

HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

STATEMENT OF
GENERAL MARK A. MILLEY, USA
20TH CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF
ENDING THE U.S. MILITARY MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN
SEPTEMBER 29, 2021

Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Rogers, thank you for the opportunity to be here with Secretary Austin and GEN McKenzie to discuss Afghanistan.

During the past 20 years, the men and women of the U.S. military along with our allies and partners fought the Taliban, brought Osama Bin Laden to justice, denied al Qaeda sanctuary, and protected our homeland for two consecutive decades. Over 800,000 of us in uniform served in Afghanistan.

Most importantly, 2,461 U.S. Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines were killed in action. 20,698 were wounded in action and countless others suffer the invisible wounds of war.

There is no doubt in my mind that our efforts prevented an attack on the homeland from Afghanistan, which was our core mission. And everyone who served in that war should be proud. Your service mattered.

Beginning in 2011, we steadily drew down our troop numbers, consolidated and closed bases, and retrograded equipment from Afghanistan. At the peak in 2011, we had 97,000 US and 41,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan.

10 years later when Ambassador Khalilzad signed the Doha Agreement with Mullah Berader on 29 February 2020, the US had 12,600 US troops, 8,000 NATO and 10,500 contractors in Afghanistan.

This has been a 10-year multi-administration drawdown, not a 19-month or a 19-day withdrawal.

Under the Doha Agreement, the US would begin to withdraw its forces contingent upon the Taliban meeting certain conditions, which would lead to a political agreement between the Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan.

There were 7 conditions applicable to the Taliban and 8 to the U.S. While the Taliban did not attack U.S. forces, which was one of the conditions, it failed to fully honor any other commitments under the Doha Agreement. Perhaps most importantly for US national security, the Taliban has never renounced Al Qaeda or broke its affiliation with them.

In the 8 months from February to October of 2020, in accordance with the provisions of the Doha Agreement, we reduced US military forces from 12,600 to 6,800, NATO forces from 8,000 to 5,400 and U.S. contractors from 9,700 to 7,900 in the process of systematically retrograding from Afghanistan.

One of the conditions of Doha was a reduction of violence by the Taliban leading to a nationwide cease fire. For the entirety of the 2020 fighting season, the Taliban maintained a consistently higher than average level of violence throughout the country.

My job is to advise the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council of various military options and associated costs, benefits, risk to force, and risk to mission.

In the fall of 2020, my analysis was that an accelerated withdrawal without meeting necessary conditions risks losing the substantial gains made in Afghanistan, damaging U.S. credibility, or a general collapse of the ANDSF and the Afghan government resulting in a complete Taliban takeover or a general civil war.

Additionally, we estimated an accelerated withdrawal would increase risks of regional instability, the security of Pakistan and its nuclear arsenals, a global rise in violent extremist organizations, our global credibility with allies and partners would suffer, and a narrative of abandoning the Afghans would become widespread.

We further assessed the increased potential for a humanitarian catastrophe including significant numbers of refugees, a degradation in health, schools, women's rights, and revenge killings.

In 2020, Taliban violence against women, human rights defenders, journalists, and government officials continued, with almost 1,000 targeted killings attributed to the Taliban, up from 780 in 2019.

The Taliban strengthened its positions around several provincial capitals in anticipation of the departure of foreign forces and, over this time period, enemy-initiated attacks increased by over 50% and were above previous seasonal norms.

Based on my advice and the advice of the commanders, Secretary Esper submitted a memorandum on 9 November recommending to maintain U.S. forces in Afghanistan until conditions were met for further reductions.

Two days later on 11 November, I received an unclassified signed order directing the U.S. military to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan by 15 January 2021.

After further discussions regarding the risks associated with such a withdrawal, the order was rescinded. On 17 November we received an order to reduce troop levels to 2,500 plus enabling forces no later than 15 January.

When President Biden was inaugurated, there were approximately 3,500 US troops, 5,400 NATO, and 6,300 contractors in Afghanistan tasked to train, advise, and assist with a small contingent of counter terrorism forces. The strategic situation was stalemate.

The Biden Administration, through the National Security Council process, conducted a rigorous interagency review of the situation in Afghanistan in February, March, and April.

During this process, the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CENTCOM Commander Gen McKenzie, USFOR-A Commander GEN Miller, and myself were all given serious consideration by the Administration.

We provided a broad range of options and our assessment of their potential outcomes. The cost, benefit, risk to force and risk to mission were evaluated against the national security objectives of the United States.

