

Batch 1: The Strategic Failure

1. A Historical Outlook: President Biden's Afghanistan Policy

President Joe Biden's historical record of foreign policy positions contextualizes his decision to withdraw the United States from Afghanistan in 2021. During his decades-long tenure as a Delaware U.S. senator, eight years as vice president of the United States, and nearly four years as president, Mr. Biden has demonstrated distrust of America's military experts and advisors and has prioritized politics and his personal legacy over America's national security interests.

A. A Lesson Unlearned: A Pattern of Abandoning America's Allies

President Biden's urgency to leave Afghanistan harkens back to his stance at the end of the Vietnam War, while serving as a U.S. senator from Delaware. The parallels between then-Senator Biden's willingness to abandon America's South Vietnamese allies and, more recently, his willingness to abandon America's Afghan allies as president, demonstrate a pattern of callous foreign policy positions and readiness to abandon strategic partners.

The United States' military's campaign in Vietnam was winding down when Mr. Biden was sworn in as Delaware's U.S. senator. On the eve of a fact-finding trip to South Vietnam, freshman Senator Joe Biden made evident no matter what he saw on the ground, he wanted to end all U.S. military aid, stating, "I can't imagine what could change my mind, unless it were proof of communist reprisals against South Vietnamese after a military collapse. ... I question that I would even then."¹ Two weeks prior to Saigon's collapse, Senator Biden advised President Gerald Ford to leave "as quickly as possible," expressing a willingness to leave to chance the fate of U.S. citizens, military, and locals who supported the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government.²

Following the withdrawal, Senator Biden was resistant to American involvement in Vietnam, including assistance to South Vietnamese refugees of the war. As the Republic of Vietnam collapsed in the spring of 1975, he opposed the approval of funds and efforts by President Ford's administration to evacuate thousands of South Vietnamese families out of the country. Senator Biden went on to say, "I am not sure I can vote for any amount to put American troops in for one to six months to get the Vietnamese out."³ He later said, "I will vote for any amount for getting the Americans out. I don't want it mixed with getting the Vietnamese out."⁴ According to Senator Biden, "The United States has no obligation to evacuate one, or 100,001, South Vietnamese."⁵

In keeping with his opposition to assist the South Vietnamese, on April 25, 1975, Senator Biden voted to oppose the Vietnam Contingency Act of 1975, which sought to send emergency relief funds to South Vietnam, including to facilitate the evacuation. The act passed the Senate despite his objections.⁶ Five days later, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, and hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese who could not escape were eventually sent to reeducation camps to be abused, tortured, or killed.⁷

Nearly five decades later, President Biden unfortunately failed to learn from Vietnam. At the brink of Afghanistan's collapse, when asked by a reporter if he foresaw any parallels between Vietnam and Afghanistan, President Biden would respond similarly about his moral responsibility for the Afghan people, in particular, women's rights, stating, "None whatsoever. Zero."⁸ And his decision to comprehensively withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan would, once again, abandon America's allies — in this instance, to a sweeping reprisal campaign of summary executions, disappearances, and other abuses by the Taliban.⁹

B. Support for Nation-Building in Afghanistan as U.S. Senator

On September 14, 2001, Senator Biden voted to authorize the U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan to punish al Qaeda and their Taliban sponsors and protectors.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, in late October 2001, Senator Biden gave a speech stressing the urgency for support of the Afghanistan war, stating, "Our immediate goal is to cut off the head of al Qaeda, break up the network, leave them no safe haven. That means, to state the obvious, the removal of Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar, and the Taliban leadership."¹¹ He argued for establishing "a relatively stable regime in Afghanistan," a "politically and socially stable" nation.¹²

Senator Biden reiterated his support for Afghanistan's independence from the Taliban in February 2002 stating, "History is going to judge us very harshly, I believe, if we allow the hope of a liberated Afghanistan to evaporate because we are fearful of the term 'nation-building' or we do not steer the course."¹³ He went on to strongly advocate for nation-building in Afghanistan, saying, "President Bush's aversion even to rudimentary elements of establishing order and stability because it might put him on the road to nation-building, I think have to be outweighed by our national security need to prevent Afghanistan from backsliding into a lawless safe haven for anti-American terrorists."¹⁴

In the years that followed, Senator Biden continued to support nation-building as crucial to the reconstruction and stabilization of Afghanistan — deploying it as a political attack against former President George W. Bush. In February 2004, at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, Senator Biden criticized President Bush's Afghanistan policy as not being sufficiently supportive of the country, "In some parts of this administration, 'nation-building' is a dirty phrase. But the alternative to nation-building is chaos — a chaos that churns out bloodthirsty warlords, drug-traffickers and terrorists. We've seen it happen in Afghanistan before — and we're watching it happen in Afghanistan today."¹⁵ Months later, in October 2004, Senator Biden framed the reconstruction of Afghanistan as a missed opportunity, urging the administration to "get involved in genuine, quote, 'nation-building.'"¹⁶

In 2007, while serving as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Biden continued to criticize President Bush for not delivering sufficient aid toward nation-building in Afghanistan.¹⁷ When speaking to the United States' Iraq and Afghanistan policy, he expressed alarm at the administration's focus on Iraq, which he believed detracted from the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. "If we should be surging forces anywhere, it's in Afghanistan, not Iraq. NATO troops are necessary, but not sufficient. We've also got to train the Afghan police and army — which means, for starters, paying them decent salaries," Senator Biden said.¹⁸ He

would continue to complain that President Bush was not taking Afghanistan reconstruction seriously enough through 2008.¹⁹

During his presidential campaign in 2008, Senator Biden ran on his support for increasing Afghanistan reconstruction aid.²⁰ He also continued to advocate for a troop surge in Afghanistan out of concern “the Taliban appear[ed] to be making a serious comeback.”²¹ Senator Biden seemed to recognize a secure and independent Afghanistan would make America safer and the region more stable when he could use it to contrast what President Bush was doing. However, his recognition of Afghanistan’s strategic importance deteriorated, however, when he lost the presidential nomination and assumed his role as vice president of the United States to then-President Barack Obama.

In January of 2009, immediately prior to being sworn in as vice president, Mr. Biden took a trip to Kabul, where a dinner with then-President Hamid Karzai reportedly ended abruptly with tensions running high between the two.²² Mr. Biden came back to Washington, D.C., with diminished confidence regarding the United States’ involvement in Afghanistan. According to President Obama in 2020, “What he saw and heard on the trip convinced him that we needed to rethink our entire approach” and that Afghanistan was a “dangerous quagmire.”²³ Mr. Biden’s tenure as vice president would see him grow increasingly frustrated with U.S. policy in Afghanistan and begin advocating for the United States to extricate itself from the country.

