

Special Representative for Afghanistan
Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad
Opening Statement for Afghanistan Briefing
House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on National Security
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the Committee. I welcome the opportunity to talk with you today about America's strategy in Afghanistan and to update you on my recent discussions with partners in Kabul, the Taliban in Doha, and regional and international stakeholders. As you know, President Biden made the decision to withdraw the remaining U.S. forces from Afghanistan beginning on May 1 and concluding by September 11.

With the departure of our forces underway, we are entering a new phase in our partnership with Afghanistan. What are our objectives for the current phase? They are to:

1. Safely withdraw our remaining forces while leaving Afghan forces in the best position possible to defend themselves.
2. Promote a political settlement and oppose the imposition of a government by force.

3. Prevent Afghanistan from becoming a platform for terrorists threatening the United States or our allies.
4. And promote regional cooperation including connectivity, trade, and economic development to shift the country to a peacetime mindset and give the region a stake in its success.

We therefore are:

1. Building international support for a political settlement that would have broad support in Afghanistan.
2. Encouraging unity among Afghan leaders on the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan side.
3. Sustaining military, political, and economic support for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.
4. Incentivizing the Taliban to reduce violence, accelerate negotiations for a political settlement, and agree to a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire.
5. Strengthening our cooperation against terrorism with countries in the region through enhanced monitoring and response capabilities.
6. Promoting economic connectivity, trade and development between Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia.

The Taliban face a fundamental choice between two very different futures: They can embrace a negotiated path to peace, make the transition from a violent insurgency to a political movement, and be part of a nation that enjoys respect in the global community. But if they pursue a military takeover, they will face isolation, regional opposition, sanctions, and international opprobrium – and our and our allies’ support for Afghan security forces will continue.

We are working closely with the United Nations to enhance its role, which is an important one due to its expertise on matters such as ceasefires and process design. We welcome the UN, Turkey’s, and Qatar’s willingness to co-convene a high-level dialogue in Istanbul. The parties need to agree to a date as soon as possible and we expect them to come prepared with concrete proposals. The opportunities are in place, the international will to assist is robust, and both Afghan government leaders and the Taliban need to do their part to ensure this historic moment is not lost.

Pakistan has an important role to play. Senior U.S. officials and I remain in close touch with Pakistan’s leaders, pressing them to exercise their considerable leverage over the Taliban to reduce violence and support a negotiated settlement. I believe Pakistan understands that a protracted war in Afghanistan is not in its interest.

As you know, we have already begun the process of withdrawing our troops, in close coordination with our NATO Allies and partners. The withdrawal so far has taken place without incident and we expect this to continue. However, we are prepared to respond forcefully if attacked and have made this clear.

We are working with our regional and international partners – who all have a stake in a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan. We recently had productive meetings with Russia, China, and Pakistan, and separately with our European allies, and released powerful joint statements calling on the two sides to reduce violence and engage seriously in negotiations and on the Taliban not to pursue a spring offensive. All our partners have made clear that a peaceful Afghan nation resulting from dialogue and compromise and not from force, can count on material assistance, support, and profitable relationships.

With the support of Congress, we are committed to maintaining substantial security assistance through the Afghan Security Forces Fund. Our NATO Allies and partners are likewise committed to stand with Afghanistan – its people and its institutions – in promoting security.

We have heard justifiable concerns regarding the safety of the thousands of Afghans who have worked with our diplomats and soldiers over the

past twenty years. As Secretary Blinken has made clear, we are working hard to ensure that we have expedited consideration for those at risk. At the same time, we must not assume the inevitability of a worst-case outcome. Our goal should be an Afghanistan in which all the country's people can live in peace and security. Ideally, Afghans who have acquired education, skills, and international experience will form the backbone of a new economy and prosperity for a peaceful Afghanistan. Strong measures must be taken to ensure that the value of these individuals is recognized and that retaliatory acts are formally forsworn. This will be an integral and essential part of the peace talks and of our own discussions with the Taliban.

We will continue to advocate preserving the gains for minorities and for women, including their meaningful participation in the ongoing negotiations and their representation in society and politics. This is something I worked hard on during my time as ambassador and in my current capacity, and the significant progress achieved must not be lost. The Taliban should also understand that the Afghanistan of today is very different than it was twenty years ago.

We are reconfiguring our counterterrorism capabilities to ensure our ability to monitor and address threats emanating from Afghanistan. We will maintain intelligence collection in the region and will continue to work closely with Afghan counterparts. We are developing

opportunities for enhanced cooperation with regional partners, who share our concerns and are open to cooperation. We will hold the Taliban accountable to their commitments to prevent al Qaeda and ISIS or any other terrorist group from using Afghanistan as a base for attacks against us.

Please know that the release and safe return home of Mark Frerichs, who has been held as a hostage since 2020, is very important to Secretary Blinken and to me. Secretary Blinken has raised Mark's safe return repeatedly with his counterparts in the region. And in my meetings with the Taliban, I have demanded his release.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the tremendous loss following the recent attack on a girls' school near Kabul. This was a deeply shocking incident. It appears that ISIS was responsible, but ultimately, it is the ongoing violence and chaos that makes such attacks possible.

It bears repeating and I think is important to remember that what our country did for Afghanistan over the past two decades has been extraordinary and motivated by goodwill and honorable goals. Our men and women in uniform have sacrificed their lives, and thousands now live with permanent physical and other disabilities as a result of their service. We have invested massively in the effort to develop a society far from our own, not just because terrorists planned 9/11 there, but also because we cared about the plight of millions of women and girls, about

a fledgling civil society that has now grown into a viable entity, about ethnic and religious minorities, and about replacing extremism with peace. We want our investments and sacrifices to have been worthwhile, and if we navigate the coming months appropriately, I believe this can happen. We want an enduring partnership with Afghanistan.

In the end it is up to the Afghans to seize their opportunities. Our troops deserve to come home, and Afghanistan deserves a chance to find its way forward, with help and encouragement from its friends.

I look forward to your questions.