

Testimony of Ryan Crocker

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Hearing on Afghanistan

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Thornberry, it is an honor to appear before you today to discuss the critical issue of the US military mission in Afghanistan and the peace process.

Our military has been in Afghanistan almost two decades. After this length of time, it is important to recall the reasons for our intervention. It was in response to the most devastating attacks on US soil since Pearl Harbor. Those attacks came out of Afghanistan, perpetrated by al-Qaida which was hosted and sheltered there by the Taliban. We gave the Taliban a choice: give up al-Qaida. and we will take no action against you. The Taliban chose a swift military defeat and exile over abandoning their ally. Why is this of any significance today? Because, after nearly two decades, the Taliban leadership remains in exile. And its links to al-Qaida remain very strong.

Mr. Chairman, I appear before you today not as a scholar but as a practitioner. At the beginning of January 2002, I had the privilege of reopening our Embassy in Kabul. It was a shattered city in a devastated country. The Kabul airport was closed, its runways cratered and littered with destroyed aircraft. The drive to Kabul from our military base at Bagram was through a wasteland of mud, strewn with mines. Nothing grew. Kabul itself resembled Berlin in 1945 with entire city blocks reduced to rubble. Over two decades of constant war had left a terrible legacy. The damage was not only to the physical infrastructure. The Afghan people had suffered enormously through the civil war and the tyranny of the Taliban. None had suffered more than Afghan women and girls. In those early days, it seemed that an investment in the people of Afghanistan. especially females, could be the best antidote to the pernicious ideology of the Taliban. So we opened girls' schools. Our first Congressional visitor in January 2002 was Joe Biden, then Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. We visited a newly established girls' school in Kabul, and observed a first grade class. The girls ranged in age from six years old to twelve since the older girls had come of school age after the Taliban closed their schools. I

asked one of the older girls if it bothered her that she was in a class with girls literally half her age. She just beamed and said that she didn't care who else was in the class. The important thing for her was that she was there.

As this Committee knows well, there is often a degree of tension between our national security interests and our values as Americans. For me on that freezing January day it was an epiphany. Our core national security interest in preventing another attack on the homeland from Afghan soil was in complete harmony with our core value of gender equity. We expanded those efforts, encouraging Afghan women to step forward in politics including representation in the Afghan Parliament, as military officers, as entrepreneurs. Our implicit message was that if you step forward, we've got your backs. When I arrived in Afghanistan in 2002, there were about 900,000 students in Afghan schools, all of them boys. When I left Afghanistan at the end of my tenure as ambassador 2011 – 2012, there were eight million students, over 35 % girls. I believed then, and I believe now, that there is no better bulwark against a return of Taliban rule than an educated Afghan society that rejects its evil ideology.

But it will require continued US engagement, including military presence. When I left Kabul in 2012, it was at the height of the Afghan surge with about 100,000 troops on the ground. Under the extraordinary leadership of GEN John Allen whose initiative in moving swiftly to place night operations in the hands of the Afghans removed a huge political irritation in our bilateral relationship and expanded Afghan military capabilities which enabled a responsible drawdown of our own forces. After my departure, the pace and depth of the drawdown accelerated sharply, no doubt encouraging the Taliban to step up their military pressure. It is worth noting that President Obama, like President Trump, also wanted the withdrawal of all US combat forces by the end of his presidency. He was eventually persuaded to leave a force level of about 10,000 troops. President Trump initially signaled that he understood the need for a long term presence, stating in the summer of 2017 that decisions on US force levels would be made on the basis of conditions, not calendars. But it appears that he soon ran out of patience, leading to a decision in early 2019 to accept a long-standing condition of the Taliban that it would be prepared to negotiate with the United States, but not with the Afghan government which it labeled an American puppet. I argued at the time that by bowing to the Taliban demand which previous

presidents had resisted, we had delegitimized the Afghan government we had pledged to support. This was not the beginning of a peace process. It was the first step in an American capitulation to the Taliban. As such, it bears a sad resemblance to the Paris talks on Vietnam. We came to the table waving a white flag: we surrender. We are here to negotiate the terms of that surrender. There are, of course, also important differences between that time and this. Neither North Vietnam nor the Viet Cong had launched an attack on the American homeland. Al-Qaida, sheltered by the Taliban, has. And they will be back.

Developments since then have only strengthened my view that these negotiations are a cynical sell out of the Afghan government and its people, especially women and girls. We accepted Taliban demands on the withdrawal of our forces in return for Taliban commitments on other issues that they had no intention of meeting. Violence against the Afghan government and its forces has increased. That should come as no surprise as we continue our own withdrawals while the Taliban openly disregard their own promises. A recent OIG report states that the Taliban has continued to stage attacks on US led coalition forces. In response, President Trump has announced that he will cut almost in half our remaining forces, and that he will do so in less than two months. This is not a carefully and responsibly executed reduction. It is a rout.