C. Commitment Toward a U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan as Vice President

Over 100 American servicemembers had died in Afghanistan in 2008, a greater number in a single year than in any prior year.²⁴ Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, called the situation in Afghanistan at the beginning of Mr. Obama’s presidency “precarious and urgent.”²⁵ Upon assuming office in January 2009, President Obama ordered a comprehensive review of the United States’ Afghanistan policy.²⁶ That review concluded in the fall of 2009, splitting the administration between those who favored and those who opposed a surge in troops.²⁷ On one side, senior military leadership—including U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal, commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan at the time—favored a surge of American troops in pursuit of a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban and the terrorist threat in Afghanistan.²⁸ On the other side, then-Vice President Biden viewed Afghanistan as a lost cause and opposed a troop surge—doubting the military’s counterinsurgency plan and advocating to shift focus to Pakistan.²⁹ Ahead of a meeting with military leaders during this review, Vice President Biden reportedly urged President Obama to “stand up to these guys, because if you don’t, they’re going to treat you like you’re their puppy.”³⁰

By November 2009, Vice President Biden became aware that President Obama was inclined to support the military’s position. He expressed his frustration, insisting the president “only make this decision if he was sure of it.”³¹ Despite additional attempts by Vice President Biden to dissuade President Obama, the president announced his plan to call for an additional thirty thousand U.S. troops and ten thousand NATO allied forces to support a counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operation.³²

Undaunted, Vice President Biden persisted in his attempts to convince the commander in chief to be more wary of his military. “Listen to me, boss. Maybe I’ve been around this town for too long, but one thing I know is when these generals are trying to box in a new president,” Vice President Biden said.³³ He added, “Don’t let them jam you.”³⁴ Vice President Biden reportedly contended in private that President Obama had been overpowered by the U.S. military and by those to whom he referred as the “five blocks of granite”: then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Admiral Michael Mullen, General David Petraeus, and General Stanley McChrystal.³⁵ Defense Secretary Gates would later write Vice President Biden was “relentless ... in pushing his view and in attacking the integrity of the senior military leadership.”³⁶ According to Gates, Vice President Biden left a June 2009 meeting on Afghanistan “discouraged less about the skepticism regarding more troops than about the total focus on the politics. Biden was especially emphatic about the reaction of the Democratic base.”³⁷

In 2010, Vice President Biden began advocating for the Obama administration to pursue a full military withdrawal from Afghanistan. According to then-U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, Vice President Biden rejected the importance of protecting women’s rights in Afghanistan, insisting “that’s not what [U.S. soldiers are] there for.”³⁸ Vice President Biden was instead focused on Afghanistan being a “debacle politically” that would harm their positioning in the 2012 election.³⁹ When Holbrooke raised America’s “obligation to the people who had trusted us,” Vice President Biden responded, “Nixon and Kissinger got away with it,” referencing the abandonment of America’s Vietnamese allies at the end of the Vietnam War.⁴⁰ In public interviews in December 2011, Vice President Biden would go on to say, “The Taliban, per se, is not our enemy.”⁴¹

Fast forwarding to present day, Afghanistan played a prominent role in Special Counsel Robert Hur’s 2024 report on President Biden’s unauthorized removal, retention, and disclosure of classified documents. According to the report, President Biden “long s[aw] himself as a historic figure” and “believed history would prove him right” in his opposition to the troop surge.⁴² He retained “for posterity’s sake” a 2009 memorandum he wrote for President Obama as vice president, reflecting his uncompromising commitment toward a full military withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁴³ President Biden appears to have believed his historic position on Afghanistan would ensure his legacy.

2. The Trump Administration and the Doha Agreement

A. The South Asia Strategy

On November 8, 2016, Donald J. Trump was elected as the 45th president of the United States. During his campaign, Mr. Trump initially expressed a desire to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan, pointing to corruption and skepticism of overseas military intervention.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, after having witnessed the rise of the Islamic State following the United States’ withdrawal from Iraq under the prior administration, then-President Trump indicated he was leaning in favor of leaving U.S. troops in Afghanistan.⁴⁵ He would go on to publicly state there was a strategic significance of maintaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan, in part to serve as a check on nuclear-armed Pakistan.⁴⁶

At the start of the Trump administration, the United States had roughly 11,000 troops in Afghanistan, representing a significant reduction from the 100,000 present in the country at its peak under the prior administration.⁴⁷ Upon assuming office in January 2017, President Trump directed then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis and his national security team to conduct a “a comprehensive review of all strategic options in Afghanistan and South Asia.”⁴⁸

In August 2017, six months into his presidency, President Trump announced the results of the review, rolling out his administration’s Afghanistan and South Asia strategy.⁴⁹ That strategy would shift decisions regarding Afghanistan “from a time-based approach to one based on conditions.”⁵⁰ “Conditions on the ground — not arbitrary timetables — will guide our strategy from now on. America’s enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us out. I will not say when we are going to attack, but attack we will,” he said.⁵¹ The new strategy would be guided by three fundamental conclusions: (1) a need for “an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made”; (2) “predictable and unacceptable” consequences of a rapid withdrawal; and (3) immense security threats faced in Afghanistan and the broader region.⁵² Ultimately, the objective was to shift from nation-building and, instead, “enable Afghanistan to become a more stable state — one capable of protecting its people with limited outside support — as well as to lay the foundation for bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, and, ultimately, to end the conflict.”⁵³ The Trump administration’s National Security Strategy, released in December of 2017, reiterated the U.S.’ commitment to empower the Afghan government and its military to conduct combat operations against the Taliban, and the shift of the U.S. military to a supporting role.⁵⁴

B. Negotiating With the Taliban

In September 2017, President Trump selected former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad to serve as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR). Upon his selection, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced his appointment, stating, “Ambassador Khalilzad is going to join the State Department team to assist us in the reconciliation effort, so he will come on and be the State Department’s lead person for that purpose.”⁵⁵ He stated further the ambassador would be “full-time focused on developing the opportunities to get the Afghans and the Taliban to come to a reconciliation.”⁵⁶ In his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ambassador Khalilzad explained as SRAR he was tasked to pursue a peace agreement with the Taliban, centered on three priorities:

1. Allow for a safe and orderly U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan;⁵⁷
2. Ensure Afghanistan would not revert to a safe haven for terrorism;⁵⁸ and
3. Include intra-Afghan negotiations, namely, negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government.⁵⁹

Over the course of the next two years, Ambassador Khalilzad engaged with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, negotiating an agreement that sought to bring an end to the conflict in Afghanistan.⁶⁰ Negotiations, however, were limited to the United States and the Taliban, and excluded the

Afghan government.⁶¹ According to Ambassador Khalilzad, the Taliban viewed the Afghan government as illegitimate and refused to meet with Afghan officials until a deal was executed between the U.S. and the Taliban.⁶² Ambassador Khalilzad stated he traveled between Doha, Qatar, to Kabul, Afghanistan, to seek input from and keep apprised Afghan government officials.⁶³

By acquiescing to the Taliban's demand to exclude the Afghan government from negotiations, Ambassador Khalilzad created significant consternation with President Ghani's administration. President Ghani's National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib accused Ambassador Khalilzad of pursuing his own ambitions with the negotiations.⁶⁴ Mr. Mohib added, "The perception in Afghanistan and people in government think that perhaps, perhaps all this talk is to create a caretaker government of which [Ambassador Khalilzad] will then become the viceroy."⁶⁵

On February 29, 2020, after nine rounds of discussions, American and Taliban negotiators signed the "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" — more commonly known as the Doha Agreement.⁶⁶ The Doha Agreement reflected a series of conditions that, if fully satisfied, would result in the complete withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan.⁶⁷ Alternatively, if the Taliban failed to fulfill any commitment in the agreement, U.S. forces were not obligated to leave Afghanistan.

