

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

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Opening Statement Chairman Stephen F. Lynch Subcommittee on National Security “Examining Next Steps for U.S. Engagement in Afghanistan” May 20, 2021 at 9:00AM

Good morning, everyone. I’d like to thank U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad for joining us once again. Thank you as well for your service to our country. Your perspective, especially before our Subcommittee, is extremely helpful in informing the decisions that the Members of the Subcommittee have to make, so we are greatly appreciative of your willingness to help this Subcommittee with its work.

Today’s hearing will examine President Biden’s landmark decision to withdraw all remaining U.S. military forces—approximately 3,500 troops—from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. When announcing this historic decision last month, President Biden underscored that the United States has achieved its primary objective for launching Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001: “To ensure Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again.”

I certainly share President Biden’s desire to bring a responsible end to America’s longest war. Since 2001, more than 2,400 U.S. servicemembers have made the ultimate sacrifice and over 20,000 have been wounded in support of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. Nearly two decades of war in Afghanistan have also cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$873 billion – including an estimated \$144 billion on reconstruction alone.

No matter how thoroughly considered, however, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan still comes with significant consequences to our national security, the long-term viability of the Afghan state, and the future stability of the region – especially in the absence of an intra-Afghan peace agreement. As Members of the Oversight Committee, it is our job to ensure that those consequences are recognized and those risks are minimized to the greatest extent possible, while continuing to promote the responsible stewardship of U.S. taxpayer resources.

For example, during our Subcommittee’s [hearing](#) earlier this Congress with the Afghanistan Study Group, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joe Dunford and former Senator Kelly Ayotte from New Hampshire cautioned that without a U.S. military presence in-country, our intelligence and quick-strike capabilities against al Qaeda, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, and other terrorist groups will likely be significantly diminished.

Several weeks later, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko [testified](#) that regardless of our military footprint, the Afghan Government will continue to require

substantial U.S. and donor assistance to sustain its security and defense forces—as well as its fledgling political, economic, and civic institutions—or risk eventual collapse.

So I am encouraged that the Biden administration has made clear that, notwithstanding our scheduled military withdrawal, the United States will continue to provide vital civilian and humanitarian assistance to the Afghan government and to the Afghan people. Last month, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the Biden administration will allocate \$300 million in additional aid for economic development, anti-corruption, women’s empowerment, and other essential programs in Afghanistan.

However, without a U.S. security presence on the ground in Afghanistan, it will become increasingly difficult, but not impossible, for independent auditors such as SIGAR to conduct oversight of U.S. taxpayer-funded assistance and development programs in Afghanistan. To that end, the Administration should begin planning now—not when U.S. forces have already left—to ensure that proper oversight mechanisms and safeguards are in place to promote the effective and responsible use of U.S. taxpayer resources in Afghanistan.

I’d like to thank Ambassador Khalilzad, again, for testifying before our Subcommittee today, and with that, I will now yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Glenn Grothman, for his opening remarks.

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