Our allies and our adversaries are taking note. NATO has played a significant role in Afghanistan since 2001. More than half the forces involved in Operation Resolute Support are non-US. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has warned that premature withdrawal could again turn Afghanistan into a platform “for international terrorists to plan and organize attacks on our homelands.” It is a reminder that this is not a theoretical threat. 9/11 happened. Thanks largely to our own impatience and the bad decisions it has fostered, the architects of 9/11 are on the verge of a return. The Taliban chose defeat and exile over surrendering al-Qaida. That exile has now lasted almost 20 years. The Taliban has not become kinder and gentler in the process. It is a movie we have seen before, unfortunately. After the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan, the US also made a precipitate withdrawal from the region. A vicious civil war ensued in Afghanistan followed by the rise of the Taliban. That’s how the road to 9/11 was paved.

Then there is the issue of Pakistan, a country in which I served as ambassador from 2004 to 2007. Much of the Taliban leadership had sanctuary in Pakistan, a major source of friction in our bilateral relationship. The Pakistani narrative on the Taliban ran like this: We were close allies during the anti-Soviet jihad. But once we prevailed, you went home. And once you no longer needed us, you stopped getting waivers for the Pressler Amendment which stipulates the withholding of all US economic and security assistance to any country pursuing a nuclear weapons program. So almost overnight we went from being the most allied of allies to the most sanctioned of adversaries. And we were left with a vicious Afghan civil war on our borders, threatening our own fragile stability. So when the Taliban emerged as a force that could stabilize most of Afghanistan, they had our backing. Then 9/11 happened and you're back. We are happy to see you, and we will take whatever is on offer while the taking is good. Because we know that at some point, you will be leaving again – it's what you do. So if you think we're going to turn the Taliban into a mortal enemy, you are completely crazy. Because one day you will get tired of all this and go home. We can't go home – this is home. And the Taliban will still be here, long after you are gone. There is much to challenge in this narrative from an American perspective, but it is widely believed in Pakistan. And as they watch our rush for the exits now in Afghanistan, Pakistanis feel completely vindicated in their actions.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Thornberry, our lack of strategic patience is a consistent feature in our international relations. Our allies have come to fear it while our adversaries count on it. Nowhere has this been more clear than in Afghanistan. We need to take a collective deep breath and consider our equities and our options. The cost for the US in blood and treasure is a small fraction of what it was at the height of the troop surge. I look at it as a very reasonable insurance premium against the return of the perpetrators of 9/11. This ill-considered and highly dangerous troop withdrawal should be suspended, as should any further concessions in this disastrous negotiation with the Taliban. The American people have chosen as President Elect an individual with deep experience and knowledge in international affairs, including in this region. His options should not be limited by precipitate actions now. We need a longer view, both forward and back. Looking back, in the roughly 100 year history of the modern Afghan state, Afghanistan has always needed some level of international support – this is not a new phenomenon, and as I have argued, the price tag need not be prohibitive. This is a time and a

place for longer term thinking. Beginning next month, I will be part of an initiative that seeks to do just that. The Atlantic Council and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund are launching a strategic dialog aimed at developing a long-term transatlantic framework for peace and security in Afghanistan. I continue to believe that a way forward is possible in Afghanistan that will advance our critical national security interests while upholding our most cherished American principles. Sadly, the current actions of the Administration betray both.

Finally, I want to take a moment on a very special group of Afghans who will feel the impact of whatever is decided on with respect to our commitment in Afghanistan. These are the interpreters and some others who offered critical support to our mission. Mr. Chairman, you recently received a letter from Senators Shaheen and Wicker asking that the necessary steps be taken to authorize 4000 additional visas for these brave individuals and their immediate families. There is a backlog of almost 18000 cases, and these individuals are at enormous risk.

No One Left Behind, a group dedicated to bringing our interpreters and others here to safety, calculates that about 300 of the individuals and family members have been killed while waiting for the visas we promised them and have delivered very slowly and in disappointingly small numbers. I urge this committee to do the right thing – the thing we promised. Bring these brave people here. Bring them home, to their new home. We will never regret having done so.

If we fail in this endeavor, we will damage our own core values, and our national security interests. The nature of war has changed. There is no more total war – we can be grateful for that. Conflicts of the future are going to require interpreters. And the world is watching this case. I commend this committee for its support of the Special Immigrant Visa program. I urge you to take the necessary steps to see that these brave people are able to leave danger behind and come here to us. They earned it, They paid for it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

