forces and the Afghan people at large. In late August 2021, Afghan military leadership stated that the previous United States Administration’s signing of the Doha Agreement “doomed us,” and that the current United States Administration’s announcement to continue an accelerated withdrawal “exacerbated the situation.” Senior Ghani Administration officials also described the Doha Agreement as “legitimizing” the Taliban and warned that the September 2021 withdrawal deadline involved a high level of risk. The change of U.S. administrations in late 2020, followed by a six-month delayed announcement that the U.S. retrograde continue as planned increased the ANDSFs’ already degraded morale. The continuation of the retrograde over the summer of 2021, concurrent with rapid Taliban battlefields gains, created “an enormous sense of betrayal” and fear in Afghanistan, according to public reports from senior Afghan military officials.

General MCKENZIE. I believe the February 2020 Doha Agreement was the predominant reason for the eventual collapse of GIRoA. It is not possible to overstate the pernicious and devastating effect this agreement had on the morale of the ANDSF, particularly aggravated by our negotiation strategy, which did not subsequently apply or enforce conditions on the Taliban. Subsequent announcements regarding reductions of U.S. force levels contributed further to the sense of demoralization.

CHINA

31. Senator INHOFE. Secretary Austin, General Milley, how has Chinese leadership interpreted the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. I can’t speak to the views of Chinese leadership, but I believe that generally speaking, the People’s Republic of China’s leadership knows that the Department of Defense has been, and will continue to increasingly be, deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific region.

General MILLEY. Beijing probably judges that our withdrawal from Afghanistan will enable the United States to focus on competing with China and in Beijing’s view, constrain China’s rise as a global power. Beijing is concerned over the increased risk of terrorism and instability in Afghanistan resulting from our absence, especially emanating from Afghanistan’s shared border with the PRC. However, Beijing probably also sees an opportunity to amplify messaging that United States power is waning. As part of its messaging campaign, Chinese government officials and state media have used our withdrawal from Afghanistan to question our reliability as a security partner in the region, and particularly whether the United States will come to the defense of Taiwan.

INTERAGENCY DELIBERATIONS

32. Senator INHOFE. Secretary Austin, General Milley, General McKenzie, in the timeframe from November 1, 2020 through August 31, 2021, what were the dates and specific topics of interagency meetings convened by the National Security Council addressing the issue of Afghanistan that any of the three of you, the Deputy Sec-

retary of Defense, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, or the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff participated in?

Secretary AUSTIN. I can only speak to meetings convened by the National Security Council (NSC) staff during this administration. The NSC staff regularly convened Deputy and Principal-level meetings to discuss Afghanistan during the policy review leading up to the President's decision in April 2021. These meetings continued over the course of the withdrawal. Between the President's announcement in April 2021 and the beginning of the evacuation in August 2021, the NSC staff convened dozens of Deputy- or Principal-level meetings on Afghanistan, focused on the security situation, the drawdown, Embassy security, the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program, and humanitarian assistance scenario planning. During the evacuation operation, the NSC led daily meetings.

General MILLEY. [Deleted.]

General MCKENZIE. During this time period, I participated in five meetings convened by the NSC to discuss Afghanistan: 3, 4, 11, and 20 February 2021 and 8 July 2021, I defer to the NSC to disclose contents and topics based on the classification of the meetings.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR ROGER F. WICKER

DRONE STRIKE ON AUGUST 29, 2021

33. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin and General Milley, an American Predator drone strike in Kabul on August 29, 2021, killed ten innocent Afghan civilians with no ties to terrorist groups. Reportedly, this strike was at least partly based on intelligence asserting that a white Toyota Corolla, Afghanistan's most common car type, would be involved in an attack at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA). The commander of U.S. Central Command said, "I am fully responsible for the strike and tragic outcome." What are the lessons learned?

Secretary AUSTIN and General MILLEY. The strike on August 29, 2021 was a self-defense strike, taken against what was believed to be an imminent threat to U.S. forces and civilians. It was a tragic mistake, and the Department has conducted multiple, independent reviews on the incident—and a Department of Defense Inspector General review is still ongoing. Reviews to date point to a combination of factors, including a breakdown of communication and confirmation bias, leading to the tragic mistake.

OVER THE HORIZON OPERATIONS

34. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, when conducting over the horizon operations in Afghanistan, what will the Department of Defense or the interagency do to combat enemy disinformation after a completed strike? How much more difficult will it be to counter such disinformation?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department uses its Public Affairs capabilities to provide the most timely and accurate information possible about DOD operations. Effective employment of our information-related capabilities in Afghanistan can be achieved without physical presence.

SIGNALING A RISK AVERSE POSTURE TO U.S. MILITARY CASUALTIES

35. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, Special Forces personnel for Canada, France, and Germany operated outside of the perimeter of Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) to secure the safe passage of their respective nations' citizens. Did the U.S. decision to stay within the confines of HKIA signal that we were unwilling to risk taking any casualties? Did the decision not to extend our presence in Kabul send such a signal? Do you believe it is harmful to U.S. interests to signal that we are unwilling to risk casualties?

Secretary AUSTIN. While we did not discuss these operations at the time, U.S. forces undertook outside-the-wire missions, including the helicopter airlift of 169 Americans from a facility outside the airport to HKIA during the evacuation. It is my firm belief that executing a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) in hostile territory signals to the world the U.S. willingness to take the necessary risks to accomplish the mission at hand.

CLOSE AIR SUPPORT

36. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, the most recent Afghan Ambassador to the United States called me on August 13, 2021, to urge for the continuation of close

air support (CAS) operations. When did the Department of Defense halt close air support operation in support of our Afghan military allies?

