Testimony of Ryan Crocker

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Hearing: Afghanistan 2001-2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies – Part II

October 5, 2021

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCaul, it is a privilege to appear before you today to discuss the policies different Administrations followed in Afghanistan. Some months ago, I had the honor of testifying before this Committee on restoring diplomacy and development in a fractured world. That world is no less fractured today, and the deep dive into the issue of Afghanistan this Committee has organized will inform and illuminate issues far beyond the borders of that country.

In the first decade after 9/11, I had the opportunity to see Afghanistan from different perspectives. At the beginning of January 2002, I reopened the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, shuttered for security reasons since 1989. As ambassador to Pakistan 2005-2007, I visited Afghanistan several times at the invitation of Ron Neumann, my colleague in Kabul to meet with President Karzai. In 2011, I returned to Afghanistan as ambassador. These different visitations provided me with different perspectives over time. But they also provided a very important and consistent answer to the question of why we came to Afghanistan and why we stayed: to prevent another attack on the American homeland from Afghan soil.

It is important to stress this point, Mr. Chairman. The sound and fury swirling around the current debate on U.S. policy in Afghanistan can create the mistaken impression that successive Administrations have been confused over what that policy actually was. That is not the case. It was not the case on March 11, 2002, six months after 9/11, when we commemorated the placing of a fragment of the World Trade Center at the base of the Embassy flagpole in Kabul. It had been brought to Afghanistan by the commander of the Fifth Special Forces Group, Colonel (later Lieutenant General) John F. Mulholland Jr. It was clear to me a decade later when President Obama asked me to return to Afghanistan as ambassador and to negotiate a long term Strategic Partnership Agreement with the Afghans that he could sign. He did so in May 2012 in Kabul.

So in my view at least, the end goal for the U.S. in Afghanistan was clear from the beginning and never shifted: the security of the United States. Everything else was about ways and means. That was on my mind that first week in January 2002, driving from Bagram to Kabul (the airport in Kabul was closed, its runways cratered and littered with destroyed aircraft). The landscape was a total wasteland of abandoned structures and endless fields of frozen mud. There were no signs of life – plant, animal or human. Kabul was not much better. Entire city blocks were destroyed, reminiscent of images from Berlin in 1945. Most of this destruction came not from the Americans or the Soviets. It was wrought by the Afghans themselves during the vicious civil war that followed the Soviet retreat in 1989.

Hamid Karzai's Interim Administration had nothing – no army, police, governmental institutions or rule of law. Education seemed a logical starting point, especially for girls who had been deprived of that opportunity when the Taliban took over. USAID moved immediately to establish girls' schools, and that January, I took our first Congressional visitor to see a first grade class. Ages ranged from six to twelve, the older girls having reached school age when the Taliban was in power. Did it bother them that they

were in a class with girls literally half their ages? Not at all. They were just happy to be in school. That visitor was Senator Joe Biden, then Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He pronounced himself solidly in favor of our educational initiatives. Through sustained effort over the years, the U.S. helped Afghanistan move from 800,000 students on 9/11, all of them boys, to nearly eight million when I left as ambassador in 2012, some 35% of them girls. That is a powerful tool for social change that would transform the country, but it takes time. And patience.

Part of the argument for a complete U.S. troop withdrawal was that we were not "winning" in Afghanistan. And if we are not winning, we should withdraw. Winning and losing, victory and defeat were terms that I did not use in war zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq. In an era of limited warfare, these terms lose their meaning. Take the word defeat. It only has meaning if a people feel defeated. That is an argument put forward to justify the Dresden raids of February 1945 and their heavy civilian casualties. Coming just two months before the final German surrender, the argument is that the attacks were primarily intended to break the will of the German people. The same could be said of Sherman's march through Georgia at the end of the Civil War. We do not do total war anymore, with the consequence that the Taliban did not feel defeated in Afghanistan. We saw the first signs of this during Operation Anaconda against al-Qaida and Taliban fighters in a rugged area in Afghanistan's northeast at the beginning of March 2002 when young Afghans tried to penetrate our lines, not to get out of the fight but to get into it. As was the case in Iraq as well, an insurgency is almost inevitable.

This combines with another phenomenon in the broader Middle East. Peoples of this region learned long ago that it is not possible to prevail over the better trained and equipped forces of the West in open combat. So put up enough of a fight to save face, then scatter. Lie low for a while, regroup, refresh and then, sometime after the western power thinks it has won, start counterpunching. It happened to the French in Morocco, the Italians in Libya, the British in Iraq, the Brits, the Soviets and the Americans in Afghanistan. It has been an enduring element of the region's political culture for several hundred years and is unlikely to change. I hoped we have learned that lesson.

There are several other lessons that we need to absorb if we contemplate U.S. military interventions in the future. One is corruption, something I encountered in Afghanistan as well as Iraq on an industrial scale. Looking back, it is almost inevitable – as are insurgencies themselves. If a regime is overthrown by an outside power, there will be no respected institutions, sets of checks and balances or broadly accepted rule of law. If we look at our own history, we can see how slow, uneven and painful the development of such institutions is. When you add significant sums of money, you get corruption, as inevitably as you get an insurgency. As our own history shows, institutional development takes time, and a lot of it. But it is also critical for a stable, pluralistic society. In my experience, institutions are far more important to the building of a democracy than elections, which can be counterproductive if conducted without a stable institutional base. We have seen this in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Other lessons we need to internalize include the importance of local buy in for projects we think are important. Without it, failure is almost certain. In the same vein, funds and expertise for operations and maintenance have to be identified and sustained before we commit to a project.