The Doha Agreement was comprised of four parts: (1) a reduction in violence by the Taliban, (2) withdrawal of all NATO forces from Afghanistan, (3) intra-Afghan negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and (4) counterterrorism assurances by the Taliban. Subject to the satisfaction of those four parts, the United States committed to withdrawing by May 1, 2021.⁶⁸

As a confidence building measure, the United States committed to work toward the release of Taliban prisoners and to review sanctions against Taliban members, subject to the commencement of intra-Afghan negotiations.⁶⁹ Namely, the Doha Agreement contemplated the United States working to secure the "expeditious" release of up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners in return for the Taliban releasing up to 1,000.⁷⁰ The Doha Agreement also obligated the United States to reduce troop levels from 13,000 to 8,600 in the first 135 days after its signing.⁷¹

The Taliban, in return, committed to a series of obligations. The Doha Agreement conditioned the United States' withdrawal on "the commitment and action on the obligations of the" Taliban to cut ties with al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, and to stop those groups from using Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.⁷² It also required the Taliban to reduce violence against Afghan forces and start negotiations with the Afghan government by March 10, 2020, preceding the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces.⁷³ According to a senior government official, the Trump administration contemplated a safeguard to monitor the Taliban's continued adherence to the Doha Agreement, including leaving behind "some residual force for monitoring and implementing counter terrorism."⁷⁴ This was critical in light of

assessments by senior U.S. officials — including then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley and then-CENTCOM Commander General Frank McKenzie — that a continued U.S. military presence prevented the Taliban from significant military conquests in the country.⁷⁵

President Trump would say on February 29, 2020, that if the Taliban did not comply with the agreed-upon conditions, the United States would hold the Taliban accountable. “I really believe the Taliban wants to do something to show we’re not all wasting time. If bad things happen, we’ll go back with a force like no one’s ever seen,” he said.⁷⁶ That same day, the Pentagon announced, “Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Defense Secretary Dr. Mark T. Esper and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg all said today that any withdrawal would be conditions-based, and the Taliban would have to negotiate with Afghan officials for the process to move forward.”⁷⁷ Secretary Esper would add, “If the Taliban uphold the agreement, the United States will begin a conditions-based reduction in forces.”⁷⁸

C. Implementation of the Doha Agreement

After signing the Doha Agreement in February 2020, the Trump administration commenced a phased military drawdown from Afghanistan. According to General McKenzie in his testimony before the committee, President Trump’s withdrawal plan “envisioned the complete withdrawal of all our forces and our diplomats and citizens. It also contemplated the possible withdrawal of Afghans who had served with us. The plan had a number of options, but it was the framework for everything that followed.”⁷⁹

The final Commander of NATO’s Resolution Support Mission and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, General Austin Scott Miller, was tasked with executing the military retrograde in tandem with then-U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan John Bass.⁸⁰ According to General Miller, the military drawdown proceeded in close coordination with the State Department, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁸¹ Ambassador Bass explained to the House Foreign Affairs Committee that, in accordance with orders by the administration, U.S. Embassy Kabul reduced its personnel, decreasing its diplomatic footprint alongside the military.⁸² “I would say later in 2019 there was a clear desire to reduce the size and cost of the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan, particularly on the military side but not only on the military side. And we undertook a substantial reduction in consolidation of the embassy footprint throughout 2019, in part to demonstrate that we were getting smaller and costing less operationally,” he said.⁸³

The first step toward a phased withdrawal resulted in the reduction of U.S. forces to 8,600.⁸⁴ In his testimony before the committee, General Miller conveyed he supported a reduction to 8,600 because this number allowed the United States to maintain a “sufficient footprint to do necessary partnering, protect the force, and where necessary provide military authorities to actions on the ground there.”⁸⁵ That drawdown was completed by the summer of 2020.⁸⁶

By 2020, the United States’ objectives in Afghanistan had narrowed, focused now on “safeguard[ing] the United States of America,” “protect[ing] it against terrorist threats,” and “capacity building, trying to develop a standalone Afghan force.”⁸⁷ General Miller explained the objectives had shifted, where the United States was now “building and sustaining an Afghan

security force” as a “ways and a means to get to [the United States’] overarching objective” of countering terrorism in the country.⁸⁸ General Miller described the split between the counterterrorism objectives and supporting the Afghan force objectives as a “60-40” split.⁸⁹ Months later, in July of 2020, President Trump pursued another phased drawdown, reducing U.S. troops to 4,500.⁹⁰ Given the aforementioned narrowed objectives, General Miller assessed the United States could execute the reduction without risk while continuing to meet goals in Afghanistan.⁹¹

On October 8, 2020, then-National Security Council (NSC) Advisor Robert O’Brien announced a further reduction in U.S. forces to 2,500 troops.⁹² Senior military officers — including Generals Milley, McKenzie, and Miller — assessed that with 2,500 troops, the U.S. could sufficiently support the Afghan national security forces and prevent the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.⁹³ In his testimony before the committee, General Miller assessed that with 2,500 forces in Afghanistan, the United States could continue to support and sustain Afghan forces in their fight against terrorism. “I thought it was a minimum force that would keep the Afghan military in the fight. Because within that 2,500 came a pretty robust air package, to include our [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] in country,” he said.⁹⁴

President Trump, however, considered a complete U.S. withdrawal before the end of his presidency. On November 11, 2020, he issued a memorandum to then-Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller, ordering him to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by January 15, 2021.⁹⁵ According to General Milley, he went to the White House with Acting Secretary Miller to discuss the memo with the president. Reportedly, the two men, along with NSC Advisor (NSA) O’Brien, advised the president against a complete withdrawal.⁹⁶ Shortly thereafter, the order was rescinded, and no steps were taken to withdraw forces.⁹⁷ On November 13, 2020, Acting Secretary Miller sent a Pentagon-wide memorandum regarding Afghanistan stating, “This war isn’t over. We are on the verge of defeating Al Qaida and its associates, but we must avoid our past strategic error of failing to see the fight through to the finish.”⁹⁸

By the conclusion of the Trump administration, the United States maintained 2,500 troops alongside approximately 22,000 NATO forces and contractors in Afghanistan.⁹⁹ General McKenzie explained to the committee that “ultimately, President Trump selected a branch of the plan that maintained 2,500 U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan by Inauguration Day in January 2021. We had branches to that plan to complete a withdrawal by May of 2021 had we been so ordered.”¹⁰⁰

In accordance with assessments by State Department officials warning about keeping a large diplomatic presence while the U.S. military reduced its presence, Embassy Kabul’s footprint was also reduced by 43% by January 20, 2021.¹⁰¹ General Miller explained it was a “team effort” between he and Ambassador Bass to ensure Afghan security forces and Afghan leadership “didn’t see daylight between our diplomatic team and our military team.”¹⁰²

D. An Assessment of the Doha Agreement: Ambassador Khalilzad’s Flawed Process

Despite the Doha Agreement's aim for lasting peace, negotiations with the Taliban led by Ambassador Khalilzad strained the United States' relationship with the Afghan government. By excluding the Afghan government from negotiations at the demand of the Taliban, Ambassador Khalilzad undermined America's ally and, in doing so, likely harmed the legitimacy of the Afghan government and the potential for intra-Afghan negotiations.