Secretary AUSTIN. Throughout the course of the drawdown, U.S. forces continued to conduct air strikes in support of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) fighting the Taliban. Once the drawdown was complete, DOD strike assets were operating from over the horizon, reducing our capacity to provide close air support to ANDSF units. The Department of Defense had the necessary authorities to conduct such strikes through August 31, and we used those authorities where and when it was feasible to defend our ANDSF partners. As United States forces withdrew, Afghan forces, specifically the Afghan Air Force (AAF), assumed roles previously performed by United States forces. The AAF remained operational until the fall of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

37. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, why did the Department of Defense halt close air support operation in support of our Afghan military allies?

Secretary AUSTIN. From the President's decision in April until the collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), United States forces continued to conduct airstrikes in defense of ANDSF units threatened by Taliban attacks. As DOD executed the drawdown and the shift to our Embassy security-focused posture, DOD transitioned to an over-the-horizon posture. Working within these constraints, DOD continued support to the ANDSF as the Taliban pressed their offensive against the Afghan Government.

TREATMENT OF AFGHAN REFUGEES

38. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, group of 18 Afghan Christians were relocated on a military flight from HKIA to Ramstein Air Base during the withdrawal from Afghanistan. After arriving, this group reported threats of violence from other Afghan nationals on the basis of their religion. At my request, the State Department relayed these concerns and a Department of Defense official visited them in-person, only to find these threats credible and the situation urgent. They have been moved to a safe location; however, it confirms that some unvetted evacuees present a real danger to those around them. There are many other vulnerable evacuees experiencing these same threats on the basis of their gender or status as a religious minority. Most evacuees do not have the ability to flag their concerns for elected officials in Washington.

What is the Department of Defense doing to ensure vulnerable populations, such as religious minorities, are not subject to violence and harassment from other Afghan evacuees and how is the Department of Defense proactively working to identify evacuees that present a danger?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department is committed to the safe and successful resettlement of evacuees, and to promptly and fully responding to any alleged threat or security risk to them. DOD has worked closely with the Department of Homeland Security, which is serving as the Lead Federal Agency (LFA) for this operation, and our other interagency partners to provide appropriate public safety, security, and law enforcement at each DOD installation where evacuees are temporarily housed. This effort includes Federal, State, local, and DOD law enforcement and security forces as well as, in the case of overseas installations, host nation law enforcement. Together, these teams provide visible, proactive patrols, integration into the community leaders' councils, and the provision of education on law enforcement activities in U.S. communities. Additionally, resources and expertise from across the Federal Government and from non-governmental organizations and volunteer organizations have been marshaled to provide critical cultural, gender, and religious advisors, with due focus on and sensitivity to those likely to be most vulnerable. DOD is committed to supporting DHS, in their role as the Lead Federal Agency, in the thorough security vetting and complete processing of every evacuee, which includes the collection of biographic and biometric information.

Senator Dan Sullivan

VARIABLES IMPACTING OVER-THE-HORIZON (OTH) COUNTERTERRORISM (CT) MISSIONS

39. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, will the threat of Taliban, al Qaeda, or ISIS-K violence against US citizens or legal permanent residents in Afghanistan deter the United States from conducting OTH CT strikes in Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department remains committed to preventing Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist safe haven, and we will harness our significant capabilities in service of that goal. Our counterterrorism objective in Afghanistan is to disrupt terrorist organizations' external operations against the U.S. Homeland, Ameri-

cans abroad, and our allies and partners. We always have the ability to take action, including kinetic action, to disrupt terrorist threats to our people and our interests.

General MILLEY. General Milley defers to Secretary Austin, as this is a matter of Administration policy.

General MCKENZIE. No.

40. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, will CENTCOM require additional personnel or equipment to execute the OTH CT mission in Afghanistan?

Secretary AUSTIN. We continuously evaluate requirements to balance forces across the Department's missions, and make adjustments when required.

General MILLEY. General Milley defers to Secretary Austin, as this is a matter of Administration policy.

General MCKENZIE. USCENTCOM will require operations and intelligence personnel at our OTH-CT HQ as well as ISR resources, but the numbers will be substantially less than previous missions in Afghanistan. We are in constant dialogue with the Secretary of Defense about our requirements.

41. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, if CENTCOM requires additional personnel or equipment to execute the OTH CT mission in Afghanistan, when will they arrive in the AOR?

Secretary AUSTIN. The projected timeline of any potential movement of forces will be based upon the resource and the availability of the asset, when compared with other global requirements.

General MILLEY. General Milley defers to Secretary Austin, as this is a matter of Administration policy.

General MCKENZIE. The resources we requested and that the SecDef approved are in the AOR now. We will continually assess if additional resources are needed and request them if that is the case.

42. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, if CENTCOM requires additional personnel or equipment to execute the OTH CT mission in Afghanistan, will any of the personnel or assets come from the United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) area of responsibility (AOR)?

Secretary AUSTIN. We continuously evaluate requirements to balance forces across the Department's missions, and make adjustments when required. Any decision on re-allocation of forces from one AOR to another will be based on a thorough review of the priority of the mission, assets available, and informed by the needs of the Combatant Commanders. We have significant capability in both the CENTCOM and INDOPACOM AORs.

General MILLEY. General Milley defers to Secretary Austin, as this is a matter of Administration policy.

General MCKENZIE. As part of any request for forces (RFF) process, the Joint Staff considers all possible sourcing options when they make recommendations to the Secretary of Defense.

43. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, can the United States conduct OTH CT operations in Afghanistan if none of the countries that share a border with Afghanistan grant overflights rights?

Secretary AUSTIN. The U.S. Government has discussions ongoing with countries in the region, regarding a range of issues, to include overflight. Our discussions have been promising.

General MILLEY. General Milley defers to Secretary Austin, as this is a matter of Administration policy.