So what do we do? Accept the fact that while small wars cannot be won outright, they can be managed. When I left Afghanistan in the summer of 2012, President Obama's surge had brought over 100,000 troops to the country. The Taliban controlled none of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals. Beginning with President Obama and continuing under his successor, troop levels steadily dropped. By the end of

President Obama's second term in 2017, there were around 15,000, and still the Taliban controlled no provincial capitals. And when President Trump left office, the number was just 2500. Only when President Biden made clear that all forces would be withdrawn by a set date did the Taliban begin to move.

This is important. Challenges to stability such as endemic corruption are real and they are serious. But they are not new. The one new and decisive factor in the process that enabled the Taliban to move from controlling none of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals to controlling the entire country almost overnight was the final U.S. withdrawal. There is a back story, of course, and it is a critical one. In 2019, President Trump authorized direct negotiations between the United States and the Taliban without the participation of the Afghan government. It was a concession to a long-standing Taliban demand: they were ready to talk to the Americans, but not with their illegitimate puppet regime in the room.

This action delegitimized the Afghan government and its security forces, and began the process that culminated in the collapse of the government and the triumphant return of the Taliban to power. It was clear to any intelligent observer that this would be the nearly certain outcome of a fatally flawed process. In an NPR interview in September 2019, almost six months before the conclusion of the February 2020 U.S. – Taliban agreement, I said that a planned Camp David meeting between the Taliban and President Trump that had been cancelled by the President and the talks with the Taliban suspended following a Taliban attack that killed an American might be a net positive if the U.S. abandoned these negotiations with the Taliban which were not peace talks but a discussion on the terms of a U.S. surrender, reminiscent of the Paris peace talks on Vietnam in the 1970s.. "At the end of the day, there has to be a negotiated settlement. You don't end wars without it. But the tack this Administration has taken since the beginning of these talks was going in absolutely the wrong direction." And so they did, bringing us the horrific spectacles of last month. It is a grim irony that two Administrations so different in so many respects were united on a disastrous policy in Afghanistan.

Mr. Chairman, this hearing as well as similar exercises elsewhere will produce a number of lessons learned that will be important for our future endeavors. I have mentioned a few of my own. But I believe there is a single overarching problem that is at the root of what we have seen in Afghanistan and elsewhere. It is the failure of strategic patience. This is not new, and it is not unique to Afghanistan. But it has perhaps had its greatest impact there and next door in Pakistan. Our allies have come to fear our lack of strategic patience, and our adversaries to count on it. A comment attributed to the Taliban has circulated for years in Afghanistan: "You Americans have the watches, but we have the time." In Pakistan, where I served as ambassador 2004-2007, much of the Taliban leadership enjoyed sanctuary, and it was a major source of friction in our bilateral relationship. The Pakistani narrative on the Taliban runs like this: We were close allies in the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s in Afghanistan. But when 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 U.S. economic and military 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 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're happy to see you, and we'll 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. Oh – there you go now. We're so happy we didn't turn the Taliban into a mortal enemy just to watch you ride off into the sunset.

So the Pakistanis saw their strategic position vindicated. But I doubt the high fiving in the corridors of power lasted more than 15 minutes or so. The U.S. withdrawal and the manner in which it was conducted has emboldened Islamic radicals everywhere, not least in Pakistan where the Pakistani Taliban seeks the overthrow of the government in Islamabad. Islamic destabilization of a state with nuclear weapons is a terrifying prospect.

The list of damage to our national security and our values is long. We have allowed the Taliban and al-Qaida to reunite. The threat this poses to our own security is not theoretical – 9/11 actually happened, brought to us from Afghanistan by these same actors. At the same time, our complete withdrawal has degraded our intelligence capabilities. The strike in Kabul on what was supposed to be an Islamic State target but wasn't foreshadows the future. We urged Afghan women and girls to step forward, into parliament, private enterprise, the classroom and the military. They did. And now they will pay the price for our lack of strategic patience. That has already started. Afghan interpreters and others provided direct assistance to our military and civilian personnel. They were critical to our efforts, and put their lives and those of their families at risk by working with us. We said we would take care of them through the Special Immigrant Visa program, bringing them to safety in our country. We left thousands of them behind.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCaul and I wrote an essay for the New York Times at the beginning of May. In it, we urged the Biden Administration to take steps to mitigate the impact of a full withdrawal: alternative intelligence arrangements with neighboring countries to compensate for the end of our presence in Afghanistan. A strategy for protecting our diplomats and humanitarian workers. Continuing support for Afghan women and girls. Fulfilling our obligations to Afghans who assisted us. None of these things happened.

I will conclude on a personal note. One of the projects that had the greatest impact in Afghanistan cost the least amount of money. It was the reconstruction of Ghazi Stadium in Kabul to FIFA standards, meaning that it could host World Cup matches. It was a joint endeavor by International Security Assistance Forces Commander John Allen and me. For a soccer mad country, this was huge. But there was a deeper meaning. Ghazi Stadium was used by the Taliban to carry out public punishments after Friday prayers, including beheadings and the stoning of women. This was the symbol of the new Afghanistan – a more stark contrast would be hard to imagine. I wonder how long it will take the Taliban to turn it back into a killing ground. And we let it happen.