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Opening Statement
Subcommittee Chairman Stephen F. Lynch
Subcommittee on National Security
“Examining the Trump Administration’s Afghanistan Strategy, Part 2”
September 22, 2020

Good morning, everyone. Before we begin, I would like to take a moment to honor the memory of the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Justice Ginsburg was a force for good on the Supreme Court and a true champion for justice, equality, and the balance of power in our representative democracy.

Eleven days ago, our country marked the 19th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Like Pearl Harbor 60 years earlier, September 11th will forever be etched in American history as a date that will live in infamy. We will never forget the 2,977 souls that we lost on that horrific day.

After the 9/11 attacks, the United States went to war against al Qaeda and their Taliban hosts in Afghanistan. Since then, the conflict has taken the lives of 2,448 American servicemembers and injured tens of thousands more.

In a significant milestone earlier this year, the United States and the Taliban on February 29th signed an “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” which outlined a way forward for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces by mid-2021. In exchange, the Taliban promised to come to the negotiating table with the Kabul Government and to prevent terrorist groups such as al Qaeda from using Afghanistan to stage attacks against the United States and our allies.

Despite multiple indications that the Taliban have not fully met their commitments under the February agreement, the Trump Administration has steadily withdrawn U.S. forces from Afghanistan, which has ceded much of our leverage to help shape the future of Afghanistan for its people and our national security interests.

In fact, in an interview airing over the weekend, former Trump Administration National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster described the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan as an “unwise policy.” Instead, he argued, “what we require in Afghanistan is a sustained commitment to help the Afghan government and help the Afghan security forces continue to bear the brunt of this fight.”

Since U.S. forces began to withdraw from Afghanistan following the February agreement, security conditions on the ground have deteriorated. In June, the Department of Defense estimated that the Taliban sustained levels of violence “five times higher” than those

observed during a February 2020 reduction-in-violence period, and U.S. CENTCOM Commander General Kenneth McKenzie later described this escalation as “not consistent with somebody negotiating in good faith.”

Nevertheless, after months of violence, delay, and a contentious prisoner exchange, the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban finally met in Doha earlier this month to begin intra-Afghan negotiations, but many Afghans remain deeply distrustful of the Taliban’s true intentions.

In particular, many Afghans, especially women and girls, are justifiably concerned that the human rights and democratic gains they have achieved with U.S. support since 2001 could be in jeopardy if the Taliban return to power through force or a negotiated settlement.

Given the legacy of past failures, we must remain clear-eyed about the stakes of this moment: if the Taliban are unwilling or unable to abide by their commitments, or if political negotiations collapse, the resulting crisis would likely have grave consequences for the Afghan people, regional stability, and international security.

So I am grateful to our witnesses, Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs David Helvey, for being here today to answer our questions about these risks and the Trump Administration’s ongoing efforts to bring the U.S. war in Afghanistan to a close.

While we are all eager for our sons and daughters in uniform to return home, it is also important that we do not needlessly or recklessly bargain away the rights and freedoms that the Afghan people have gained at such a huge cost in American, Coalition, and Afghan lives.

With that, I will now yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Grothman of Wisconsin, for his opening statement.

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