The negotiations also undermined the United States' longstanding policy of refusing to negotiate with terrorists.¹⁰³ While the Taliban is not designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the United States, the Haqqani Network — an integral component of the Taliban — has been designated as such since 2012.¹⁰⁴ According to Ambassador Khalilzad, multiple members of the Taliban delegation negotiating in Doha were members of the Haqqani Network.¹⁰⁵ Further, the Taliban maintained its alliance with al Qaeda throughout negotiations, with al Qaeda swearing its allegiance to the Taliban's Supreme Leader, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada.¹⁰⁶ Despite these facts, Ambassador Khalilzad thought it appropriate to continue negotiating with the terrorist group. The Taliban would ultimately celebrate the signing of the Doha Agreement as a "historic victory" and "humiliating defeat" for the United States.¹⁰⁷ When asked about the Taliban's continued ties with al Qaeda and the ongoing terrorist threat imposed by the Taliban, Ambassador Khalilzad attempted to cast doubt on those ties, asserting, "The commitments in writing is what mattered."¹⁰⁸

Several sources have also raised serious concerns regarding Ambassador Khalilzad's negotiation methods surrounding the Doha Agreement. General McKenzie described Ambassador Khalilzad's process as "often opaque," that would leave other officials "in the dark" regarding the exact terms of the agreement.¹⁰⁹ General Milley explained Ambassador Khalilzad did not consult the U.S. military when developing the terms of the Doha Agreement.¹¹⁰ Indeed, in his testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ambassador Khalilzad conceded his lack of understanding surrounding the important need for U.S. contractors to support the Afghan military.¹¹¹

According to former NSC Senior Director for South and Central America Lisa Curtis, "Ambassador Khalilzad was too willing to make concessions to the Taliban and to throw the Afghan government under the bus."¹¹² Ambassador Khalilzad reportedly dismissed concerns from the Afghan government that the Taliban were not negotiating in good faith.¹¹³ When interviewed by the committee regarding this issue, Ambassador Khalilzad said he prioritized the Taliban's "commitments in writing" over the overwhelming available evidence of the Taliban's ongoing violations.¹¹⁴ And while framed as a confidence building measure, many of the 5,000 Taliban prisoners the group demanded be released were guilty of "insider attacks" against the United States, and upon being released over the summer of 2020, rejoined the Taliban as fighters in the violence that ensued in 2021.¹¹⁵ Further, Ambassador Khalilzad advocated that Pakistan release Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar — one of the founders of the Taliban — whom he reportedly described as "a man of peace."¹¹⁶ The Trump administration sought to bring America's longest war to an end in a responsible manner; however, flaws in that process had lasting consequences.

3. The Biden-Harris Administration and Execution of the Doha Agreement

A. The Interagency Review of the Doha Agreement

“The first meeting I had with [President Biden] when he became president, the senior-level meeting, it was clear where his head was – which was that this was a godforsaken country, Afghanistan, and that we were never going to fix it.”¹¹⁷
– Former SRAR, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad

On November 7, 2020, Joseph R. Biden was elected as the 46th president of the United States. During the presidential transition from the Trump administration into the Biden-Harris administration, President Biden’s principal advisers on U.S. foreign policy — Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan — reportedly submitted a memorandum notifying him that negotiations with the Taliban in Doha were at an impasse and that Ambassador Khalilzad had failed to get the Taliban and the Afghan government to work together.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, Ambassador Khalilzad was retained as SRAR by President Biden, with the now recently confirmed Secretary of State Blinken announcing on January 27, 2021, “with regard to Ambassador Khalilzad, yes, we have — we have asked him to continue the vital work that he is performing.”¹¹⁹

Upon assuming office in January 2021, President Biden ordered a comprehensive interagency review of the United States’ policy toward Afghanistan and selected NSA Sullivan to lead that review.¹²⁰ According to Chief of Staff to Secretary Blinken Suzy George, “the White House ran the Afghan policy review process.”¹²¹

On January 23, 2021, NSA Sullivan informed his Afghan counterpart, then-National Security Advisor of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Hamdullah Mohib, that the United States was reviewing U.S. policy towards Afghanistan and assessing the Doha Agreement and the Taliban adherence to their commitments, including their obligations “to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders.”¹²² NSA Sullivan committed to Mr. Mohib the Biden-Harris administration would “support the peace process” with the goal of “a durable and just political settlement and permanent ceasefire” in Afghanistan.¹²³

It was clear to many as the administration commenced its interagency review process, however, that President Biden was committed to withdrawing from Afghanistan irrespective of their assessments. General McKenzie wrote in his memoir that, during a late February 2021 meeting with President Biden, “the president ‘plainly wanted out’ of Afghanistan, but he also understood the steep price we would pay for leaving precipitously.”¹²⁴ Ambassador Khalilzad confirmed General McKenzie’s account, saying, “[President Biden’s] perspective was clear.”¹²⁵ According to journalist and author Bob Woodward in his book *Peril*, administration officials — including, Secretary Blinken and then-White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain — knew President Biden was committed to leaving Afghanistan no matter what the interagency review found.¹²⁶

The interagency meetings that occurred were led by NSA Sullivan and his deputies, Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer and Homeland Security Advisor Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall.¹²⁷ According to then-U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ross Wilson, the chief of mission for Embassy Kabul, the State Department took part in those meetings, its equities led by then-Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources (D-MR) Brian McKeon.¹²⁸ Ambassador Wilson explained that while he and then-Acting Under Secretary of State for Management Carol Perez participated in those meetings, D-MR McKeon served as the State Department's lead on Afghanistan policy.¹²⁹ D-MR McKeon testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee he did not receive any briefings from the administration on the Afghanistan withdrawal until April 2021, after he was confirmed by the U.S. Senate in March.

Prior to D-MR McKeon's confirmation in March 2021, the State Department's Afghanistan policy was predominantly led by then-State Department Counselor Derek Chollet.¹³⁰ D-MR McKeon testified before the committee following his confirmation that, despite serving as the lead, he split his duties regarding Afghanistan with Counselor Chollet, who focused on "how we would continue to maintain a posture and ability to assess the terrorism threat and continue to take counterterrorism action from outside the country."¹³¹

When interviewed by the committee regarding his role setting Afghanistan policy throughout 2021, Counselor Chollet was largely uncooperative and repeatedly claimed he could not remember key details regarding his role in the Afghanistan withdrawal.¹³² He did admit, however, that he attended the interagency meetings but claimed did not engage in or oversee any planning pertaining to the Afghanistan withdrawal.¹³³

During the interagency review, Ambassador Wilson represented Embassy Kabul's equities. In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Wilson explained he mainly contributed assessments regarding U.S. diplomatic and political capabilities in Afghanistan given the impending U.S. military withdrawal.¹³⁴ He testified further the embassy's Regional Security Officer (RSO) was predominately concerned with essential functions they would lose if the military withdrew.¹³⁵ The RSO for Embassy Kabul expressed concern to Ambassador Wilson regarding the loss of the situational awareness provided by the U.S. military's surveillance balloon, the lack of medical and medivac support, and the supplemental degree of security provided to the embassy.¹³⁶ On February 22, 2021, Ambassador Wilson sent an official cable to Secretary Blinken conveying the RSO's assessment that violence was increasing in Afghanistan and, in particular, in Kabul.¹³⁷

Key officials testified before the committee they were not contacted or their participation during the interagency review was limited. General Miller, who served as the senior military official in Afghanistan throughout the review, testified that throughout 2021 he was only invited to and participated in one initial NSC meeting and one NSC deputies meeting. He had no direct communications with Secretary Blinken.¹³⁸ When asked whether he wished his input had been sought at further interagency meetings regarding Afghanistan, he said, "I do. I mean, I thought I had something to offer."¹³⁹ Mr. Bass, the last confirmed U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, serving from December 2017 to January 2020, informed the committee that prior to the non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO), he was contacted only once by Deputy NSA Finer.¹⁴⁰ He explained the conversation occurred "in the first couple of months" of the Biden-Harris

administration, and was it retrospective, not about “any prospective discussions about [the] way forward.”¹⁴¹

In February 2021, President Biden held a principals meeting in the Situation Room, which included Secretary Blinken, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and General Milley. General Milley reportedly advised President Biden to keep American forces in Afghanistan, warning the United States’s withdrawal from Afghanistan would precipitate the Taliban’s seizure of Afghanistan by Thanksgiving or Christmas 2021.¹⁴² General Milley also warned women’s rights in the country would “go back to the Stone Age.”¹⁴³ He asserted it would be foolish to abandon Afghanistan after “all the blood and treasure spent” during the two-decade war.¹⁴⁴ In that meeting, President Biden asserted what would become one of his common excuses for issuing the go-to-zero order — the Taliban would resume its attacks on American forces absent a withdrawal. General Milley remind him that Afghan security forces were now conducted on-the-ground fighting, with U.S. forces largely operating within secure military bases.¹⁴⁵

