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Written Statement
House Foreign Relations Committee
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Thank you, Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Meeks, and members of the Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to be here with General McKenzie to discuss this country's twenty-year effort in Afghanistan and the 2021 withdrawal. My purpose is to help you form a holistic assessment of our efforts in Afghanistan.

But most importantly I am here today to help the families of the fallen, the 13 fallen at Abbey Gate and the thousands of fallen and tens of thousands of wounded and countless numbers who suffered the invisible wounds of a 20-year war.

I am humbled to be here today with 3 Gold Star families from the Abbey Gate attack and there are no words by me, any other General, any politician, or anyone that can ever bring back their fallen. But we can and must honor their sacrifice to protect our country and be forever thankful that they answered the call to the colors. They each paid the ultimate sacrifice on the altar of freedom like so many before them in order to keep our nation safe.

We owe these 13 families and all the families of the fallen and all Veterans of Afghanistan from private to General, the CIA officers, and State Department diplomats, or any other American who served in Afghanistan, we owe them all the truth in order to try an answer the questions- what did it all mean, why did my son or daughter, father or mother, brother or sister, friend or colleague die or suffer grievous wounds?

These are difficult, gut-wrenching questions, and at best, we can only get part of the way there with this hearing, building on previous hearings of this committee and hearings from the House and Senate Armed services committees, memoirs, interviews, books and other accounts that are out there.

But we must also recognize that much of the record is still classified and beyond the scope of this open hearing. It will likely take professional historians years to mine the records in order to produce dispassionate analytically accurate accounts of the US war in Afghanistan.

This hearing today is but one step in that process.

Over two decades—between 2001 and 2021—approximately 800,000 members of the United States Military served in Afghanistan and thousands of others from many agencies in our government. Of those hundreds of thousands, 2,461 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines lost their lives; almost 30,000 more were wounded in action; and countless others suffered the invisible wounds of war. This includes the brave men and women who were killed or wounded during the United States's withdrawal from Afghanistan in the ISIS-K suicide bombing at Abbey Gate on 26 August 2021.

We must always honor the incredible sacrifices each of them and their families made fighting the Taliban, bringing Osama bin Laden to justice, denying sanctuary to al-Qaida, and ultimately protecting the American homeland.

We lost over 200 US and international troops and many more wounded in action in units under my direct command in several tours and multiple years of combat in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Every commander who has ever served in combat knows they personally issued the orders that gave the task, purpose, place and time of their soldier's death or wounds. And we also know it was the enemy who killed or wounded them. Combat is an unforgiving environment and those of us who have served in the brutality of ground combat live with that dark reality for all the days of our lives. There is no military leader who has lost troops in combat who does not know that feeling. This is personal to me, and I will do everything in my power to ensure these families and all our Veterans and families know the truth and have the answers.

At the peak of military commitment in 2011, the United States had just under 100,000 troops stationed in Afghanistan alongside 42,000 NATO allies and about 20,000 DOD US contractors. Beginning that same year, the United States began to steadily draw down troops, close bases, and retrograde equipment. This began a ten-year effort that spanned three administrations and ultimately led to a full withdrawal of American forces.

Nothing we are going to discuss today happened overnight or, indeed, even over a period of months or weeks. It was a process of withdrawal that spanned a decade. Three Presidents; 5 Secretaries of State; 10 Secretaries of Defense; 8 Directors of the CIA; 4 CJCS ; 24 Joint Chiefs; 4 Commanders of CENTCOM; and 5 US Commanders in Afghanistan.

The outcome in Afghanistan did not occur in the last 20 days or 20 months. It was the cumulative effect of many decisions over many years of war. And like any complex phenomenon, there is no single causal factor that determined the outcome but rather multiple factors in combination that will take years to sort out and arrive at something approximating truth.

But the story of the endgame I would suggest begins with the Doha Agreement signed on 29 February 2020 by Ambassador Khalizaid on behalf of President Trump with Secretary of State Pompeo present. It was a bilateral agreement between the US and a State Department designated terrorist organization -the Taliban. The agreement guaranteed that the United States would withdrawal all troops from Afghanistan by May 1, 2021. In exchange, the Taliban agreed to meet certain conditions, which would lead to a political agreement between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan.

There were seven conditions applicable to the Taliban and eight to the United States and importantly Doha was negotiated without the input of the Afghan government nor the US military.

At the time of the agreement the US had about 13,000 troops along with 8500 NATO troops and 11,000 DOD US contractors.

The Taliban failed to uphold their end of the Agreement. With the exception of foregoing any lethal attacks on United States forces, they failed to fully honor any other condition, including renouncing linkages with al-Qaida, reducing violence, establishing a

ceasefire, or participating in Afghan-to-Afghan negotiations with the Government of Afghanistan. We, the United States, adhered to every condition of that Agreement to the letter.