General MCKENZIE. Even with current Access, Basing, and Overflight (ABO) conditions, OTH-CT is a difficult endeavor. Although further degradation of ABO would increase risk to the OTH-CT mission, the United States still maintains a variety of lethal and nonlethal capabilities to disrupt and degrade terrorist organizations in Afghanistan. The United States always retains the right to defend U.S. forces or persons.

AFGHAN NATIONAL DEFENSE AND SECURITY FORCES (ANDSF) ASSESSMENTS

44. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, you testified that the Doha Agreement significantly impacted ANDSF morale and that ANDSF suffered from poor leadership and organization. Can you explain how your assessments of ANDSF effectiveness, leadership, and organization changed from February 29, 2020 to August 31, 2021?

Secretary AUSTIN. Afghan political leadership became increasingly fractured after the signing of the United States-Taliban Agreement on February 29, 2020, and the signing of the agreement was a significant blow to the morale of the ANDSF. Political infighting among Afghan Government leaders, and frequent changes within the leadership ranks, significantly eroded effectiveness of the ANDSF over the course of 2021, as they assumed increased responsibilities.

General MILLEY. When the Doha Agreement was signed, the ANDSF possessed sufficient equipment and manpower that if employed correctly, could have allowed them to hold out against Taliban offenses for 12–24 months.

From February 2020 to August 2021, the ANDSF began to assume a defensive posture, providing the Taliban freedom of movement to attack static positions causing morale to degrade. On 12 May 2020, former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced the ANDSF would return to an offensive posture after several Taliban attacks, but little impact was witnessed. The ANDSF was heavily reliant on coalition air support to conduct large scale ground operations. The decrease in coalition air support forced an increase in AAF operations further overstressing the force. With the ANDSF located at remote locations across the country, providing logistical and combat support became increasingly difficult for the AAF to sustain operations. The withdrawal of contract logistics support that maintained the majority of Afghan aircraft further compounded the AAF's ability to sustain a high OPTEMPO.

By early 2021, we were assessing that ANDSF was having difficulty controlling Provincial Capitals, and we observed them ceding large swaths of rural territory, and witnessed high attrition rates. By spring 2021, the Taliban adopted a battlefield strategy of cutting highways and lines of communications to prevent ANDSF from resupplying or providing reinforcements to nearby bases. A lack of aircraft, leadership, and corruption further degraded morale. By summer 2021, the Taliban was negotiating surrenders with local elders and ANDSF personnel handing the Taliban swaths of territory. Furthermore, ANDSF's most capable units including ANASOC were sent from Kabul to fight in other provinces; we assessed that overstretched those units and left Kabul vulnerable.

By August 2021, ANDSF was suffering from a lack of leadership, morale issues, corruption, ANDSF's most elite forces deployed out of Kabul, and failure to adopt a comprehensive defense plan led to the fall of Kabul. The details described is how our assessment changed over time.

General MCKENZIE. It was consistently my assessment that the ANDSF would collapse without U.S. assistance. It is impossible to overstate the pernicious and debilitating effects the 29 February 2020 agreement had on ANDSF morale. Morale continued to decline with every subsequent announcement of U.S. force reduction. However, I believed the ANDSF, without U.S. support following our withdrawal, would endure through the 2021–2022 winter fighting season.

TALIBAN ATTACKS ON U.S. AND COALITION FORCES

45. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, did the Taliban or forces under Taliban direction attack US or Coalition Forces at any point between February 29, 2020 and August 31, 2021?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Taliban did not target United States or coalition forces since signing the United States-Taliban Agreement through the completion of the withdrawal. However, it was my assessment that if we remained beyond August 31, 2021, the Taliban would likely begin targeting United States or coalition forces again.

General MILLEY. To my knowledge, the Taliban never deliberately attacked U.S. or Coalition ground forces after the signing of the Doha Agreement. There were isolated instances of Taliban rocket and mortar fire targeting ANDSF bases where U.S. Forces were present. On occasion there were reports of Taliban fighters that returned fire at United States combat aircraft providing close air support to ANDSF.

General MCKENZIE. Between 29 February 2020 and 31 August 2021, there were seven attacks against locations where U.S. or Coalition forces were present. Five of these were indirect fire (IDF) events and two were suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attacks. Two of the IDF and both SVBIED attacks resulted in ANDSF casualties, but none of the attacks in this period resulted in United States or Coalition force casualties. The Taliban or forces under Taliban direction may have conducted these attacks; however, the attribution for the attacks has not been confirmed and the ANDSF were the likely targets.

46. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, if the Taliban or forces under Taliban direction did attack United States or Coalition

Forces at any point between February 29, 2020 and August 31, 2021, did this violate the Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban?

Secretary AUSTIN. My view is that if a Taliban attack had wittingly targeted United States or coalition forces, that would have been a violation of the United States-Taliban Agreement.

General MILLEY. To my knowledge, the Taliban never deliberately attacked United States or Coalition ground forces after the signing of the Doha Agreement. There were isolated instances of Taliban rocket and mortar fire targeting ANDSF bases where U.S. Forces were present. On occasion there were reports of Taliban fighters that returned fire at United States combat aircraft providing close air support to ANDSF.

The Taliban failed to fully honor any other commitment from the agreement, including their pledge to not allow terrorists to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States. They also failed to engage in substantive negotiations to end the conflict and failed to reduce violence overall. Moreover, Taliban actions, including its brutal military campaign and targeted assassinations, completely undermined the spirit of the agreement, which sought a peaceful settlement to the conflict, not a military takeover.