In that same meeting, Secretary Blinken purportedly advocated against a military withdrawal because it would negatively impact the thousands of U.S. government officials who spent two decades seeking to improve conditions in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁶ Mr. Blinken contended, however, that Embassy Kabul should remain open regardless of the military withdrawal and that there was no reason to close the embassy prior to the Taliban taking over.¹⁴⁷ General Milley disagreed, asking, “But if the decision is to withdraw troops to zero, then that means zero, right?”¹⁴⁸ A senior defense official assessed “this was always a friction point in discussions” between the State Department and the Pentagon.¹⁴⁹ According to State Department files obtained by the committee, a February 3, 2021, call sheet between Counselor Chollet and General McKenzie states, “In the meantime, we must continue to signal the United States has not made a decision on troop drawdowns and the May 1 deadline.”¹⁵⁰

On February 3, 2021, President Biden convened his national security team in the Oval Office to set the stage for withdrawing all U.S. forces from Afghanistan.¹⁵¹ Despite having long made clear his commitment to get out of Afghanistan, he promised to listen to suggestions in that meeting.¹⁵² He reportedly stated, “Our mission is to stop Afghanistan from being a base for attacking the homeland and U.S. allies by al Qaeda or other terrorist groups, not to deliver a death blow to the Taliban.”¹⁵³ After those February meetings, President Biden reportedly informed NSA Sullivan that justifications provided by his advisors to remain in Afghanistan were not “good enough” to convince him.¹⁵⁴ President Biden was “adamant” that it was not worth it to keep troops in Afghanistan.¹⁵⁵

As committed by NSA Sullivan to Mr. Mohib in his January 2021 communication, the Biden-Harris administration’s interagency review of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan was to allegedly include an assessment of the Taliban’s compliance with the Doha Agreement. Then-Defense Department Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby said on February 23rd that the administration was taking a look “at the issues of compliance,” to make informed decisions for the strategic decisions to come.¹⁵⁶ According to senior State Department and Defense Department officials, the Taliban was in clear violation of those commitments throughout 2021.

In his testimony before the committee, General McKenzie stated his assessment then was the Taliban would never follow through on its commitment to cut ties with al Qaeda.¹⁵⁷ “Their ties with al Qaeda were deep and profound and there was no way, in my judgment, that they were ever going to separate from al Qaeda,” he said.¹⁵⁸ General Milley echoed that sentiment, testifying before the committee that the U.S. military “pointed out repeatedly that the conditions were not being met” by the Taliban.¹⁵⁹ He believed the Taliban had completely failed to honor their commitments, including, “renouncing linkages with al Qaeda, reducing violence, establishing a ceasefire, or participating in Afghan-to-Afghan negotiations with the Government of Afghanistan.”¹⁶⁰ General Miller concurred, informing the committee that the Taliban did not reduce violence, but rather changed their targets. “What they did is they changed their violence. They went full in on the Afghan checkpoints and trying to dump a body count up.”¹⁶¹ He testified Ambassador Wilson “agreed that there was lack of compliance with the Doha Agreement.”¹⁶²

Ambassador Wilson testified before the committee that, throughout his tenure as Chief of Mission to Embassy Kabul, the Taliban failed to uphold both the spirit and letter of the Doha Agreement, as evidenced by their violence towards Afghan forces and civilians, and their failure to cut ties with al Qaeda.¹⁶³ Salman Ahmed, Director of the Secretary of State’s Policy Planning Staff, told the committee, “in some ways, yes” the Taliban was living up to its commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups in 2021, but “in some ways, no” it was not.¹⁶⁴ Notably, former Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Afghanistan throughout 2021, Mr. Mark Evans, explained to the committee President Biden’s decision to unconditionally withdraw all U.S. troops was in fact not contingent on compliance to the Doha Agreement’s conditions, asserting there was no “checklist approach” where the U.S. would refuse to uphold its end of the deal until the Taliban held up theirs.¹⁶⁵

The State Department’s Acting Assistant Secretary for the South and Central Asian Bureau (SCA) throughout 2021 — the bureau tasked with leading the United States’ foreign policy on Afghanistan, amongst other nations — Dean Thompson, could not recall if his bureau ever offered an assessment of whether the Taliban was meeting their commitments under the Doha Agreement. Instead, Acting Assistant Secretary Thompson stated SCA relied almost exclusively on Ambassador Khalilzad’s assessments — which, as this report will demonstrate, were flawed and often disregarded the on-the-ground realities.¹⁶⁶

In his testimony before the committee, Ambassador Khalilzad explained there was never a comprehensive assessment by the administration on whether the Taliban was adhering to the Doha Agreement.¹⁶⁷ He noted, however, that intelligence reports determined the Taliban’s adherence to the counterterrorism requirement was “mixed to positive, not completely satisfactory, mixed to positive.”¹⁶⁸ When asked by committee members about the Taliban’s violations of the Doha Agreement and, in particular, their counterterrorism obligations, Ambassador Khalilzad claimed — without evidence — that the Taliban “made substantial progress in delivering on those commitments.”¹⁶⁹ Ambassador Khalilzad reportedly reached out to the Taliban at the request of Secretary Blinken to inquire about the Doha Agreement’s withdrawal timeline.¹⁷⁰ A few weeks later, Ambassador Khalilzad informed Secretary Blinken of the Taliban’s response: “If you go a day beyond May 1, all bets are off. ... No wiggle room.”¹⁷¹

Integral State Department documents, obtained by the committee through enforcement of a subpoena, appear to take Taliban non-compliance with the agreement as obvious. In a March 26, 2021, memorandum from Ambassador Khalilzad's deputy, then-Deputy SRAR Molly Phee, to Secretary Blinken, she remarks "[A]s is typical, the Taliban do not address their commitments under the [Doha] agreement."¹⁷²

Nevertheless, despite the administration's public commitment to assess the Taliban's compliance with the Doha Agreement, it appears compliance with the agreement's conditions was not pertinent to their Afghanistan policy. In a February 12, 2021, press conference, former State Department Spokesperson Ned Price assured reporters the Biden-Harris administration's review of the Doha Agreement "will include assessing whether the Taliban are fulfilling their commitments relating to counterterrorism, reducing violence, engaging in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders."¹⁷³ In his testimony before the committee, however, Spokesperson Price admitted Taliban adherence to the Doha Agreement was "immaterial" to the administration's decision to withdraw.¹⁷⁴

B. Internal Warnings and Threat of Collapse

Throughout the interagency review, President Biden failed to heed the warnings of his military advisers or listen to advice from across his administration. During the presidential transition from the Trump administration to the Biden-Harris administration, the Pentagon issued a report in December 2020, which stated the U.S. military continued to "maintain 11 bases positioned throughout Afghanistan," and that "U.S. and NATO objectives remain unchanged, and the United States continues to conduct both the [counterterrorism] and [train, advise, and assist] missions" in the country.¹⁷⁵ President Biden's top military advisers would go on to recommend that the United States maintain the 2,500 troop level set by the Trump administration.