In the Fall of 2020, as I previously testified, my analysis was that an accelerated withdrawal would likely lead to the general collapse of the Afghan security forces and the Afghan government, resulting in a large-scale civil war reminiscent of the 1990s or a complete Taliban takeover. Secretary of Defense Esper recommended, and I supported, maintaining 4,500 troops on the ground in Afghanistan until conditions were met. Shortly following Secretary Esper's removal, I received an order signed by President Trump directing the United States military to withdraw all troops by January 15, 2021, in approximately 60 days. On November 17, I received a new order to reduce troop levels to 2,500 by January 15, 2021. The Department of Defense acted accordingly.

When President Biden took office in January 2021, there were roughly 2,500 U.S. troops on the ground, with about 7000 NATO forces and around 6000 DOD US contractors along with 9000 non-US contractors.

The National Security Council conducted a rigorous 10-week interagency review of the Doha Agreement and a broad range of options were presented and debated. The uniformed military was fully a part of this process and our views were thoroughly presented and considered.

In previous public testimony, I noted that at that time, my analysis based on the Commanders recommendations and the consensus of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was that we needed to maintain a minimum force of 2,500 U.S. troops on the ground, mostly Special Forces, with allied troops and contractors, in order to sustain the Afghan Security Forces and government until the conditions of the Doha agreement were met. Without this support, my view was that it was a matter of when, not if, the Afghan government would collapse, and the Taliban would take control.

Again, as I previously publicly testified, I consistently supported a negotiated end to the war but only if there was a reduction in violence leading to a permanent ceasefire and there were Afghan to Afghan negotiations leading to a power sharing agreement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. Absent those conditions, I was not in favor of a unilateral withdrawal of US forces because of the associated costs and risks.

The fundamental tension facing President Biden was that no one could satisfactorily explain when or even if the Doha conditions would ever be met and if we stayed indefinitely then open war would likely begin again with the Taliban.

On April 14, 2021, President Biden made the formal announcement of his decision to honor the Doha Agreement with a military withdrawal while maintaining a diplomatic presence.

Planning for the final withdrawal was significant and required substantive interagency coordination. There were multiple interagency meetings and rehearsals. The uniformed military understood that our mission was to conduct a retrograde of the remaining US military forces and

equipment while leaving a small contingent to defend the American Embassy while diplomatic outcomes were negotiated.

That mission was successfully accomplished under the leadership of General Scott Miller. He retrograded or destroyed all US owned military equipment and all of our remaining US military personnel except the contingent to defend the embassy. The US manufactured equipment that was captured by the Taliban was ANSF owned and had been given to them over the previous 20 years. It was not US military owned equipment. General Miller's specified mission was complete in early July 2021.

The second mission given to the DOD was to support the Department of State in case the Ambassador or the Secretary of State ordered a Non Combatant Evacuation Operation. The Embassy of course was in Kabul and the Kabul International Airport was the designated evacuation airfield. HKIA, as it was known, was secured by NATO Turkish forces in combination with Afghan security forces.

When the NEO was finally ordered on 14 August 2021 by the Department of State, the Government of Afghanistan leaders were fleeing, the ANSF was melting away, the Taliban were on the outskirts of Kabul, thousands of civilians were seeking safety at the Kabul airport, and the Turk contingent and ANSF at HKIA ceased to provide security.

In my view, NEO and the withdrawal of the Embassy could and should have been approved for execution significantly earlier.

Nevertheless, the US military alerted, marshalled, mobilized, and rapidly deployed faster than any military in the world could ever do. The deploying forces quickly took operational control of HKIA under the leadership of LTG Chris Donahue and Admiral Pete Vasely with significant elements of the 82d Airborne, Marines, National Guard, and Special Forces alongside our CIA partners and selected NATO forces. Additionally, we set up multiple bases to process evacuees in other countries throughout the Middle East, Europe and CONUS.

In short, the US military did not fail. The US military performed one of the most incredible evacuations under pressure in recorded history and in an extremely difficult, dynamic and dangerous environment. That performance is due to the individual bravery, competence, and compassion of every soldier sailor airman marine special operator from private to general who had any role in the NEO.

At the end of 20 years, we the US military helped build an army and a state, but we could not forge a nation. We could provide the weapons and training but when on 15 August 2021, the senior Afghan leaders boarded planes and abandoned their country it was apparent that while many Afghans fought valiantly for 20 years and even to the end, we could not create the will to fight at the national leadership level. One former Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan said: "We could provide advice; we could provide training support. But we couldn't give the Afghan army a soul. Only the political leadership and people of Afghanistan could do that. And that was a failure. The Afghan government remained extraordinarily corrupt."

The enemy occupied Kabul and overthrew the government and military that we supported for two decades. The war was a strategic failure, and we are still feeling its impact.

But we also provided hope for 20 years to the Afghan people, we provided unprecedented opportunity to millions, and in the final days we gave 130,000 people their lives and freedom at a very high cost.

And most importantly, we protected the United States from terrorist attack from the territory of Afghanistan—that was our original and most essential mission. In that mission we succeeded and that effort continues today.