General MCKENZIE. An attack on U.S. forces between 29 February 2020 and 31 August 2021 confirmed to have been conducted by the Taliban or forces under its direction could be understood as going against one of the Taliban's commitments under the Doha Agreement. However, determinations concerning whether any particular engagement or engagements were inconsistent with the Doha Agreement were policy matters, to be informed by USCENTCOM's military assessments, but not military decisions for USCENTCOM to render.

TRIPWIRES TO DECLARE NONCOMBATANT EVACUATION OPERATION (NEO)

47. Senator WICKER. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, to your knowledge, what were the tripwires for the State Department to declare a NEO in Afghanistan between January 20, 2021 and August 31, 2021?

Secretary AUSTIN. I would defer to the Department of State on U.S. Embassy Kabul's tripwires.

General MILLEY. Senator, I will provide this answer in a classified response.

General MCKENZIE. The State Department's Embassy Kabul Emergency Action Plan contained several "Risk Indicators," including 17 Kabul-specific indicators, which served as the basis for considering actions to take. These helped inform State Department decisions regarding whether to draw down the Embassy's presence and evacuate non-combatants. The 17 Kabul-specific indicators were included in a number of DOD and interagency briefs and discussions, and the Embassy specifically made them REL FVEY NATO at USCENTCOM's request to facilitate NEO planning with our allies and partners.

48. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, to your knowledge, were any tripwires for the State Department to declare a NEO in Afghanistan modified or changed with the completion of the US military retrograde from Afghanistan in July 2021?

Secretary AUSTIN. I would defer to the Department of State on U.S. Embassy Kabul's tripwires.

General MILLEY. The NEO plan was continually reviewed and updated by the State Department, DOD, CENTCOM, and the embassy in Kabul as the situation developed throughout the summer.

General MCKENZIE. The Risk Indicators were drafted prior to the military retrograde and were not modified or changed after its completion in July.

49. Senator WICKER. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, to your knowledge, were the tripwires for the State Department to declare a NEO in Afghanistan reviewed at the April 28, 2021 Afghanistan Retrograde Rehearsal, the May 8, 2021 senior official ROC drill, the June 11, 2021 working level interagency table top exercise on NEO, or the August 6, 2021 senior official interagency Non-Combatant Evacuation table top exercise?

Secretary AUSTIN. I would defer to the Department of State on U.S. Embassy Kabul's tripwires.

General MILLEY. General Milley defers to the Department of State on this matter.

General MCKENZIE. The 17 Kabul-specific risk indicators in the Embassy Kabul Emergency Action Plan to help facilitate assessment and decision making factored into planning beginning in late July - early August.

CALLS WITH PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY (PLA) COUNTERPART

50. Senator WICKER. General Milley, when can you provide the Senate Armed Service Committee transcripts of your October 30, 2020 and January 8, 2021 calls with PLA counterparts and lists of United States officials present for the calls?

General MILLEY. Transcripts are not produced for phone calls I execute with my counterparts. I am willing to share a classified readout and list of individuals present during the calls, which I have already transmitted to individual members of the committee.

 QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR RICK SCOTT

COVID-19

51. Senator SCOTT. Secretary Austin, will the Department require a dishonorable discharge in all cases wherein a service member refuses to take the COVID-19 vaccine?

Secretary AUSTIN. No. On August 24, 2021, after careful consultation with medical experts and military leadership, I issued direction to the Secretaries of the Military Departments, requiring that all members of the Armed Forces under DOD authority on active duty or in the Ready Reserve, including the National Guard, be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The Military Departments have committed to extensive counseling with individual Service members who have concerns about a vaccine, in advance of taking any adverse actions for failing to obey a lawful order to take a vaccine. For Service members who refuse vaccination orders without a lawful exemption, Commanders have a wide range of disciplinary tools available. Such tools range from counseling to courts-martial, with many intermediate possibilities, including removal from a position, non-judicial punishment, and administrative separation.

 QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR MARSHA BLACKBURN

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE TALIBAN

52. Senator BLACKBURN. General McKenzie, what was the nature of your negotiations with the Taliban from the time you took command in Afghanistan until Kabul's fall?

General MCKENZIE. I have never negotiated with the Taliban. I did not communicate with the Taliban until Kabul was in the process of falling. I met with Taliban representatives in Doha on 15 August 2021 with the primary purpose of warning them that the United States would respond forcibly to any effort on their part to interfere with the NEO. They pledged not to do so. I further proposed that they withdraw their forces from the city and allow the ANDSF to secure it until the Taliban and GIRoA agreed upon a transition plan, but President Ghani fled and GIRoA effectively collapsed the same day as this meeting. Subsequent to this meeting, I had no further contact with any Taliban representatives.

53. Senator BLACKBURN. General McKenzie, in your August meetings with the Taliban in Doha, did their officials ever offer to allow U.S. troops to control Kabul throughout our withdraw, and if so, did you consult with any other administration official prior to making these agreements?

General MCKENZIE. The Taliban observed that "someone" would have to secure Kabul and inquired whether the United States intended to do so. I did not consider this a sincere "offer." Securing Kabul would have required the additional deployment of a reinforced combat division, which would have had to deliberately clear the city before securing its outer perimeter—activities that would have provoked overt hostilities with the Taliban and jeopardized the NEO. In the presence of the President's Special Representative, Ambassador Khalilzad, I informed the Taliban that United States forces would not undertake the security of a city that the Taliban had already infiltrated, and I reaffirmed the specific purpose of the meeting: to warn the Taliban of the severe consequences of interfering with our NEO. The Taliban pledged that they had no intention of doing so and subsequently abided by this commitment. I reported this conversation to my chain of command.

54. Senator BLACKBURN. General McKenzie, at any point in August did you attempt to negotiate for a wider perimeter around Hamid Karzai International Airport

(HKIA) that U.S. troops would control while evacuation operations were taking place?

