

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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August 12, 2019

The Honorable Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Esper and Secretary Pompeo:

As Members of the Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on National Security, we write to request a briefing on the United States' current strategy in Afghanistan and potential implications of a U.S. military, diplomatic, and humanitarian withdrawal from the country.

On July 29, 2019, while speaking at the Economic Club of Washington, Secretary Pompeo stated that the President has directed him to reduce the United States' military presence in Afghanistan by the 2020 presidential elections.¹ Secretary Pompeo clarified his remarks a few days later, and stated that the President's expectations are for the United States to reduce its operational footprint on the ground in Afghanistan as quickly as feasible.²

The United States' objective of ensuring a favorable outcome for the United States and Afghan people is likely dependent on successful negotiations between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban, facilitated by U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. On March 12, 2019, Ambassador Khalilzad announced that following a first round of negotiations, the United States and the Taliban agreed "in principle" to four major issues: counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban, U.S. troop withdrawal, intra-Afghan dialogue, and a complete ceasefire between the parties to the conflict.³ On July 31, 2019, Ambassador Khalilzad tweeted that an initial deal with the Taliban could be imminent, and the following day, the Washington Post reported that the agreement "would

¹ U.S. Department of State, *Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo With David Rubenstein, President of the Economic Club of Washington, DC* (Jul. 29, 2019) (online at www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-michael-r-pompeo-with-david-rubenstein-president-of-the-economic-club-of-washington-d-c/).

² *Pompeo Backtracks on Afghanistan Withdrawal by Fall 2020*, Military Times (Jul. 31, 2019) (online at www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2019/07/31/pompeo-backtracks-on-afghanistan-withdrawal-by-fall-2020/).

³ Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, Twitter post (Mar. 24, 2019, 9:59 am) (online at <https://twitter.com/US4AfghanPeace/status/1105513780375625730>).

require the Taliban to begin negotiating a larger peace deal directly with the Afghan government, [and] could cut the number of American troops in the country from roughly 14,000 to between 8,000 and 9,000 [from a peak of over 100,000 in 2011].”⁴ Press reports further indicate that the State Department is planning to scale back its presence at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, “with the goal of cutting half of the embassy’s personnel by the end of September.”⁵

On April 3, 2019, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), John Sopko testified before our Subcommittee that “[i]f large-scale withdrawals of U.S. operational and oversight personnel occur, the stewardship of U.S. taxpayer funds and achievement of reconstruction goals could suffer.” He continued:

If widespread corruption is not adequately addressed, the effectiveness of programs, the perceived legitimacy of the Afghan state, and the willingness of donors to continue their assistance could all suffer. If economic development stalls, accommodating new entrants to the labor force, including returning refugees and former government and insurgent fighters, could prove a daunting task. If women’s rights and progress are not respected, and if the rule of law is not upheld, equitable and effective governance could fail. And if new security arrangements do not provide for fair and effective policing while standing ready to quash any resurgence of terrorism, then all other aspects of reconstruction could ultimately fail.⁶

Since October 2001, more than 2,400 U.S. military personnel have been killed and more than 20,000 have been wounded in Afghanistan. The United States has further spent more than \$744 billion in Afghanistan, including approximately \$133 billion for reconstruction.⁷ We are therefore concerned that a large-scale withdrawal of U.S. military, diplomatic, and humanitarian personnel without adequate oversight could come with significant risks to our national objectives and strategic interests in Afghanistan.

Given that an anticipated reconciliation agreement between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban may be imminent, we request a briefing by September 27, 2019, on how your Departments plan to address the below challenges as identified in SIGAR’s 2019 report on high-risk U.S. reconstruction program areas in Afghanistan:

⁴ *U.S. preparing to withdraw thousands of troops from Afghanistan in initial deal with Taliban*, The Washington Post (Aug. 1, 2019) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-preparing-to-withdraw-thousands-of-troops-from-afghanistan-in-initial-deal-with-taliban/2019/08/01/01e97126-b3ac-11e9-8f6c-7828e68cb15f_story.html?utm_term=.9f2302182494).

⁵ *U.S. scaling back Afghanistan embassy at crucial moment in peace talks*, CNN (Aug. 1, 2019) (online at www.cnn.com/2019/08/01/politics/us-scaling-back-afghanistan-embassy/index.html).

⁶ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Statement of John F. Sopko* (April 3, 2019) (online at <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/GO/GO06/20190403/109241/HHRG-116-GO06-Wstate-SopkoJ-20190403-U1.pdf>).

⁷ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Apr. 30, 2019) (online at www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-04-30qr.pdf).

1. Widespread Insecurity;
2. Underdeveloped Civil Policing Capability;
3. Endemic Corruption;
4. Sluggish Economic Growth;
5. Illicit Narcotics Trade;
6. Threats to Women's Rights;
7. Reintegration of Ex-Combatants; and
8. Restricted Oversight.

The Committee on Oversight and Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X.

If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Subcommittee Majority staff at (202) 225-5051 or Subcommittee Minority Staff at (202) 225-5074.

Sincerely,



Stephen F. Lynch
Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security



Jody B. Hice
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on National Security