General Milley testified to the committee that, based on assessments from military commanders and the consensus of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he recommended President Biden keep 2,500 troops in Afghanistan. "We needed to maintain a minimum force of 2,500 troops on the ground — mostly special forces — with allied troops and contractors in order to sustain the Afghan national security forces and its government until the diplomatic conditions of the Doha Agreement were met," he said.¹⁷⁶ It was his view that without U.S. troops in Afghanistan, "it was only a matter of when, not if, the Afghan government would collapse and the Taliban would take control."¹⁷⁷ He has since testified that he believes Afghanistan would not have collapsed had those 2,500 U.S. troops, along with allied forces and contractors, remained in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁸

General McKenzie echoed General Milley's concerns. According to him, with 2,500 troops plus a small contingent of special operations forces, the U.S. could have continued its counterterrorism mission, advised and assisted the Afghan military, and held onto eight bases including Bagram Air Base with the support of NATO allies.¹⁷⁹ In his testimony before the committee, General McKenzie affirmed he was unequivocal in his advice to the president, warning him a rapid collapse of the Afghan government and military would follow if the United States went to zero. The Afghans, he believed, were not prepared to stand alone.¹⁸⁰

General Miller informed the committee he too advised the United States maintain a small troop presence in Afghanistan to support Afghan security forces and complete the United States' counterterrorism mission. Keeping 2,500 troops, General Miller testified, came with robust air and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, enabling the Afghans to continue fighting the Taliban.¹⁸¹ General Miller stated his recommendation remained consistent throughout his command in Afghanistan.¹⁸²

Colonel Seth Krummrich, Chief of Staff for Special Operations Command Central during the military retrograde, reiterated the military told President Biden, "If you start to withdraw, the Taliban are going to come pouring in and there's nothing that's going to stop them."¹⁸³ According to Colonel Krummrich, "The president decided we're gonna leave, and he's not listening to anybody."¹⁸⁴

Secretary Austin appears to have similarly urged President Biden to keep between 2,500 to 4,500 U.S. forces in Afghanistan during the interagency review.¹⁸⁵ In an effort to convince President Biden, he reportedly told him, "we've seen this movie before," referencing what happened after the United States withdrew from Iraq and the Islamic State overran the country's military.¹⁸⁶

In addition to military recommendations during the interagency review, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John Sopko warned of the imminent threat to the Afghan government and their forces should the U.S. unconditionally withdraw. SIGAR Sopko stated repeatedly in March 2021 that the Afghan government faced an existential threat in the face of a renewed Taliban offensive. He pointed to the key role Pentagon contractors played in sustaining the Afghan Air Force — something Ambassador Khalilzad admitted he did not take into consideration during the Doha Agreement negotiations and an issue that would be one of the key factors to the Afghan military's collapse. SIGAR Sopko alerted the administration, and the American public, chaos would ensue if these contractors were removed from the battlefield. On March 10, 2021 — one month before President Biden announced the withdrawal — SIGAR cautioned Afghanistan "is under threat" and noted the Afghan government "fears for its survival."¹⁸⁷ He warned further, "It is not an overstatement to fathom that, if foreign assistance is withdrawn and peace negotiations fail, Taliban forces will be at the gates of Kabul in short order."¹⁸⁸ Testifying before the House Oversight Committee on March 16, 2021, SIGAR Sopko reiterated that drawing U.S. forces to zero would cripple the Afghan forces. According to him, "To be quite blunt, [the Afghan government] probably would face collapse."¹⁸⁹

Warnings by the military and SIGAR were echoed by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). In April 2021, prior to President Biden's withdrawal announcement, ODNI stated, Afghanistan "will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support. Kabul continues to face setbacks on the battlefield, and the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory."¹⁹⁰

C. NATO Warnings and Threat of Collapse

In a March 25, 2021, speech, President Biden affirmed that any decision he made with respect to the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan would take NATO equities into account. Some State Department officials interviewed by the committee repeated his claim that NATO was

consulted. According to Counselor Chollet, “NATO itself didn’t take a position” on the withdrawal, and his “understanding, the gestalt understanding that I recall was, you know, general understanding of our position, I mean, and everybody knew the threat that we were facing and were appreciative of our consultation.”¹⁹¹ Spokesperson Price testified before the committee that the administration’s decision to withdraw “was coordinated exquisitely” with NATO allies, that “they welcomed the decision that we put forward” and “they, in turn, followed suit.”¹⁹²

These State Department employees’ description of events, however, is contradicted by NATO allies, who expressed concern and frustration with the president’s decision to withdraw. Dating back to January 27, 2021, British Army General Sir Nicholas Carter, who served as Chief of the Defense Staff from June 2018 to November 2021, issued dire warnings at a NATO Chiefs of Defense Meeting. “It is obvious to everyone that the conditions specified in the 29 February agreement are not being met... Withdrawal under these circumstances would be perceived as a strategic victory for the Taliban, which would weaken the [NATO] Alliance and embolden extremists the world over,” General Carter said.¹⁹³

On February 15, 2021, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenburg similarly warned against withdrawing from Afghanistan prematurely, stating, “[O]ur presence is conditions-based. ... We need to find the right balance between making sure that we not stay longer than necessary, but at the same time, that we don’t leave too early.”¹⁹⁴ “Peace talks remain fragile, and the level of violence remains unacceptably high, including Taliban attacks on civilians,” he said. “The Taliban must reduce violence, negotiate in good faith and live up to their commitment to stop cooperating with international terrorist groups.”¹⁹⁵

On March 23 and 24, 2021, NATO held its ministerial meeting in Brussels, Belgium. In that meeting, Secretary Blinken reportedly spent time participating in a “listening session” with NATO allies regarding Afghanistan.¹⁹⁶ A senior official from the Biden-Harris administration present at the meeting claimed NATO representatives “expected that [President Biden] was leaning in the direction of a withdrawal at that point.”¹⁹⁷ The representatives — particularly those from the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy — argued against the United States’ withdrawal, informing Secretary Blinken that President Biden’s decision should be tied to the conditions on the ground.¹⁹⁸ German Foreign Minister Heiko Mass reportedly stressed that any decision by the United States should be made with buy-in from its NATO allies and argued in favor of a conditions-based approach.¹⁹⁹

Thereafter, Secretary Blinken appears to have asked his team to put together a new recommendation memo to the president which reflected NATO allies’ assessment.²⁰⁰ Secretary Blinken was purportedly jolted by how strongly NATO officials argued against a complete U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, expressing concern “about the health of the transatlantic alliance.” He allegedly relayed those concerns to President Biden, describing the pushback to a complete U.S. withdrawal as coming at him in “quadraphonic sound.”²⁰¹ State Department documents obtained by the committee confirm that as a result of these meetings, Secretary Blinken told NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg in mid-April, “I share your view that it would be preferable to reach a political settlement before foreign troops depart.”²⁰²

In his testimony before the committee, General McKenzie reiterated America's NATO allies recommended against a full U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. According to General McKenzie, "It was my actual belief that had we stayed at 2,500 we would have probably 5,000 NATO forces, and maybe more than that."²⁰³ He assessed, "Because of the unique capabilities that the United States brings, [NATO] couldn't have stayed without our presence."²⁰⁴ NATO data published in February 2021 stated that, at the start of 2021, NATO presence in Afghanistan numbered close to 10,000 troops from roughly three dozen nations.²⁰⁵ The United States, in contrast, had 2,500 to 3,500 troops in Afghanistan.²⁰⁶ General Milley informed the committee NATO "would follow our lead" on staying or going.²⁰⁷ His assessment was echoed by General Miller, who added in his testimony NATO allies were "committed for the long haul in terms of let's get on a conditions-based path."²⁰⁸