General MCKENZIE. Given the forces we had on the ground on 15 AUG, it would not have been possible to secure more perimeter outside of HKIA without a sizeable increase in forces. The perimeter was adequate for our force protection requirements.

55. Senator BLACKBURN. General McKenzie, do you assess that the ISIS-K terrorists getting past the Taliban checkpoints, when Afghans with legitimate paperwork provided by the Department of State were being turned away, to be a violation of Taliban leaders' security guarantee?

General MCKENZIE. No. United States forces at HKIA had coordination meetings with the Taliban several times daily, and the security environment was changing almost hourly. Commanders on the ground dealt immediately with any divergence or perceived divergence from security coordination at HKIA. The Taliban was largely receptive to our requirements for external security support.

56. Senator BLACKBURN. General McKenzie, if the Taliban did not adhere to the majority of the conditions prescribed in the Doha agreement – then why did President Biden?

General MCKENZIE. I cannot speculate as to how the President came to his decisions. We had robust discussions on every aspect of our withdrawal, and in the end, he decided to proceed. I cannot discuss the actual content of our discussions.

57. Senator BLACKBURN. General McKenzie, do you assess that the Taliban have the capability to prevent al Qaeda from conducting attacks from within Afghanistan? Do you have the intent to do so?

General MCKENZIE. The Taliban are capable of limiting al-Qaida's activities in Afghanistan in the near to mid-term, including preventing the group from conducting external attacks. I do not have any insight into the Taliban's intent. However, as Afghanistan stabilizes, the Taliban leadership's intent to prevent al-Qaida from conducting external attacks and willingness to monitor and suppress al-Qaida activity may diminish.

COST ESTIMATES

58. Senator BLACKBURN. Secretary Austin, please provide a cost assessment of the equipment that was left by DOD in Afghanistan; please provide figures on both United States-owned and -operated equipment left or destroyed in place, and equipment provided to the ANDSF by the United States.

Secretary AUSTIN. The value of equipment that the Department of Defense provided to the Afghan security forces since 2005 is approximately \$18 billion. Much of this equipment was destroyed in combat or has been degraded. Over the course of the retrograde, the Department of Defense removed tens of thousands of tons of equipment out of Afghanistan. Remaining equipment was transitioned to the ANDSF, for their use to defend their own country, consistent with congressional intent. Prior to the United States departure from Afghanistan, there were over 100 United States vehicles, more than 70 Afghan aircraft, and other equipment destroyed or demilitarized at Hamid Karzai International Airport.

COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE PRESS

59. Senator BLACKBURN. General Milley, in testimony you confirmed that you did speak with Bob Woodward for his book "Peril". Did you speak with Robert Costa?

General MILLEY. I did speak with Mr. Woodward, but not Mr. Costa. I engage with the media routinely as part of my role as Chairman. I believe it is vital for senior officials to talk to the media in all of its various forms to explain the Department's activities. We are beholden to the people of this Nation and a free and open press is critical to the function of the democracy we are sworn to support and defend.

60. Senator BLACKBURN. General Milley, have you ever had on or off the record conversations with authors in which government resources were used (i.e. at the Pentagon, via a DOD email account, or on a work phone)?

General MILLEY. I frequently conduct background, on-the-record and off-the-record interviews with various media in coordination with my public affairs office. We disclose details of military decision making and our operations to the American people within the bounds of operational security. I believe the American people have the right to know these details. My media engagements are consistent with the previous

practice of this office and that of other senior government officials. All my public affairs activities comply with applicable laws and statutory regulations.

61. Senator BLACKBURN. General Milley, in your time as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, how many times have you briefed the press at a routine press call?

General MILLEY. Routine press engagements include scheduled press briefings at the Pentagon, travel with designated media, on the record, off the record and background interviews. These are scheduled and facilitated through OCJCS Public Affairs.

62. Senator BLACKBURN. General Milley, in addition to “Frankly, We Did Win The Election,” by Michael C. Bender; “Peril,” by Bob Woodward and Robert Costa; and “I Alone Can Fix It: Donald Trump’s Catastrophic Final Year,” by Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig, how many additional authors have you spoken with about the Trump presidency?

General MILLEY. Two. I routinely speak with reporters and authors as part of my duties as Chairman in order to inform the American people. These engagements are planned in coordination with my public affairs office.

63. Senator BLACKBURN. General Milley, please provide all written communications and transcripts of any recorded conversations you had with the press or authors regarding the following books: “Frankly, We Did Win The Election,” by Michael C. Bender; “Peril,” by Bob Woodward and Robert Costa; and “I Alone Can Fix It: Donald Trump’s Catastrophic Final Year,” by Philip Rucker and Carol Leonnig.

General MILLEY. I do not possess any such written communication or transcripts. Any documented communication would only be between these individuals and my public affairs office to coordinate the details of such conversations.

64. Senator BLACKBURN. General Milley, have you ever had on or off the record conversations with, or provided any information to, an author or member of the press regarding any other books, including, but not limited to, the following—and if so, with whom did you communicate:

- “Landslide, The Final Days of the Trump Presidency” by Michael Wolff
- “In Trump’s Shadow: The Battle for 2024 and the Future of the GOP” by David Drucker
- “Betrayal: The Final Act of the Trump Show” by Jonathan Karl
- “Midnight in Washington: How We Almost Lost Our Democracy and Still Could” by Adam Schiff
- “Nightmare Scenario, Inside the Trump Administration’s Response to the Pandemic That Changed History” by Yasmeen Abutaleb and Damian Paletta
- An untitled and forthcoming book by Peter Baker and Susan Glasser
- “I’ll Take Your Questions Now: What I Saw at the Trump White House” by Stephanie Grisham, October 2021
- “For Such A Time As This,” by Kayleigh McEnany, December 2021
- “In Trump Time: A Journal of Americas Plague Year” by Peter Navarro, November 2021

General MILLEY. I conduct routine on the record, off the record, background interviews with journalists and authors. These are scheduled by my public affairs office.

