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Written Testimony on the U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan

House Committee for Oversight and Reform

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(U) Good afternoon Chairwoman Maloney, Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, and members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity to brief you on Afghanistan today. In the wake of the 19th anniversary of the attacks on September 11, 2001, there is no more fitting time to discuss with Congress and the American people the importance of our mission in Afghanistan in keeping America safe against terrorist attacks while honoring those who have made tremendous sacrifice toward achieving this goal.

(U) My remarks today will focus on the Department of Defense's strategy in Afghanistan, the criticality of our partnerships with the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and our NATO Allies and partners in achieving our objectives, and our expectations of the Taliban in upholding their commitments in the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. I hope this sets the stage well for our discussion today.

(U) Pursuant to President Trump's 2017 South Asia Strategy, the Department of Defense's key objective in the South Asia region is to ensure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe-haven for terrorists who may threaten the United States, or our citizens, allies, or interests. The strategy prioritizes ending the war through a political process, acknowledging that there is no military solution to the conflict. To achieve our objectives in Afghanistan, the Department conducts two complementary missions: the NATO-led RESOLUTE SUPPORT Mission, focused on training, advising, and assisting the ANDSF to build their capacity to provide security for their country and the U.S. counterterrorism mission that works with the ANDSF to mitigate terrorist threats. We actively combat ISIS Khorasan, al Qa'ida, and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan to prevent them from developing capabilities that could threaten our homeland. Although these terrorists are severely degraded, continued pressure on them remains vital to ensuring our homeland is never again attacked as it was on September 11, 2001.

(U) Following the announcement of the South Asia Strategy, U.S. Forces and our Afghan partners adjusted military efforts to intensify battlefield pressure on the Taliban. However, the main focus of U.S. Government efforts was achieving an agreement with the Taliban that could pave the way toward an Afghan-owned political settlement. On February 29, 2020 an historic agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban and the release of a parallel United States-Afghanistan Joint Declaration served as a pivotal moment in the path towards peace in Afghanistan.

(U) Since February 29, U.S. Forces have adjusted military efforts to adhere to U.S. commitments within the Agreement. We reduced our force level to 8,600 and turned five bases over to our Afghan partners. The Commander of U.S. Forces – Afghanistan's authorities have not changed. U.S. forces continue to defend the ANDSF against attacks from the Taliban, but are not conducting offensive attacks on the Taliban.

(U) We have long maintained that our force presence in Afghanistan is conditions-based, and our conditions-based approach is reflected in the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. This August, the President made a determination that the conditions in Afghanistan were sufficient to further reduce our force presence. Today, the Department is focused on reducing our forces to between 4,000 and 5,000 by the end of November 2020. At this force level, we maintain the core aspects of the train, advise, assist (TAA) mission, keep open our associated TAA commands, conduct the U.S. counterterrorism mission, and protect the force. We also continue to provide necessary enablers to our Allies and partners, including our interagency partners in country. And, we are closing or turning over some additional bases while supporting Afghan-led efforts to secure the country against terrorist threats.

(U) Any further reduction in forces below this level will continue to be conditions-based, and will take into account the Taliban's progress in meeting their substantial counterterrorism guarantees to the United States under the Agreement.

(U) I would like to make it clear that the Secretary has not issued orders to reduce military personnel below this 4,000 to 5,000 level in Afghanistan, although we are conducting prudent

planning to withdraw to zero service members by May 2021 if conditions warrant and the Taliban have met their commitments, per the U.S.-Taliban Agreement. As Secretary Pompeo said in Doha, the Taliban must uphold their counterterrorism guarantees to the United States; we also expect the Taliban to meaningfully participate in Afghanistan Peace Negotiations and to do their part in preventing outside actors from negatively impacting the peace process.

(U) We remain firmly committed to our counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan as well as to our Afghan partners. We continue to consult with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg and our Coalition allies and partners on the way forward on the RESOLUTE SUPPORT Mission. The Coalition came to Afghanistan together, we are adjusting together, and, if our conditions are met, we will leave together.

(U) We are also actively focused on mitigating the impact of the novel Coronavirus on our military and diplomatic personnel, NATO Allies and coalition forces, and our Afghan partners. For example, DoD has funded procurement of \$8 million of COVID-related medical supplies for the ANDSF, such as personal protective equipment, hand sanitizer, and infrared thermometers. Although COVID-19 has paused most face-to-face advising, we have maintained continual contact with Afghan partners through teleconferences, secure video teleconferences, and other forms of communication, similar to how all of us have adapted to this new environment.

(U) Over the last seven months, our ANDSF partners have continued to demonstrate resilience in the face of high levels of violence, resolve in their fight against international terrorist organizations, and a commitment to a better, more secure, and prosperous Afghanistan. Our Joint Declaration with the Afghan Government acknowledges the special bond shared by Afghan and U.S. forces forged during many years of tremendous sacrifice and courage. It reaffirms the U.S. commitment to seek funding on an annual basis to sustain the ANDSF and to continue our partnership as they secure their country throughout the peace process.

(U) For progress towards peace to continue, the Taliban must reduce violence against the Afghan Security Forces and Afghan civilians. Violence has been unacceptably high for too long. It remains our expectation that the Taliban will decrease violence and focus on:

- Meaningfully participating in Afghanistan Peace Negotiations to determine the date and modalities of a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire and reach an agreement concerning the future political roadmap of Afghanistan;
- Preventing Afghanistan from serving as a safe-haven for any terrorist group that may threaten the United States and our Allies, including not hosting them and preventing them from recruiting, training, and fundraising; and,
- Defeating ISIS Khorasan.

(U) We urge the Taliban, the Afghan Government, and the Afghan people to choose the path towards peace. Peace agreements are not signed between friends; they are negotiated between parties that must reconcile a shared desire for peace against years of bloodshed and grievances. We are encouraged that Afghanistan Peace Negotiations are underway and are supportive of the Afghan-led, Afghan-owned process.

(U) Although the road to peace will be long and challenging, the United States recognizes that this is the best option to meet our objectives in Afghanistan. We expect more challenges to arise throughout the process, and we will continue to work with Congress to achieve a successful outcome in Afghanistan that protects U.S. national security.

(U) Lastly, the Department of Defense remains committed to transparency to the American people regarding our efforts in Afghanistan. The Department understands that certain efforts on the way to peace, like the recent prisoner releases, will cause painful emotions to resurface for the families who lost loved ones on September 11, 2001 and in Afghanistan. Their sacrifices are not lost on us. It is because of these sacrifices we have advanced progress toward making America safer and ensuring Afghanistan is never again used as a safe-haven for terrorists. These decisions, though difficult, remain focused on achieving the same noble end-state for which so many have fought. We are grateful – and will continue to honor – their sacrifice.

(U) Chairwoman Maloney, Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon. I look forward to your questions.