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Opening Statement Chairman Stephen F. Lynch Subcommittee on National Security “The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction’s 2021 High-Risk List” March 16, 2021.

Good morning, everyone. I’d like to thank Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko for joining us today as we examine SIGAR’s [2021 High-Risk List](#). This biennial report identifies key areas of Afghanistan reconstruction that are especially vulnerable to waste, fraud, and abuse.

As underscored by our recent hearings with [U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad](#) and the [co-chairs of the Afghanistan Study Group](#), the issue of U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan has reached a moment of great consequence.

More than a year after the Trump administration and the Taliban signed a putative “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” insurgent violence against Afghan forces and a campaign of terror including assassinations against government officials, teachers, prominent women leaders, and humanitarian workers has continued to the present day.

Despite the lack of progress in de-escalating Taliban violence, President Biden is now forced to decide whether to withdraw the remaining 2,500 U.S. military personnel and approximately 13,500 U.S. and third-country contractors from Afghanistan by May 1st, as envisioned in the Trump-Taliban Agreement.

Alternatively, with less than 6 weeks before the May 1 deadline, the Biden administration can attempt to negotiate an extension to the February 2020 agreement, or—as has recently been reported— convene coalition partner countries to engage with both the Afghan Government and the Taliban with the goal of initiating a detailed discussion for a peaceful transition and reconciliation between the two sides.

These talks are happening at a moment of great uncertainty for the people of Afghanistan. In his [2021 High-Risk List](#), Inspector General Sopko warns that a highly unstable security environment, coupled with the scheduled withdrawal of U.S. and international forces in the midst of a global pandemic have all placed the U.S. reconstruction mission in Afghanistan “at greater risk than ever before.”

Since 2002, the United States has spent over \$88 billion, or an estimated 62% of total U.S. reconstruction assistance, on training and equipment for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. **Yet, despite our best efforts to strengthen the Afghan Government’s**

military and police forces, levels of violence in Afghanistan remain unacceptably high, and the enduring presence of al Qaeda, Islamic State-Khorasan, and other terrorist organizations all threaten to overtake the already fragile negotiations between the Afghan Government and the Taliban.

The current situation presents enormous risk to the nascent gains of Afghan women and girls who have made historic progress in their ongoing struggle for gender equality throughout the past two decades. While there were zero women and girls attending school during the previous period of Taliban control in Afghanistan, today approximately 3 million women and girls are able to safely do so. With the support of at least \$787 million in U.S. direct assistance, Afghan women have gained expanded legal protections, increased access to social services, and are now able to meaningfully participate in Afghan politics. **Unfortunately, SIGAR reminds us in its [latest report](#) that “Afghanistan remains one of the most challenging places in the world to be a woman” and again identifies women’s rights as high-risk—especially given the potential for Taliban reintegration into Afghan civil society and government.**

Let me be clear: the prospects for a sustainable and lasting peace in Afghanistan will inevitably depend on whether the Taliban and the Afghan Government can reach a political agreement that respects the rights of all Afghans—including women and girls. So, I was pleased to see the Biden administration prioritize the rights of Afghan women and girls in the guiding principles document it reportedly provided to the Afghan Government and the Taliban in recent weeks.

To conclude, Inspector General Sopko [writes](#), “whether or not the United States continues to withdraw its troops, the new Administration and Congress will have to decide whether and to what extent reconstruction will continue.” As we work with the Biden Administration to determine our best path forward in Afghanistan, we must afford meaningful consideration to how their approach might impact the high-risk reconstruction areas identified in [SIGAR’s report](#).

I look forward to today’s discussion with Inspector General Sopko, and I now yield to the Ranking Member from Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman.

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