65. Senator BLACKBURN. General Milley, if you answered yes to the previous question, please provide all written communications and transcripts of any recorded conversations you had regarding these books.

General MILLEY. I do not possess any such written communications or transcripts.

DISCLOSURE

66. Senator BLACKBURN. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, in accordance with your testimony on Tuesday, will you please provide the committee with any written recommendations that either you personally, your command, or your department made to the President of the United States; related to the withdraw of forces from Afghanistan in accordance with the appropriate classifications.

Secretary AUSTIN. The Administration, through the National Security Council process, conducted a rigorous interagency review of the way forward for Afghanistan in advance of the President’s announcement in April. The Administration asked for and thoughtfully considered my views, as well as the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the USCENCOM Commander, and the United States Forces-Afghanistan

commander. We each advised the President on a broad range of options and our assessment of their potential outcomes. I will not comment on the specific recommendations I made to the President or on the details of these executive discussions.

General MILLEY. I gave the range of options and my best military advice orally and in writing to both Presidents Trump and Biden through Secretaries of Defense Esper, Miller, and Austin, in coordination with Assistants to the President for National Security Affairs (APNSAs) O'Brien and Sullivan.

General MCKENZIE. I provide my military advice through the chain of command—via the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense and, at the Secretary's discretion, to the President. I do not engage with the President directly without the Secretary's awareness. It is at the Secretary's and the President's discretion to share any written correspondence between the Department and the President.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JOSH HAWLEY

DOD INPUT REGARDING EVACUATION TIMELINE

67. Senator HAWLEY. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, did General Miller speak to you about the timeline for closing the United States embassy in Kabul, and if so, what did he recommend, when did he provide that recommendation, and did you share his recommendation with officials at the State Department or White House?

Secretary AUSTIN. Department of Defense leaders, including General Miller, were working closely with the Department of State to support security requirements for United States Embassy Kabul. Any decision to close the embassy ultimately rests with the Department of State. I am satisfied that the National Security Council-led interagency review was robust and that the President sought out and listened to a range of expert perspectives.

General MILLEY. [Deleted.]

General MCKENZIE. During General Miller's time in command of USFOR-A, he did not speak with me about suspending operations at the embassy in Kabul. At that time, we conducted planning based on the assumptions that GIROA would continue as the effective governing entity and that accordingly, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul would remain in active operation.

68. Senator HAWLEY. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, did you advise the State Department to close the U.S. embassy in Kabul prior to August 12, and if so, what did you recommend, when did you make this recommendation, and to whom did you provide this recommendation?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department of Defense planned for a wide range of contingencies for security at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. During interagency discussions, we provided our recommendations for DOD support to Embassy security. Because of that contingency planning, we were able to safely draw down our embassy and move our diplomatic mission to the airport. We were also able to secure the airport and start the evacuation within 72 hours of the decision to execute a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO).

General MILLEY. [Deleted.]

General MCKENZIE. No. On 08 July, the President announced that the United States would end combat operations on 31 August, and that the United States would continue the diplomatic mission. Throughout July and August, USFOR-A FWD advised the U.S. Embassy Kabul staff, including the Ambassador, on the security situation, including the status of the Afghan National Defense Forces, threat conditions, and DOD-assessed impacts should a U.S. presence remain. Those engagements became more frequent and more focused as the security situation deteriorated, including through the end of the NEO.

69. Senator HAWLEY. Secretary Austin, when asked during the hearing on Tuesday about the Department of Defense's communications with the State Department regarding the timeline for a noncombatant evacuation, you responded, "We provided our input to the State Department." What specific "input" did the Department of Defense provide to the State Department regarding the timeline for a noncombatant evacuation, and when did the Department of Defense provide that input?

Secretary AUSTIN. Through a series of senior-level National Security Council-led interagency meetings, the Department of Defense provided input, including but not limited to military capabilities and planning to support a noncombatant evacuation

operation (NEO) under different scenarios, and support to the Department of State. It is the Department of State's decision to formally declare a NEO.

70. Senator HAWLEY. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, did any Department of Defense official object to the timelines or any other aspect of the plans presented by the State Department for a noncombatant evacuation at the June 11 interagency table-top exercise referenced in General Milley's written statement, and if so, who objected and what specifically were their objections?

Secretary AUSTIN. DOD conducted a thorough analysis of and provided constructive input into the Department of State's timelines and plans for a possible non-combatant evacuation operation, including areas where DOD required additional information or had concerns.

General MILLEY. At an Interagency planning session designed to prepare for the June 11, 2021 Interagency Table-Top Exercise, the NSC provided policy-framing guidance to focus only on the retrograde of U.S. and NATO Forces from Afghanistan. My staff continued to conduct daily meetings with their State Department counterparts to maintain situational awareness and reinforce the need for a more-involved Interagency planning effort to ensure the development of a coherent NEO plan and for embassy drawdown to pace with the U.S. military drawdown.

General MCKENZIE. The June IA TTX focused on withdrawal from Afghanistan, not NEO operations. The State Department did not present a NEO plan at this TTX.

71. Senator HAWLEY. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, did any Department of Defense official object to the timelines or any other aspect of the plans presented by the State Department for a noncombatant evacuation at the August 6 interagency table-top exercise referenced in General Milley's written statement, and if so, who objected and what specifically were their objections?

