

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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### Opening Statement Chairman Stephen F. Lynch Subcommittee on National Security

#### **“A Pathway for Peace in Afghanistan: Examining the Findings and Recommendations of the Afghanistan Study Group” February 19, 2021.**

Good morning, everyone. Before we begin our first Subcommittee hearing of the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, I'd like to welcome members on both sides of the aisle and congratulate the gentleman from Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman, for returning as our Ranking Member. I look forward to working with all of you as we conduct meaningful oversight of the critical national security and foreign policy challenges facing the United States.

Since the U.S. war in Afghanistan began nearly 20 years ago, more than 775,000 of our brave men and women in uniform have deployed to Afghanistan. More than 2,400 have made the ultimate sacrifice, and another 20,000 have been wounded. The war is now the longest in our nation's history and has cost American taxpayers more than \$860 billion.

On February 29, 2020, after more than a year of diplomatic negotiations led by U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, the United States and the Taliban signed a landmark “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan.” This agreement established a timeline for the complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, so long as the Taliban agreed to begin peace talks with the Afghan Government and to sever its ties with al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

In his first public testimony before Congress on the U.S.-Taliban peace deal in September of last year, Ambassador Khalilzad [reported](#) to our Subcommittee that the Taliban had not fully complied with their counterterrorism commitments under the agreement, stating: “With regard to terrorism and al Qaeda, in this setting, what I can say is the Talibs have taken some steps, based on the commitment they have made, positive steps, but they have some distance still to go.”

**Despite these shortcomings, the Trump administration began a military drawdown in Afghanistan that even outpaced the terms of the February 2020 peace agreement. Today, only 2,500 U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan, even as the security situation on the ground continues to deteriorate.**

**Upon taking office last month, the Biden administration announced its intent to review the U.S.-Taliban agreement, including whether the Taliban remains in compliance**

**with its terms. The administration also stated its commitment to protect the historic gains made by Afghan women and girls as the peace process continues.**

That brings us to this important hearing, and we are honored to be joined today by the three co-chairs of the Afghanistan Study Group. I would also like to take a moment to thank the nonpartisan U.S. Institute of Peace for the support and expertise they provided the Study Group during the course of its work.

In the fiscal year 2020 omnibus bill, Congress—led by Senator Lindsey Graham, Senator Patrick Leahy, and the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs—tasked the independent and bipartisan Afghanistan Study Group to “consider the implications of a peace settlement, or the failure to reach a settlement, on U.S. policy, resources, and commitments in Afghanistan.” After nearly nine months of review and consultations with current and former U.S. and Afghan government officials, allies and partners, and other key stakeholders, the Study Group issued its [final report](#) earlier this month.

**The Study Group concluded that for the first time since 2001, an opportunity now exists “to achieve a just and durable peace in Afghanistan.” But it will not be easy, and the Trump administration has left President Biden with few good options. As the Study Group explained in their [final report](#):**

On the one hand, the Taliban have signaled publicly that if all international forces are not withdrawn by May 2021, as envisaged in the Doha agreement, they will resume their ‘jihad’ against the foreign presence and will withdraw from the peace process. On the other hand, a withdrawal in May under current conditions will likely lead to a collapse of the Afghan state and a possible renewed civil war.

**Nearly 20 years of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan might very well be defined by the next three to six months—likely with profound consequences for U.S. national security and the future stability of the region.**

We are grateful to the Afghanistan Study Group and our distinguished witnesses for their service. We look forward to their testimony, and with that, I will now yield to the Ranking Member from the great state of Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman.

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