On 14 April, the President announced his decision and the U.S. military received a change of mission to retrograde all U.S. military forces, maintain a small contingency force of 600-700 to protect the embassy in Kabul until the Department of State could coordinate contractor security support, assist Turkey to maintain the Hamid Karzai International Airport, and transition the U.S. mission to “over the horizon” counter terrorism support and security force assistance.

There are 6 issues I would like to further discuss: planning, Bagram airbase, Intelligence, NEO execution, 31 August, and the Way Ahead.

First, there were detailed tactical and operational plans developed by USFOR-A Commander GEN Miller and CENTCOM Commander Gen McKenzie. These plans were reviewed by the interagency and approved at the highest level. At the strategic level there were extensive coordination meetings as well as daily action officer level coordination meetings.

Along with the extensive interagency coordination, there were 4 key synchronizing events; a 28 April Afghanistan Retrograde Rehearsal, an 8 May senior official rehearsal of concept (ROC Drill), an 11 June working level interagency table top exercise on NEO, and a 6 August senior official interagency Non-Combatant evacuation table top exercise.

The 28 April Afghanistan Retrograde Rehearsal was attended by leaders from across the DOD, to include the SECDEF, DEPSECDEF, OSD/P, The Joint Chiefs as well as the USFOR-A Commander GEN Miller, the Commander of CENTCOM Gen McKenzie, the Commander of TRANSCOM Gen Lyons, the SACEUR Commander Gen Wolters, the Commander SOCOM Gen Clarke, and the Commander of CYBERCOM Gen Nakasone. The main purpose of this rehearsal was to ensure shared understanding of President Biden’s decision to leave Afghanistan and coordinate and synchronize the efforts of DoD, our allies, and partners.

The 8 May senior officials level interagency table top exercise had all relevant cabinet members to include but not limited to the Secretary of Defense Austin, DEPSECDEF Kathleen Hicks, select Combatant Commanders, to include CENTCOM, EUCOM, TRANSCOM, CYBERCOM, SOCOM, and other interagency officials. This event covered a rehearsal of concept for the complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and covered various branch plans and sequels. It was to ensure that the US Government, Interagency, and partners and allies had a shared vision of our withdrawal timeline, the plan itself, and to ensure it was synchronized.

On 11 June, the Joint Staff hosted a NEO interagency table top exercise. It included senior officials from across the interagency. These officials generated a myriad of key milestones to include prioritization and sequencing of key personnel, contingency for embassy closure, intermediate staging base locations, sorting and screening of evacuees and triggers for calling the NEO.

On 6 August another senior interagency Non-Combatant Evacuation table top exercise, focused on two scenarios; a semi-permissive NEO and a non-permissive NEO with a rapidly deteriorating security situation.

Second, the Bagram decision. In order to execute the NEO, Gen McKenzie and Gen Miller assessed two potential departure airfields. With the mission changing from direct military support to the ANSDF to security of the Embassy and other key facilities at HKIA, the U.S. military could not secure both Bagram airfield and HKIA with the troops available.

All together securing Bagram would have required approximately 5-6,000 additional troops assuming no indigenous partner force was available. These forces are in addition to those that would be required to secure Kabul and HKIA in the event of a NEO.

As GEN Miller has previously testified, HKIA would always be the center of gravity of any NEO due to the population that would need to be evacuated was mostly in Kabul.

In extremis we developed contingency plans to re-seize BAGRAM, but the conditions to do so never materialized. In short, USFOR-A and CENTCOM plans estimated that in order to conduct the NEO, HKIA was the most logical choice given the mission, enemy, purpose, constraints, and restraints. Maintaining both BAGRAM and HKIA was not feasible given the mission and troops available. Their analysis was briefed, reviewed and approved at the most senior levels of our government.

Third, the Intelligence Community provided consistent strategic-level warning regarding the Taliban's increased activity as evidenced by events on the ground. There are 419 districts in Afghanistan. The Taliban controlled approximately 78 districts in February of 2021. This rose to over 100 in mid-June and surpassed 200 by mid-July, with fighting occurring on the outskirts of 15 provincial capitals.

By late July it was evident that the security situation was deteriorating rapidly. The IC consistently estimated that the ANSDF was at risk of fracture and the government could collapse after the departure of US forces at the end of the summer with opinions ranging from weeks, months, or in some cases years after our departure depending on when the intelligence report was written.

The consensus intelligence view estimated an ANSDF fracture and provincial capitals captured with the exception of Kabul by early to late fall or at the latest December, assuming the last U.S. troops were out by 31 August.

There were no estimates that I am aware of that predicted the collapse of the Afghan Army and the government in 11 days in August prior to the final departure of US forces.