Secretary AUSTIN. As a part of the table-top discussions, DOD identified and conveyed the U.S. military's capabilities and constraints to evacuate individuals under different scenarios. DOD conducted a thorough analysis of and provided constructive input into the Department of State's timelines and plans for a possible noncombatant evacuation operation.

General MILLEY. On August 6, 2021, the Afghanistan Interagency Table-Top Exercise focused on the DOD NEO Base Plan. State Department presented tripwires which were discussed and agreed upon.

General MCKENZIE. No. We requested clarification and more fidelity on the categories and likely numbers of evacuees, more fidelity on potential locations for DOS-directed temporary safe havens (TSH) for potential NEO evacuees once they were moved from Afghanistan, and for better understanding of DOS decision points that would lead to a request for DOD support to execute a NEO.

72. Senator HAWLEY. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, did any Department of Defense official at the August 6 table-top exercise advise the State Department that they should begin a noncombatant evacuation immediately?

Secretary AUSTIN. As a part of the table-top discussions, DOD identified and conveyed the U.S. military's capabilities and constraints to evacuate individuals under different scenarios. DOD conducted a thorough analysis of and provided constructive input into the Department of State's timelines and plans for a possible noncombatant evacuation operation.

General MILLEY. Senior military leaders were clear and consistent in signaling a need for the State Department, as the lead federal agency, to accelerate the withdrawal of embassy personnel.

General MCKENZIE. USCENTCOM's role in the Interagency Wargame on 7AUG21 was to review Joint Staff Courses of Action and provide our Concept of the Operation in support of the NEO when directed by the Department of State.

FORCE REQUIREMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN PRIOR TO AND DURING THE NEO

73. Senator HAWLEY. General Milley, in your military judgement, should the United States have sent forces back to Kabul prior to August 12 in order to disrupt, delay, or degrade the Taliban's ability to seize control of Kabul, in part or whole, and prepare for a noncombatant evacuation?

General MILLEY. At the time, I did not assess, nor did the intel community, that the ANDSF would disband in 10 days and completely abandon Kabul without a fight. In order to disrupt, delay, or degrade the Taliban's advance and seize Kabul, the US would have had to introduce at least a full Brigade Combat Team (BCT), which is approximately 4,000 to 5,000 troops in addition to the BCT equivalent to

secure HKIA. So we would be re-introducing 10,000 troops and it would mean re-intensifying the war with the Taliban which was not in accordance with the strategic guidance we were operating under and the likely cost in U.S. casualties would be significant. Finally, the time required to execute this COA would have required the United States to remain in Afghanistan for an extended period of time with no clear end-state. For all of those reasons I did not make that recommendation, nor did anyone else, although it was considered.

74. Senator HAWLEY. General Milley, if you judge that the United States should have sent forces back to Kabul prior to August 12, with whom did you share that judgment and when did you do so?

General MILLEY. [Deleted.]

75. Senator HAWLEY. Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie, on August 18, 2021, Secretary Austin said, “We don’t have the capability to go out and collect up large numbers of people.” Did the Department of Defense request additional forces during the noncombatant evacuation operation in order to rescue Americans trapped in Kabul or for other purposes, when did it make any such requests, and were any such requests approved or denied?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department of Defense did make requests for support during the noncombatant evacuation operation, and those approved requests provided additional forces to improve security and to synchronize command and control in order to improve our ability to increase the number of people being evacuated. While we did not discuss these operations at the time, U.S. forces undertook outside-the-wire missions, including the helicopter airlift of 169 Americans from a facility outside the airport to HKIA during the evacuation.

General MILLEY. On August 18, 2021, the military was still building combat power at the Kabul airport following the request for a non-combatant evacuation operation. At that point, we had approximately 4,000 troops to secure and defend the airport. From that point forward, our troop presence grew as we continued to flow in troops and build combat power. We used a number of innovative approaches to go out, pick up and facilitate the entry of American citizens to the airport as the situation continued to develop. Our forces on the ground were often in direct contact with American citizens in the area to assist them in gaining access to the airport perimeter.

General MCKENZIE. No additional forces were requested for the stated purpose of rescuing Americans trapped in Kabul. This action would have required the introduction of significantly more forces into Afghanistan and would have sparked a conflict with the Taliban. As an alternative, we used a variety of means to recover Americans who did not have direct access to the airport.

PLANS AND RESOURCING FOR OTH CT IN AFGHANISTAN

76. Senator HAWLEY. Secretary Austin, the Pentagon has said repeatedly in recent years that the Indo-Pacific is its “priority theater.” If the Indo-Pacific is the priority theater, would you agree that INDOPACOM should be the option of last resort for sourcing requests for forces by other combatant commands, particularly for high-demand, low-density assets?

Secretary AUSTIN. I strongly support, and am committed to maintaining, a combat-credible, force posture in the Indo-Pacific region to deter our adversaries and defend our interests, allies, and partners. The Global Force Management (GFM) process, through which the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Combatant Commands, the Joint Staff, and the Military Services review and provide recommendations on requests for forces, enables me to make informed risk management decisions in response to emergent crises and global challenges. Circumstances can emerge where an urgent operational requirement—such as the deployment of forces to conduct the non-combatant evacuation operation from Afghanistan—requires temporary reallocation of forces from higher strategic priorities. I am confident that the current guidance and priorities we have in place enable me to make strategically-aligned force management decisions that balance these tradeoffs.

77. Senator HAWLEY. Secretary Austin, as the Department of Defense formulates options for conducting over-the-horizon counterterrorism options in Afghanistan, have you provided explicit guidance to minimize the use of forces assigned to INDOPACOM, and if not, why not?