4. President Biden's Go-to-Zero Order

Ambassador Khalilzad explained in his testimony before the committee the State Department leadership "at the highest level" discussed three options regarding the Doha Agreement.²⁰⁹ The first option was to "essentially not to insist on conditionality, just emphasize withdrawal and counterterrorism" — meaning the U.S. could withdraw regardless of whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments.²¹⁰ The second, he said, was for President Biden to do what President Trump did with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal: "[T]he Trump administration put the agreement on the Iran nuclear deal aside, said we're not going to honor that. And this administration, the Biden-Harris administration, could do the same with this agreement, saying it's flawed, we don't want to do that."²¹¹ And the third was "conditionality," meaning the United States would not withdraw forces unless and until the Taliban fulfilled its commitments under the Doha Agreement.²¹² When Secretary Blinken suggested the conditional approach, President Biden reportedly responded that he did not want to get "caught in the trap of giving the war one more try," and the withdrawal had to be done.²¹³

On April 6, 2021, during an Oval Office meeting, President Biden conveyed his decision to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan to his senior national security advisors, including Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin, and General Milley. He reportedly said, "It's time to bring the troops home."²¹⁴ Thereafter, Secretary Austin met with General Milley, General McKenzie, and General Miller to begin planning withdrawing from Afghanistan, purportedly stating, "This is not the decision that we wanted, but this is what we got. Now we have to execute it."²¹⁵

In his testimony before the committee, General Milley explained he received the formal order to withdraw all American forces from Afghanistan on April 11, 2021.²¹⁶ General McKenzie similarly received his orders that day from Secretary Austin.²¹⁷ "POTUS has made a decision. ... We will leave Afghanistan. The clock starts on 1 May. We will take the necessary time to leave in an orderly manner. I know your planning has called for 120 days; we will be out before the twenty-year anniversary of September 11th," Secretary Austin said to military leaders.²¹⁸ While the military was instructed to draw its forces to zero, President Biden's order mandated that U.S. Embassy Kabul remain following the withdrawal. According to General McKenzie, "The President's decision was to maintain an embassy, to not require our citizens to leave, and, of course, to not expedite the extraction of at-risk Afghans. This was not a military decision."²¹⁹

Vice President Kamala Harris was the last person in the room when President Biden made the decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan; a fact she boasted shortly after President Biden issued his go-to-zero order.²²⁰ Despite warnings against withdrawing by senior leaders, Vice President Harris' aide disclosed the vice president "strongly supported" President Biden's decision.²²¹ President Biden's former Chief of Staff Ron Klain affirmed Vice President Harris was entrenched in the president's Afghanistan policy. "[Vice President Kamala Harris] advised the president on that. She advised the president on the evacuation," Mr. Klain said.²²² With respect to President Biden's decision to withdraw, Vice President Harris asserted, "He is someone, who I have seen over and over again, make decisions based on what he truly believes ... is the right thing to do."²²³ The vice president's position was a disappointment to Afghan officials, including one of Afghanistan's top negotiators in peace talks with the Taliban, Nader Nadery.²²⁴ According to Mr. Nadery, it was clear to Afghan officials President Biden was determined to pull U.S. troops from Afghanistan, but he was hoping he had an ally in Vice President Harris.²²⁵ "I hoped that President Biden listened to her and other voices who advocated for Afghan women," said Mr. Nadery.²²⁶ Vice President Harris, despite publicly championing Afghan women's rights, appears to have been working in lockstep with President Biden behind the scenes to withdraw all U.S. troops no matter the consequence to Afghan women and girls.²²⁷

On April 14, 2021, President Biden publicly announced his decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, drawing American forces down to zero. He declared, "I'm now the fourth United States President to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan: two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth."²²⁸ He went on to say the United States and NATO would "be out of Afghanistan before we mark the 20th anniversary of that heinous attack on September 11th."²²⁹ When asked by the committee why President Biden chose picked the anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks to withdraw from Afghanistan by, then-White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki claimed the date was chosen for operational purposes. "I think it was the President wanting to send a clear message that this is not going to be an open ended timeline to withdrawing troops. We have had that policy for some time in the past, and he disagrees with it, so he was giving a timeline on when operationally we could move troops out, she said."²³⁰ However, when asked by the committee regarding the strategic and operational importance of that deadline, General Milley and General McKenzie responded they were not aware of any tactical or military reason for why President Biden picked the anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks.²³¹

President Biden also contended his administration "inherited" the Doha Agreement when explaining his decision to withdraw in the announcement.²³² "It is perhaps not what I would have negotiated myself, but it was an agreement made by the United States government, and that means something. So, in keeping with that agreement and with our national interests, the United States will begin our final withdrawal," he said.²³³ That logic, however, is flawed as President Biden took no issue revoking other policies he purportedly inherited from President Trump, including the "Remain in Mexico" policy, requiring asylum-seekers wait in Mexico for hearings in U.S. immigration court.²³⁴ President Biden also failed to acknowledge the Doha Agreement was predicated on conditions — conditions his senior national security advisors and America's NATO allies repeatedly acknowledged the Taliban were in violation of. Indeed, President Biden would later admit that he would have withdrawn American forces from Afghanistan with or

without the Doha Agreement, stating, “I would’ve tried to figure out how to withdraw those troops, yes.”²³⁵

President Biden would add, “I believed that our presence in Afghanistan should be focused on the reason we went in the first place: to ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again. We did that. We accomplished that objective.”²³⁶ He also claimed that al Qaeda was “degraded” in Afghanistan.²³⁷ Both those statements would prove false. Testifying before the committee, General McKenzie confirmed al Qaeda was a threat then and remains an ongoing threat in Afghanistan, stating, “[The Taliban’s] ties with al Qaeda were deep and profound, and there was no way, in my judgment, that they were ever going to separate from al Qaeda.” He added, “Our principle concern with Afghanistan right now should be the fact that al Qaeda and ISIS have the opportunity to gather strength in ungoverned spaces with clear desire to attack our homeland.”²³⁸ These assessments proved true when, following the withdrawal, the Taliban provided sanctuary to al Qaeda leader and one of the perpetrators behind the September 11 attacks, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The jihadist leader was on the balcony of a three-story house owned by senior Haqqani members in Kabul when an American drone strike killed him on July 31, 2022.²³⁹ The administration would later concede that “Zawahiri continued to pose an active threat to U.S. persons, interests, and national security.”²⁴⁰

a. Reactions and Consequences of President Biden’s Decision to Unconditionally Withdraw

The reaction to President Biden’s unilateral decision to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan was swift. The United States’ NATO allies were dismayed and blindsided by the lack of consultation. According to reporting, NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg was “livid,” informing Secretary Blinken and Secretary Austin he, “strongly disagreed with the decisions and felt that NATO’s collective position hadn’t been taken into account.”²⁴¹ Given that NATO went into Afghanistan after 9/11 in support of the United States, Secretary-General Stoltenberg reportedly felt the alliance deserved more courtesy than being forced to pack up — given their dependence on the American military — once President Biden decided to leave.²⁴² In his testimony before the committee, General Miller confirmed NATO allies’ disapproval, testifying “they certainly were unhappy, and they voiced that unhappiness.”²⁴³

The United States’ Afghan allies were unsurprisingly, devastated. General Hibatullah Alizai — former Afghan Army general — informed the committee majority staff that he pleaded for more time from American commanders on the ground, saying, “Just tell your leadership to stay with us for two more years. ... We’re going to take the initiative ... it’s in our favor and we can defeat the Taliban.”²⁴⁴ General Miller described how, after President Biden’s announcement, “it [the U.S. withdrawal] became a reality, that, you know, certainly affected the psychology and the morale of the people of Afghanistan.”²⁴⁵ Nader Nadery, a member of the Afghan government’s delegation at the Doha intra-Afghan negotiations, affirmed President Biden’s announcement had a significant impact on morale.²⁴⁶ Matin Bek, former chief of staff to President Ghani and negotiator in Doha, told the committee that President Biden’s announcement declared to Afghans, “everything was finished.”²⁴⁷ According to General Sami Sadat, President Biden’s April 14th announcement immediately impacted the morale of Afghan security forces. In his

testimony before the committee, he stated, “The bad moment was when the announcement came in ... The truth of the matter is that after President Biden announced the withdrawal, the U.S. forces and Afghan forces were in complete disarray with each other” and “it was excruciating to separate two war brothers ... two militaries that worked for twenty years.”²⁴⁸

