

Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad
Opening Statement for Afghanistan Briefing
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the Committee. I am grateful to be here today to discuss America's strategy in Afghanistan. As you know, President Biden has announced his decision to begin the withdrawal of remaining U.S. forces from Afghanistan by May 1 and to conclude before September 11. This decision was reached after an extensive review of the United States' mission in that country over the past 20 years, of the facts on the ground there currently, of the options available to us now and their likely consequences, and of the global situation and challenges our country needs to address with regard to both state and non-state actors.

As the President laid out in his speech on April 14, he made the decision based on four judgments:

1. Our original objective in Afghanistan after 9/11 was to root out al Qaeda there. That movement has been significantly degraded and its infamous leader Osama bin Laden brought to justice.
2. The world has changed since 2001. The terror threat, including from al Qaeda, is geographically dispersed, in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Moreover, we have urgent challenges in front of us: an increasingly assertive China, defeating the pandemic, and strengthening alliances to confront cyber threats and manage emerging technologies. We must fight the battles for the next 20 years, not the last 20.
3. Continuing with the policy of the past two decades in Afghanistan is no longer sensible. It would entail high ongoing costs without commensurate outcomes.
4. An agreement was already in place providing the U.S. and coalition forces would withdraw by May 1 of this year. To reverse course would have meant an inexorable return to war with the Taliban – a war that would have continued indefinitely.

To be clear, there was no option to continue the status quo. The President determined that it was not in our national interest to maintain U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

In the coming months we will withdraw our troops responsibly, deliberately, and safely, in coordination with our NATO allies and operational partners. We have made clear to the Taliban that if they attack us as we draw down, we will defend ourselves forcefully.

We will reconfigure our counterterrorism capabilities to ensure our ability to monitor and address terrorism threats emanating from Afghanistan. We will maintain substantial assets in the region and will continue to work closely with our Afghan security force and regional partners. We will hold the Taliban accountable to their commitments to prevent al Qaeda or any terrorist group from using Afghanistan as a base for attacks against us. If a terrorist threat does emerge, we will be ready.

Even as we withdraw our military forces, we will continue our diplomatic support for the peace process, and urge all parties concerned to remain strongly focused on encouraging and helping the Afghans secure a peace dividend while avoiding some of the negative patterns of recent past.

Afghan themselves – leaders and influential personages on all sides – must know that as responsible national figures, they should craft a joint way forward instead of jockeying for individual or group power. It is incumbent on all leaders in Afghanistan – those who've had the privilege to be educated, the business-minded, the young people who make up over 60% of the population, the farmers - all need to focus on rebuilding a stable post-war economy. And the region and the world need to stay engaged with advice and assistance.

For our part, the United States will support a continuing partnership with Afghanistan, and our allies and partners have indicated that they will do the same. With the support of Congress, our partnership with Afghanistan will entail the continuation of substantial civilian assistance and security assistance through the Afghan Security Forces Fund. This primarily supports sustainment of combat operations and related functions by 300,000 Afghan military and police personnel: they are a vital asset for their country and worth our investment.

We intend to maintain our embassy and will continue to provide development assistance, promote economic investment, and advocate to preserve the gains for minorities and for women, including their meaningful participation in the ongoing negotiations and their appropriate representation throughout society. This mission is important to me personally. I was fortunate to play a small role, as Ambassador to Afghanistan in the early 2000s, in encouraging the adoption of constitutional provisions that upheld the rights of women. More recently, I fought for the inclusion of women on the Islamic Republic's negotiating team; they have directly and effectively engaged the Taliban at the negotiating table, challenging Taliban stereotypes and demonstrating by their presence and skill the important social advances that have taken place in Afghanistan since 2001. We are likewise pressing for women's inclusion in any future peace efforts.

It is important to me and to the Secretary that you know that I have repeatedly demanded the release of Mark Frerichs, who has been held by the Taliban since February 2020. I have also enlisted the support of senior Qatari and Pakistani officials on his behalf. As the Taliban seek to end this chapter of animosity with the United States, they must know they will not have it as long as they hold an American hostage.

We will renew our commitment to a results-focused peace process between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. It has been evident now for years that there is no military solution to a conflict in Afghanistan that has now gone on for over 40 years. A negotiated settlement within the country itself, supported by the regional powers, is the only path to sustainable stability.

We have been pursuing intensive diplomacy with both sides and with a wide array of additional stakeholders to encourage the sides to accelerate the peace process and make progress toward a political settlement and permanent and comprehensive ceasefire. We have shared proposals on how to achieve a peace settlement, in order to help catalyze and advance the process, and these

have generated useful discussions. Leaders from across the political spectrum in Afghanistan have come together to formulate suggestions in response to these proposals and in preparation for the next phase of the peace process. This is a sign that the process is working.

The United Nations has agreed to play an enhanced role in supporting the peace process, leveraging their expertise on ceasefires, process design, and constitutional reform. We view the UN's continuing role as central to the Afghan peace process. Together with Qatar and the UN, Turkey is ready to host a high-level dialogue between the Islamic Republic and the Taliban in Istanbul. The opportunities are in place, the international will to assist is robust, and it is now up to Afghan government leaders and the Taliban to seize the moment.

As this Committee well understands, Pakistan has a special role to play in supporting peace, and senior U.S. officials and I have been in close touch with Pakistan's leaders over the past several weeks. We have urged Pakistan's leaders to exercise their considerable leverage over the Taliban to reduce violence and support a negotiated settlement. Pakistan's leaders have emphasized publicly and to U.S. officials that they do not support a military takeover by the Taliban. I believe they understand that not only Afghanistan, but their country too will face grave consequences in the event of a return to a wider civil war.

The Taliban must recognize that they have a choice between two very different futures: They can embrace a negotiated path to peace, make the transition from a violent insurgency to a political movement, and join their fellow Afghans in a nation that enjoys respect in the global community. But if they obstruct a negotiated settlement and instead pursue a military takeover, they will be opposed not only by the United States but by our allies, partners, and the region. They will face isolation, regional opposition, sanctions, and international opprobrium. There is remarkable consensus within the region and the international community against a military takeover by the Taliban.

Let me reiterate that even as we withdraw our forces in the coming months, the United States will remain a steadfast partner of Afghanistan. Our vision is for peace, development and regional connectivity, trade and cooperation. We will continue to provide support as Afghans defend their country, and we will maintain our efforts to support a negotiated settlement and a comprehensive ceasefire.

Thank you for this opportunity to update you. You have my assurances I will do all I can to maximize the prospects for peace in Afghanistan. I want to state in closing that what the United States, what you and your constituencies have done for Afghanistan over the past two decades, has been enormous and honorable. Our men and women in uniform have sacrificed their lives, and thousands now live with permanent physical and other disabilities as a result of their service. We have given hundreds of billions to this effort to stabilize and develop a society far from our own, not just because terrorists planned 9/11 there, but also because we cared about the plight of millions of women and girls, about a fledgling civil society that has grown powerful and independent, and about peace for millions of other families there, in cities and villages we now know well. We want our investments and sacrifices to have been worthwhile, and if we navigate the coming months appropriately, I believe that this can happen. In the end, however, it will be up to the Afghans to seize their opportunities. Our troops deserve to come home, and

Afghanistan deserves a chance to find its way forward, with help and encouragement from its friends.

Thank you again, and I look forward to your questions.