The speed, scale and scope of the collapse was a surprise.

Fourth, there were two distinct missions that get conflated. One was the retrograde of military forces, which was largely completed by early to mid-July. The other was the execution of a non-combatant evacuation.

The first provincial capital fell on 6 August. On 14 August, Ambassador Wilson declared a NEO and the Secretary of Defense ordered the commander of CENTCOM to execute the NEO contingency plan, which was developed months earlier. We began to alert, marshal,

and deploy prepositioned forces from the Middle East and pre-alerted forces from CONUS in accordance with CENTCOM's plan.

The Joint Force executed the NEO in a highly dynamic, dangerous operating environment from a war-torn country, eventually evacuating over 120,000 people entirely by air on 387 US military sorties and 391 non US military sorties.

Evacuees included 6,000 American citizens, over 3,000 3rd country nationals and the remainder were Afghans designated by the Department of State. This NEO was executed by the Joint Force deploying 6,000 troops in 2 days. We established 26 temporary safe havens stretching from the middle east across Europe and here in the United States.

The fifth point is the 31 August decision. On 25 August during the conduct of the NEO, I was asked for my best military advice on whether the United States should maintain military forces in Afghanistan beyond 31 August.

I and the Joint Chiefs of Staff along with the commander of CENTCOM, USFOR-A now ADM Vasley, and the Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division MG Donahue reviewed four courses of action.

We assessed the cost, benefit, risk to force, risk to mission and risk to remaining Americans in each of these COAs. We determined that any extension would increase risk to force, mission and remaining Americans to very high levels.

All the commanders and all the Joint Chiefs recommended that all U.S. forces should depart by 31 August. Every one of us understood these were independent recommendations and there was no requirement or expectation to achieve consensus.

Remaining at HKIA beyond 31 August or attempting to re-seize Bagram Air Base and clearing Kabul of Taliban would have required a much larger commitment of forces in the range of 15-20,000 or more troops, and a resumption of the war against the Taliban while fighting with ISIS.

We had evacuated over 5,000 American citizens at that point. We did not have clarity on precise number or location of the remaining American citizens.

While it was militarily feasible, we assessed the cost to be extraordinarily high. In addition to US casualties, we assessed the risk to remaining US citizens would increase significantly. And finally we assessed there was no guarantee of getting out the remaining American citizens safely, nor was there a reasonable prospect of an end state in an achievable amount of time.

Therefore, we unanimously recommended that the military mission be transitioned on 31 August to a diplomatic mission in order to get out the remaining American citizens. That mission is still ongoing.

This NEO was unprecedented and is the largest air evacuation in US history.

Although the mission evacuated 120,000 people it came at an incredible cost of 11 Marines, 1 Soldier, and a Navy Corpsman. These 13 gave their lives so that people they never met would have an opportunity to live in freedom.

For the last point, the Taliban was and remains a terrorist organization and they still have not broken ties with Al Qaeda. I have no illusions who we are dealing with. It remains to be seen whether or not the Taliban can consolidate power or if the country will fracture into further civil war.

We now must continue to protect the American people from terrorist attacks emanating from Afghanistan. A reconstituted Al Qaeda or ISIS with aspirations to attack the United States is a very real possibility and those conditions to include activities in ungoverned spaces could present themselves in the next 12 to 36 months. That mission will be much harder now, but not impossible, and we will continue to protect the American people.

Strategic decisions have strategic consequences, over the course of four Presidents, 12 Secretaries of Defense, seven Chairmen, ten CENTCOM Commanders, 20 Commanders in Afghanistan, hundreds of Congressional Delegation visits, and 20 years of congressional oversight, there are many lessons to be learned.

Some of the key ones that require thoughtful examination are the decisions to reduce forces in Afghanistan in order to invade Iraq. We need to fully examine the role of Pakistan sanctuary. We need to completely understand the degree to which corruption contributed to the collapse of the Afghan government. We need to fully understand the mission creep where we transitioned from a Counter Terrorism mission to nation building. And on the military side we need to understand how we developed, trained, and equipped the ANDSF and why they collapsed in only 11 days. Each of these and many more are complex issues that will require thorough examination in the months and years ahead.

On the military side we need – and I am committed – to understand how we developed, trained, and equipped the ANDSF and why they collapsed in only 11 days and how our intel systems missed the speed of that collapse. Each of these and many more are complex issues that will require thorough examination in the months and years ahead.

It is clear that the war in Afghanistan did not end on the terms that we wanted with the Taliban in power in Kabul. However, one lesson must never be forgotten, every Soldier, Sailor, Airman and Marine who served there for the past 20 years protected our country from attack by terrorists and for that they should be forever proud and we should be forever grateful.