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies’ *Long War Journal* had been tracking the Taliban’s attempts to gain control of territory since NATO ended its military mission in Afghanistan and switched to an “advise and assist” role in June 2014. In his testimony before the committee, the *Long War Journal*’s author Bill Roggio the data showed President Biden’s announcement “was directly responsible for the collapse of the Afghan government and military and the Taliban’s immediate takeover of Afghanistan.”²⁴⁹ With 2,500 troops, according to General Miller, the U.S. kept “the Afghan military in the fight,” and after President Biden’s announcement, there was a “loss of confidence in the security forces and some radical security force adjustments as a result.”²⁵⁰ According to SIGAR Sopko, “single most important factor in the ANDSF’s [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] collapse in August 2021 was the U.S. decision to withdraw military forces and contractors from Afghanistan through signing the U.S.-Taliban agreement in February 2020 under the Trump administration, followed by President Biden’s withdrawal announcement in April 2021.”²⁵¹

President Biden’s announcement also undermined the Afghan negotiating team’s peace talks with the Taliban in Doha.²⁵² General Miller affirmed that, following President Biden’s announcement, the Taliban’s mindset shifted to, “Why even talk to this group of Afghans that are here talking about a power sharing agreement? We have what we want here now. We don’t need a power sharing agreement.”²⁵³ Ambassador Wilson also acknowledged the announcement impacted the Afghan government’s leverage in seeking peace, asserting, “Their job absolutely became harder after [April] 14. ... And their ability to achieve an agreement that was acceptable to, not just Ghani, but other political leaders, and for that matter the Afghan people, got smaller.”²⁵⁴ Fawzia Koofi, a former Member of the House of the People of Afghanistan and member of the Afghan delegation to the Doha negotiations, also confirmed President Biden’s withdrawal announcement had a direct negative impact on the negotiations.²⁵⁵ Matin Bek recounted that the Taliban was “relieve[ed]” about the announcement which “killed the little available window for an imagined peace.”²⁵⁶ In his testimony before the committee, General Milley asserted, “Don’t put date certain on things. Don’t announce them and don’t put a date certain. You lose whatever leverage you have in negotiation.”²⁵⁷

The Taliban, in response, celebrated President Biden’s go-to-zero order, interpreting it as a victory for the jihadist movement. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid later said, “When President Biden won the election, we suspected that he might insist on continuing the war, but when he announced that he was withdrawing his forces from Afghanistan, it was a source of joy.”²⁵⁸ In the weeks after the signing of the Doha Agreement, the Taliban issued a fatwa — a religious decree — claiming the withdrawal would not end its “armed jihad” and that “[u]ntil the occupation is completely severed from its roots and an Islamic government formed, the mujahideen shall continue waging armed jihad and exerting efforts for the implementation of Islamic rule.”²⁵⁹ SIGAR later revealed that, in the weeks after President Biden’s announcement,

USAID-funded monitoring of the Taliban’s public communications “found the Taliban’s tone to be resoundingly triumphant in April and May following the announced withdrawal.”²⁶⁰

Steve Brooking, the former Chief of Mission to the British Embassy in Kabul and Special Adviser to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, assessed the impact of President Biden’s speech was immediate, saying, “It emboldened the Taliban, seriously damaged the morale of the Republic’s security forces, and persuaded many Afghans to think about switching sides to the Taliban, who were now perceived as likely winners.”²⁶¹ Put simply, President Biden’s decision to not enforce the Doha Agreement conditions and to unilaterally withdraw from Afghanistan enabled the collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan.

¹ Annie Linskey, *From Saigon to Kabul: Biden’s Response to Vietnam Echoes in His Views of Afghanistan Withdrawal*, WASH. POST (Aug. 15, 2021, 6:11 PM), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-vietnam-afghanistan/2021/08/15/fd155518-fdd5-11eb-ba7e-2cf966e88e93_story.html.

² Annie Linskey, *From Saigon to Kabul: Biden’s Response to Vietnam Echoes in His Views of Afghanistan Withdrawal*, WASH. POST (Aug. 15, 2021, 6:11), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-vietnam-afghanistan/2021/08/15/fd155518-fdd5-11eb-ba7e-2cf966e88e93_story.html.

³ Michael Hirsh, *Is Biden Haunted by Vietnam? Should He Be?*, FOREIGN POL’Y (July 9, 2021, 2:37 PM), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/09/is-biden-haunted-by-vietnam-should-he-be/>.

⁴ Michael Hirsh, *Is Biden Haunted by Vietnam? Should He Be?*, FOREIGN POL’Y (July 9, 2021, 2:37 PM), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/09/is-biden-haunted-by-vietnam-should-he-be/>.

⁵ George Packer, *The Betrayal: America’s Chaotic Withdrawal from Afghanistan Added Moral Injury to Military Failure. But a Group of Soldiers, Veterans, and Ordinary Citizens Came Together to Try to Save Afghan Lives and Salvage some American Honor*, ATLANTIC (Feb. 9, 2022, 5:15 PM), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/biden-afghanistan-exit-american-allies-abandoned/621307/>.

⁶ 121 CONG. REC. 11975 (1975), <https://www.congress.gov/94/crecb/1975/04/25/GPO-CRECB-1975-pt10-1-1.pdf> (statement of Sen. Joseph Biden); 121 CONG. REC. 11977 (1975), <https://www.congress.gov/94/crecb/1975/04/25/GPO-CRECB-1975-pt10-1-1.pdf> (rollcall vote on Humanitarian Assistance for South Vietnam—Conference Report, H.R. 6096).

⁷ “Re-education” Camps, VIETNAMESE HERITAGE MUSEUM, <https://vietnamesemuseum.org/our-roots/re-education-camps/>.

⁸ George Packer, *The Betrayal: America’s Chaotic Withdrawal from Afghanistan Added Moral Injury to Military Failure. But a Group of Soldiers, Veterans, and Ordinary Citizens Came Together to Try to Save Afghan Lives and Salvage some American Honor*, ATLANTIC (Feb. 9, 2022, 5:15 PM), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/biden-afghanistan-exit-american-allies-abandoned/621307/>.

⁹ Patricia Gossman et al., “No Forgiveness for People Like You” Executions and Enforced Disappearances in Afghanistan under the Taliban, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Nov. 30, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/11/30/no-forgiveness-people-you/executions-and-enforced-disappearances-afghanistan>.

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- ²⁴² Alexander Ward. *The Internationalists*. Page 80.
- ²⁴³ General Austin Scott Miller transcribed interview. April 15, 2024. Page 137, Line 1.
- ²⁴⁴ Afghan General Haibatullah Alizai phone call with HFAC Majority. June 3, 2024.
- ²⁴⁵ Transcribed Interview with General Austin Scott Miller, April 15, 2024, Page 134, Lines 19-22
- ²⁴⁶ HFAC Interview with Nader Nadery, former delegate of Afghan government, September 11, 2023.
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- ²⁵⁵ HFAC Interview with Fawzia Koofi, former Member of the House of the People of Afghanistan, September 8, 2023
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