Secretary AUSTIN. The Department’s focus is on China as the pacing challenge, and this informs my approach to the Global Force Management process. This process provides a robust review of available forces with the expertise, training, readi-

ness, and experience necessary to successfully complete the mission. It includes scrutiny at multiple levels within the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Combatant Commands, the Joint Staff, and the Military Services. Their recommendations provide the foundation for a Department-wide approach to address emergent crises and global challenges, including the complex and multi-faceted challenges of executing over-the-horizon counterterrorism missions. I am confident that our current processes can effectively balance priorities.

78. Senator HAWLEY. General Milley, the Pentagon has reported to Congress consistently over the years that CENTCOM consumes the vast majority of air-breathing ISR (that is, non-spaced based assets) available across the Joint Force. As a result, other combatant commands such as INDOPACOM and United States European Command (EUCOM) have had to live with substantial ISR shortfalls in their theaters as they try to monitor China, Russia, and North Korea. Would you agree that as we try to monitor terrorist groups in Afghanistan, we should try to use the ISR assets already available to CENTCOM rather than take assets from other combatant commands?

General MILLEY. Airborne ISR missions in support of the over-the-horizon counter-terrorism (OTH-CT) mission in Afghanistan continue to use assets tailored to CT that were already in the USCENTCOM theater. We globally allocate resources based on National Defense Strategy priorities, including countering violent extremist organizations. If the environment in Afghanistan changes in the future, driving a need for additional forces to execute OTH-CT, I would advise the Secretary on the allocation and transfer of forces among combatant commands as necessary to address the threat. We will continue to assess global demands based on priorities and risk.

79. Senator HAWLEY. General Milley, U.S. forces, sensors, and platforms vary in their relevance for over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations. Would you agree that an aircraft carrier operating from the Arabian Sea is a relatively expensive and inefficient way to conduct counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. We constantly balance competing world-wide demands for Department of Defense capabilities. Assets with diverse capabilities and greater mobility, like an aircraft carrier, will inevitably support a variety of operations across multiple Combatant Commands in order to balance both short and long-term priorities. OTH CT operations from an aircraft carrier is not the most efficient, nor the most cost effective method over a lengthy period of time.

80. Senator HAWLEY. General Milley, when INDOPACOM is our priority theater, and when strategic competition with China and Russia are the top priorities of our strategy, is the optimal use of our limited fleet of aircraft carriers to operate in the Arabian Sea monitoring terrorist groups in Afghanistan?

General MILLEY. As a global force, we constantly balance priorities world-wide. We align capabilities, not specific assets, to these priorities and there are many factors to consider when doing so. The optimal use of an aircraft carrier is against nation states. However, with their wide range of capabilities and great mobility, aircraft carriers will shift from one Combatant Command to another as we adjust forces globally in support of our highest priorities.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR TOMMY TUBERVILLE

WITHDRAWAL PLAN

81. Senator TUBERVILLE. Secretary Austin, was an Afghanistan withdrawal plan drafted prior to January 20, 2020 by the previous administration?

Secretary AUSTIN. I am not able to speak to plans developed by the previous administration.

82. Senator TUBERVILLE. Secretary Austin, was this [previous administration] plan being implemented during the transition period?

Secretary AUSTIN. When I came into office, I received briefings on the situation in Afghanistan and the posture of United States and Resolute Support forces throughout the region at that point in time. Those briefings provided me information about the pace of the drawdown of U.S. forces from 12,600 in February 2020 when the United States-Taliban Agreement was signed to approximately 2,500 when this administration began. I am not able to speak to plans developed by the previous administration.

83. Senator TUBERVILLE. Secretary Austin, during the House Armed Services hearing on Wednesday, September 19, you stated that “there was no hand-off” to you in regards to an Afghanistan withdrawal plan during the transition. Why did you not review the previous administration’s plan?

Secretary AUSTIN. When I assumed my position as Secretary of Defense, I made a point to get the facts and assessments directly from the Commanders to inform my own views, which I shared with the President and during the interagency policy review leading up to the decision in April 2021 to withdraw United States forces from Afghanistan.

84. Senator TUBERVILLE. Secretary Austin, if you did not review the previous administration’s plan:

- At what level was it written?
- When was this plan initially presented to the Department of Defense under the previous administration?
- When was this plan initially presented to the Department of Defense under the Biden administration?
- Who was this plan reviewed by within the Biden administration?
- Who made the decision that you did not need to review the previous administration’s Afghanistan withdrawal plan?

Secretary AUSTIN. I cannot speak to the previous Administration’s plans. When I assumed my position as Secretary of Defense, I made a point to get the facts and assessments directly from the commanders to inform my own views, which I shared with the President and during the interagency policy review leading up to the decision in April 2021 to withdraw United States forces from Afghanistan.

85. Senator TUBERVILLE. Secretary Austin, when did you first review the Biden administration’s withdrawal plan?

Secretary AUSTIN. I was given numerous opportunities to provide the Department’s views and my personal advice to the President. I was involved in every stage of the policy discussion on our options for Afghanistan. The President was thoughtful and deliberate in considering a range of facts and advice before he made his decision to withdraw remaining United States forces from Afghanistan by August 31, 2021. I supported his decision.

86. Senator TUBERVILLE. Secretary Austin, was the plan you signed off on written under the previous administration or the Biden administration?

Secretary AUSTIN. The agreement reached by the previous administration required all United States forces to be out of Afghanistan by May 1, 2021. In return, the Taliban stopped attacking our forces and our partners. President Biden asked for a review of genuine, realistic options to advance and protect U.S. interests. The interagency process that this administration ran generated those options. What emerged was a clear-eyed assessment of the best path forward to advance American interests: ending the war in Afghanistan after 20 years so that we can address the global threat picture as it exists today, not as it was two decades ago. Had the President not followed through on the commitments that his predecessor made, the risk to force would have exponentially increased.