I want to take a moment to address the recent media reporting surrounding the conduct of my duties during the final months of the Trump Administration.

I have served this Nation for 42 years. I've spent years in combat and buried a lot of my troops who died while defending this country. My loyalty to this Nation, its people, and the Constitution hasn't changed and will never change as long as I have a breath to give. My loyalty is absolute.

From October through January, I received and made hundreds of calls of assurance to allied and partner counterparts around the world as well as adversary counterparts. I also fielded many calls from you, members of Congress, both Republican and Democrat.

In frequent meetings with the Joint Chiefs, Combatant Commanders and daily meetings with my own staff, my message was consistent: that we are steady, the United States military has no role in politics, we will obey the lawful orders of the civilians appointed over us, and we will remain loyal to the Constitution.

With respect to the Chinese calls, I routinely communicated with my counterpart, General Li, with the knowledge and coordination of civilian oversight. I am specifically directed to communicate with the Chinese by Department of Defense Guidance, Policy Dialogue System. These military to military communications at the highest levels are critical to the security of the United States in order to deconflict military actions, manage crisis, and prevent war between great powers armed with nuclear weapons.

The CY2019 and CY2020 Guidance for U.S. Department of Defense Contacts and Exchanges with the PRC directed the DOD to routinize and prioritize DoD contacts and exchanges with the PLA to enhance predictability, stability, and prevent an incident between U.S. and PRC operational forces from inadvertently escalating to crisis.

The calls on 30 October and 8 January were coordinated before and after with Secretary Esper and Acting Secretary Miller's staffs and the interagency. The specific purpose of the October and January calls was generated by concerning intelligence which caused us to believe the Chinese were worried about an imminent attack by the U.S.

I know, I am certain, President Trump did not intend on attacking the Chinese and it is my directed responsibility – to convey presidential orders and intent. My job at that time was to de-escalate. My message again was consistent: calm, steady, deescalate. We are not going to attack you.

At Secretary of Defense Esper's direction, I made a call to General Li on 30 October. Eight people sat in the call with me, and I read out the call within about 30 minutes of the call ending.

On 31 December, the Chinese requested a call with me. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia Pacific Policy helped coordinate my call which was scheduled for 8 January. 11 people attended the call with me. Read-outs of this call were distributed to the interagency that same day.

Shortly after my call ended with General Li, I informed both Secretary of State Pompeo and White House Chief of Staff Meadows about the call among other topics. Soon after that, I attended a meeting with Acting Secretary Miller where I briefed him on the call.

Later that same day, 8 January, Speaker Pelosi called me to inquire about the President's ability to launch nuclear weapons. I sought to assure her that nuclear launch is governed by a very specific and deliberate process.

She was concerned and made various personal references characterizing the President. I explained that the President is the sole nuclear launch authority but he doesn't launch them alone.

There are processes, protocols, and procedures in place and I repeatedly assured her there is no chance of an illegal, unauthorized, or accidental launch.

These procedures are outlined in an Executive Order, a Presidential Policy Directive, National Security Presidential Memorandum, Department of Defense Directives, Department of the Defense Nuclear Plan, Posture Guidance, and finally Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Emergency Procedure volumes I – X, all of which are classified.

By Presidential Directive and SecDef Directives, the Chairman is part of this process to ensure the President is fully informed when determining the use of the world's deadliest weapons. By law, I am not in the chain of command. However, by Presidential Directive and DoD Instruction, I am in the chain of communication to fulfill my statutory role as the President's primary military advisor.

After the Speaker Pelosi call, I convened a short meeting in my office with the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, my NMCC watch officer, J-2, J-3, and Director of the Joint Staff among others to refresh on these procedures, which we practice daily at the action officer level. Additionally, I immediately informed Acting Secretary of Defense Miller of her call.

At no time was I attempting to change or influence the process, usurp authority, or insert myself into the chain of command, but I am expected to give my advice and ensure that the President is fully informed.

I am submitting for the record, a more detailed unclassified memorandum of my actions surrounding these events.

I welcome a thorough walk-through of all these events, and I would be happy in a classified session to talk in detail about the intel that motivated these actions and the specific timeline. I am also happy to make available all emails, phone logs, memoranda, witnesses or anything else you need to better understand these events.

My oath is to support the Constitution of the United States of America, against all enemies, foreign and domestic, regardless of cost to myself, and I will never turn my back on the oath. I firmly believe in civilian control of the military as a bedrock principle essential to this Republic and I am committed to ensuring the military stays clear of domestic politics.