Let me offer just a few broader strategic lessons learned:

1. We had several missed opportunities over the course of 20 years. Perhaps the most consequential was the decision to not to kill or capture Bin Laden in the winter of 2001/2002. We had solid intel, perhaps not perfect, but very good, and conducting an operation at that time was a real possibility. We did not, but had we done so, it would have changed the entire trajectory of the US involvement in the war.

2. As a result of the Bonn agreement, it was decided that the US would have lead responsibility to create the Afghan Army while the Germans would lead in creating the Afghan Police. It was decided the end-strength of the total Afghan security forces would be approximately 350,000 with half being police and half being army. The Germans decided to model the police on the European police forces charged with investigating crimes and policing traffic. But the situation in Afghanistan demanded a national counterinsurgency type police force. So, by design in 2002, roughly half of security forces were ineffective for the type of war being fought. Additionally, we designed the Army in the mirror image of the conventional US military with similar doctrine, organization, weapons and tactics. We did not develop the Afghan special forces, village protection forces and border forces until years later and they proved to be the most effective at fighting the Taliban. Additionally, estimates at the time called for a force of around 600,000-700,000 Afghan troops to adequately secure the country in accordance with counterinsurgency doctrine for the size of the country, the population, and the estimated size of the Taliban. We built a force that was about half of the doctrinal requirement and even less so if you discount the Afghan police who were both corrupt and ineffective. Essentially, the Afghan government was fighting a 50,000-100,000 guerilla-insurgency with roughly about 175,000 conventional army troops while trying to protect a population of 30 million. The correlation of forces was imbalanced from the early years of the war in favor of the Taliban.

3. We did not fully appreciate the village war that the Taliban were waging. With a lack of sufficient Afghan forces and a tendency to stay close to their bases or fixed sites, especially at night, the villages were fundamentally ceded to the Taliban shadow governments beginning in late 2004 and early 2005 and only grew over time with little notice by the coalition forces or the ANSF. This proved very difficult, and it became obvious that the Taliban had the initiative in the countryside and the Government could do very little that was truly effective.

4. In 2003, the US invaded Iraq and we did not significantly expand our military to meet the demands of wars in two countries simultaneously. Instead, we drew down forces in Afghanistan to shift to Iraq and the remaining level in Afghanistan was fundamentally too small for the assigned military tasks, further ceding the initiative to the Taliban. We began to see a demonstrable increase in Taliban attacks beginning in 2005 as a result.

5. We never satisfactorily dealt with the unimpeded access to and from the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan. As a result, the Taliban could always recruit, re-arm, re-fit, plan, train and organize for offensives each year. Insurgencies that maintain freedom of movement and protection from a sanctuary in a neighboring country are rarely defeated.

6. The legitimacy of the central government of Afghanistan was never fully established primarily due to longstanding unique Afghan historical factors and governmental systemic corruption from the local level to the national level. In the end, this proved to be a very significant causal factor the outcome of the war and is one of the main reasons the ANSF and Government collapsed so quickly- it was perhaps the decisive factor

7. We never fully understood the culture nor had a fingertip understanding of the nature of the fight we were engaged in while supporting an endemically corrupt government. These factors proved decisive in my view.

8. We drew down our forces from roughly 13,000 US Military in February 2020 to 8,600 in the summer of 2020 to 4,500 in the fall of 2020. By doing so we removed our advisors from the Afghan Kandaks (Battalions) and consequently we rapidly began to lose our situational understanding and awareness of what was happening in the various Afghan military units throughout the country. In essence we gave up our Human Intelligence Collection capability at the ground level and substituted technological capabilities to “see” the ANSF. The over reliance on technology limited our ability to understand the situation and I believe contributed to our intelligence gaps in the summer of 2021 which misjudged the speed of the Afghan collapse.

9. The decision to withdraw US military but maintain a diplomatic presence in a country at war was fundamentally flawed. The State Department should have drawn down the Embassy at the same rate the military was retrograding. And the State Department clearly made the decision to conduct a NEO far too late for a coordinated and safe execution. That lesson has been learned as we saw more recently in Ukraine and Sudan.

10. Strategic decisions have consequences. The outcome in Afghanistan is the cumulative effect of strategic decisions made over 20 years of war. Understanding the decisions at each phase of the war will help us in any future conflicts.

There are many more lessons that deserve full review and I offer these 10 for initial consideration.

But the lesson all Americans should know is that our troops from private to general, did all that bravery and duty could do. Your military defended you successfully for 20 years from terrorist attack out of the mountains of Afghanistan and continues to do that. And for that every American should be eternally grateful.

To all the veterans of Afghanistan, hold your heads high knowing that you did your duty, each of you did what your country asked of you, under extreme circumstances, and you did it selflessly, with professionalism, courage, compassion and with great sacrifice.

And to the families of the fallen, there is nothing any of us will ever do or say to fill the gaping hole in your heart, but we will get you the truth and we will always honor the sacrifice of you and your loved one.