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Chairman Engel and Ranking Member McCaul, thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to appear with such a distinguished group of colleagues. As a Soldier, I believe nothing is more important than protecting our national security and the lives of our service members. The issue of Russian involvement in the Afghan War is an essential part of protecting our troops and protecting our progress towards an enduring peace. I thank you for highlighting this issue for the American people.

History tells us that miscalculations and mistakes lead to war. Miscalculations and mistakes between Russia and the United States are especially dangerous because of our substantial nuclear arsenals. The offering of bounties by Russian operatives to the Taliban for killing Americans and our Coalition partners would constitute both a serious miscalculation and a significant mistake on their part.

When I served in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2012, we shared some interests with the Russians in terms of counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics and cooperated with them on military logistics through our Northern Distribution Network. By 2014, when I was the Commander of NATO Allied Land Command in Turkey, things had changed. With the Russian annexation of Crimea, invasion of Ukraine and threatening behavior towards the eastern states of the NATO Alliance, we drafted defensive plans for the first time in the 25 years since the end of the Cold War. In September 2015, they intervened in Syria and tensions worsened. By the time I moved from Turkey to Afghanistan in March of 2016, the Russians had undertaken a significant air and ground campaign to prop up the Assad regime.

From 2016-2018, while the primary US focus was on Syria and ISIS, there was a growth of Russian presence in Central Asia. No doubt some of this was motivated by uncertainty over US intentions and the potential instability which would follow a US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. The pattern was similar to what we had seen in the Baltics, Crimea, Ukraine and Syria where military exercises were used to move capabilities into an area; desensitize the US and NATO Allies to their presence and intentions and reduce our warning times. Capability creates options and they were positioning capabilities to have options to play a larger role.

They also began arming and funding Taliban elements across northern and eastern Afghanistan. They justified these actions with a false narrative that the United States was supporting the Islamic State Khorasan Province (the Afghan affiliate of ISIS) with the intent to destabilize central Asia and Russia, a narrative they promoted at the highest levels.

At the time, my conclusion was that Russian support to the Taliban was 'calibrated'. The Taliban wanted anti-aircraft missiles, but the Russians didn't provide them. However, they

provided enough small arms, ammo and money to sustain the Taliban in the fight and gain influence in advance of an anticipated US/NATO withdrawal. While this assistance did not significantly alter the tactical balance on the battlefield, it helped the Taliban inflict more casualties on the Afghan security forces and more hardship on the Afghan people. This was particularly relevant in the north of Afghanistan, the Kunduz area. In this sense, the Russians sought to undermine the US and NATO and further destabilize Afghanistan. Within US Forces Afghanistan at the time, we highlighted the growing Russian capabilities up the chain of command and took measures to better monitor their activities. We publicized their support to the Taliban through US and NATO channels and countered their false narratives in public.

Despite all of this, I was somewhat surprised to read stories of Russian involvement in bounties, a risky and irresponsible move which would mark a departure from their previously calibrated approach. The layers of complexity in Afghanistan coupled with shifting internal Russian dynamics will take some time to decipher. But if this is validated, regardless of who made the decision or where it was made, regardless of whether Russian leaders were complicit or merely incompetent in their failure to control operations, they are still responsible.

It's important to note that, there were two sides to this transaction. Russians offered and the Taliban accepted. Deliberate attacks on Americans and our Coalition partners are in violation of the spirit and letter of the peace agreement. Along with continued high levels of Taliban violence, this action further reveals that the Taliban are not meeting conditions for advancement of the peace process.

If we assess that Russia put bounties on American and Coalition lives, what should we do in response?

1. Condemn this action from the highest levels of the United States government and NATO so the Russians understand it is unacceptable and undermines any chance of improving relations and cooperation on areas of mutual interest.
2. With respect to Russia, suspend any troop withdrawals from Germany. These troop withdrawals play into Russian desires to undermine and weaken NATO. If carried out despite these bounties, this will be viewed as a sign of American weakness in the face of Russian threats. Thank you for considering an NDAA that includes a provision which "bans the administration from lowering troop levels below current levels until 180 days after Pentagon leaders present a plan to Congress and certify it will not harm U.S. or allied interests."
3. With respect to the Taliban, hold the troop drawdown in Afghanistan at the present level until the Taliban meet conditions stipulated in the peace agreement. We have delivered on our part of the peace agreement in drawing down to 8600 troops ahead of schedule; the Taliban must deliver on theirs. We should not resume our drawdown until they meet the required conditions which include severing ties with Al Qaeda, intra-Afghan peace negotiations and a sustained reduction in violence. Thank you for including the Crow/Cheney amendment in the current NDAA.

Conclusion. Our long war in Afghanistan will only end at the peace table. The current peace process rests on a foundation of hard-fought gains by the Afghan security forces supported by America and its coalition partners. In recent months, each time we see progress towards peace, we see an increase in violence by the Taliban who are supported by Russia. Russia's support, while calibrated in the past, is designed to undermine the success of the peace process and erode our will. As leaders, we all have a moral responsibility to do everything in our power to protect our service members who are fighting for an enduring peace in Afghanistan and deliver on the sacrifice of those Americans, Coalition members and Afghans who came before them.