

Former Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad

Opening Statement

House Foreign Relations Committee

Thursday, February 15, 2024

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 during my service as the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation between 2018 and 2021.

- In November 2018, the Trump Administration asked me to return to the State Department to help negotiate a framework agreement for the safe withdrawal of US forces; obtain commitments from both the Taliban and the Afghan government on US counter-terrorism concerns; and set the stage for Afghans to start negotiations for ending the war.
- This represented a major shift in US policy compared to when I had been the US Ambassador there. By the end of 2018, as is well known, the President's decision was to bring home American forces from Afghanistan. Several factors had contributed to this shift.
 - Loss of confidence in our approach, culminating in the conclusion that this war had gone on for too long, and that it was not and would not be making progress;
 - Given the changing world, the opportunity cost was high. The United States needed to focus on great power competition, i.e. China, Russia and the threat from Iran.
 - Thanks to the sacrifices, bravery and skill of our forces, Afghanistan was no longer central to the war on terror.
 - The goal of transforming Afghanistan into a modern, democratic state and engaging in nation building was now judged to have been unrealistic. Despite massive US efforts, the country had huge governance problems and rampant levels of corruption.

The Administration recognized the potential risks involved in the shift.

- The greatest risk was the potential threat to US forces during withdrawal. The British withdrawal in 1842 and the Soviet withdrawal in 1988-1989 had been very bloody.
- A second risk was Afghanistan once again becoming the platform for a terrorist threat against the US homeland, US interests and our allies.

- A third risk was the loss gains made and values achieved by Afghan people.

There was opposition to the shift both inside the government and outside. As you know, in our system, after reviewing the information and considering the views of his team and others, the President decides. He believed that a withdrawal was in the US national interest.

The plan was to achieve a framework agreement with the Taliban and the Afghan government to deliver on the commander's intent and to minimize and hedge against risks to the United States.

After more than a year of negotiations, on February 29, 2020, we reached two agreements: one with the Taliban and the other with the Afghan government. The two agreements provided a framework/roadmap for US withdrawal, dealing with terrorism, intra-Afghan negotiation between the Taliban and the Afghan government, a permanent and comprehensive cease-fire and future US-Afghanistan relations. The key features of the agreement were:

- Phased withdrawal of US and Coalition forces over a 14-month period.
- Preventing the use of Afghanistan by any group or individual to threaten the security of the United States and its allies.
- Intra-Afghan negotiations.
- Importantly, the Taliban committed not to attack US forces once the agreement was signed. This was critical for a safe withdrawal of US and coalition forces, and the Taliban adhered to it, killing no coalition fighter or US soldier during the entire withdrawal period. The first phase of withdrawal lasted 135 days, in which US forces were reduced to 8600. By the time President Trump left office, US forces in Afghanistan had been reduced to 2500.
- The US retained the right to come to the defense of the Afghan forces if the Taliban attacked them. We exercised this right as needed. The coalition forces killed many Taliban in defense of the Afghan forces.

Direct negotiations between the Afghan Republic and the Taliban started September 12, 2020. They did not make significant progress.

After the November 2020 elections, President-elect Biden's team asked me to stay on during their review of the Afghanistan effort. The Biden Administration had three options: 1) withdraw from the Doha agreement; 2) implement the agreement but with changes such as extension of the agreed timeline; linking the withdrawal of the remaining forces to the conclusion of a political agreement between the Taliban and

the Afghan government or insisting on leaving behind in Afghanistan a counter-terror force; or 3) withdraw the remaining forces without such linkages.

After extensive review and discussions, the President announced in April 2021 that we would add four months to the timetable for US and coalition withdrawal (for a total of 18 months). The withdrawal was not conditioned on a political agreement between the two Afghan sides. This decision was based on the belief that such conditionality would risk a return to war-without-end and entrap the U.S. and its allies into reversing course and sending more forces in again.

It was also decided that our over-the-horizon capabilities allowed us to sufficiently monitor and respond to terror threats to the U.S. from Afghan territory. On protecting gains made, the approach became to advocate for key values in the course of intra-Afghan negotiations by pressing the Taliban on respecting women's rights and human rights.

The withdrawal proceeded based on the new, extended timeline. The assessment was that the Afghan government would remain in power and its forces would defend it and fight the Taliban during the withdrawal and for some time afterwards. This assumption informed not only the military withdrawal plans but also the programs and plans of our other agencies.

Although reasonable when it was made, the assumption turned out to be wrong. As the withdrawal of our remaining forces progressed, the situation on the ground began to shift significantly and rapidly in favor of the Taliban. They took over one province after another, and by mid-August of 2021 were at the gates of Kabul.

A last-minute success in persuading the Taliban to refrain from entering Kabul and instead to hold talks with the government to reach a political deal for a transition government - a step to which both sides had agreed - fell apart when President Ghani surprisingly fled the country, which caused the now leaderless Afghan military and police to instantly disintegrate. These developments led to the Taliban entry into Kabul. This abrupt sequence of events obliged the U.S. to react, adapt and improvise, as none of this had been foreseen in our plans to withdraw by the end of August.

As we all remember, the final two weeks of chaos at the airport and the tragic loss of thirteen brave Americans in an ISIS-K terrorist attack there, were difficult and the what-ifs remain hotly debated.

The events of those final days, however, should not diminish the achievements made. We must all remember that after 9/11, we sent forces to Afghanistan to decimate Al-Qaida there. This was accomplished and represents a major win for the security of the United States. We should be grateful to those whose sacrifice made this possible, and to their families.

The struggle for Afghanistan is not over and Afghanistan's final chapter is certainly not written. The seeds of the values we planted, may well take fruit over time. It would be a mistake to turn our back on the country. The American approach going forward must take current realities in Afghanistan, the region and the world into account while remaining guided, as elsewhere, by our interests and enduring values.

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I look forward to your questions.