HEARING TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON SECURITY IN AFGHANISTAN AND
IN THE REGIONS OF SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA

Tuesday, October 26, 2021

U.S. Senate
Committee on Armed Services
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:32 a.m. in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jack Reed, chairman of the committee, presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE ISLAND

Chairman Reed: I will now call the hearing to order.

Good morning. The Committee meets today to examine the security situation in South and Central Asia in light of the transition of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan.

This is the sixth event in a series of Committee engagements that seek to assess the United States' military's 20-year mission in Afghanistan; understand factors that led to the Taliban's rapid takeover of the country and the collapse of the Afghan Forces; oversee DOD operations in support of Afghan evacuees; and recalibrate ongoing counterterrorism operations in light of emerging threats and broader national security priorities.

Joining us today are Dr. Colin Kahl, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and Lieutenant General James Mingus, Director for Operations, J3, Joint Staff. I thank you both for being here.

I know there may be a tendency during this hearing to focus on our final months in Afghanistan. I would stress again that our withdrawal this summer and the events surrounding it did not happen in a vacuum. The path that led to this outcome was paved with years of mistakes, from our catastrophic pivot to Iraq, to our failure to effectively grapple with Pakistan's support for the Taliban,
to the flawed Doha Agreement. This is not a Democratic or a Republican problem; these failures have manifested over four presidential administrations of both parties and an unwillingness to recognize and correct past mistakes will impact the operations of today and the future.

One fundamental question that requires close examination is how did the decades-long strategy for building the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces result in a force that was incapable of defeating the Taliban and seemingly collapsed in a matter of days?

We need to better understand what led to the development of Afghan Security Forces that suffered from low morale, widespread corruption, and which were incapable of operating without U.S. and coalition support. In addition, we need to assess the extent to which the failure of the Afghan Government to earn the loyalty of the Afghan Security Forces contributed to their being unwilling to defend the Kabul Government against the Taliban.

Further, our inability across multiple administrations to effectively deal with Pakistan is another example of past being prologue. Managing the security relationship with Pakistan will remain important as we seek to successfully implement a regional counterterrorism strategy with other partners and allies. That is why it is vitally important for us to reflect upon and study the entirety of the 20-year
mission in Afghanistan.

I agreed with Secretary Austin and General Milley's testimony to this Committee last month that there should be a comprehensive review spanning the war in Afghanistan. I would support a formal independent study of the Afghan war, as Senator Duckworth and a number of other colleagues have taken the lead in preparing. I look forward to working towards authorizing such a review as part of this year's National Defense Authorization Act.

At the same time, we cannot allow our examination of the past mission to come at the expense of our national security for today and the future. While the United States has ended its military mission in Afghanistan, we must continue to ensure that Al Qaeda, ISIS-K, and other terrorist groups cannot use Afghanistan to attack the United States and our allies. We must remain vigilant about these threats and ensure that we establish an effective and robust counterterrorism architecture moving forward.

Last week the Members of this committee received a classified update on regional security issues and threats. The American people deserve to be reassured that the Department remains actively engaged in defending the homeland against terrorist threats emanating from this region. Under Secretary Kahl and General Mingus, I would ask that, to the extent you can because of the sensitive
nature of this material, during today's open session,
provide an update on efforts to address the threat from
terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan and across South
and Central Asia. I would also appreciate an update on
progress toward building a new regional counterterrorism
architecture.

Finally, I would like to understand the status of
negotiations with regional allies and partners to facilitate
this new posture, whether and how our adversaries may
attempt to constrain or stymie such efforts, and strategies
for mitigation.

Before I turn to Ranking Member Inhofe for his opening
remarks, I would like to remind my colleagues that there
will be a classified session immediately following this open
session in SV-217, the Office of Senate Security, and also
remind my colleagues that there are scheduled, three votes
this morning. So, this will be somewhat complicated.

With that, let me recognize the ranking member, Senator
Inhofe. Senator?
STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES INHOFE, U.S. SENATOR FROM OKLAHOMA

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to our witnesses for appearing here today.

Welcome back, Secretary Kahl. As the most senior of policy advisors at DoD, it is appropriate that you agreed to testify in open session on these critical issues.

Let's be clear why we are here today: As a result of the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, 13 servicemen and women were killed, at least hundreds of American citizens were left behind, and many thousands of Afghan partners have been abandoned.

Although some of our questions on this drawdown have been answered, we still have a long way to go until all of our questions are answered, and I want to thank Chairman Reed for working with us on continuing this oversight process.

Now, too often, the current administration tells us that President Biden was forced to withdraw from Afghanistan because of President Trump's agreement with the Taliban and that is just not true; I think everyone knows that is just not true. First, President Biden hasn't felt bound by President Trump's policies on anything else; on Iran, or the Southwest Border, or on funding our military.

Second, the Doha Agreement was a conditioned-based
approach under President Trump's plan, the U.S. agreed to withdraw troops only if the Taliban met seven conditions. These conditions included: Preventing the Al Qaeda from threatening the United States from Afghanistan and denying residence to those threatening the United States.

These conditions weren't met; in fact, as General Milley told us, only one of the seven conditions was met. As we have heard in recent hearings, Al Qaeda remains active in Afghanistan, and will likely threaten the U.S. homeland very, very soon. And that is why all of President Biden's military advisers told him to keep at least 2,500 troops to continue fighting the terrorists and to protect Americans, here, and in the homeland.

But President Biden withdrew anyway. He did not feel bound by President Trump's conditions-based approach and did not follow it. I wish he had. We would all be safer today if that were the case.

Now, Secretary Kahl, you were confirmed on April 27. So you did not make a recommendation on President Biden's decision to pull all the troops from Afghanistan by a set date, rather than based on the conditions on the ground. But you were the most senior policy advisor at DOD for the next four months as this tragedy played out from May through the end of August.

What I want to know, and what the American people want
to know, and what our troops who served and sacrificed in Afghanistan absolutely deserve to know, is what did President Biden's most senior advisors do during those four months?

We want to understand what this national security team did on a day-to-day basis as a warning light after a warning light began to blink red. We need to understand, and then fix, what went wrong so that we can keep American families safe and protect our interests in the future.

The consequences of the President's disastrous decision are impossible to ignore: An Afghan interpreter for our Australian allies was executed last week. China is going after rare-earth metals there. Girls are being prevented from going to school. That's just the beginning. The danger is likely to grow across the world and in our own backyard.

We have heard from our military officials and our intelligence officials how little we really know about the rising threat of terrorism now that Afghanistan is a safe haven for these organizations.

But instead of an honest look at what went wrong, the Biden administration has hunkered down and said this withdrawal was an extraordinary success, and instead of putting together a real counterterrorism plan for the future, all we get is buzzwords.
So, I look forward to our witnesses' testimony and thank you to Chairman Reed.
Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Inhofe.
Dr. Kahl and Mr. Secretary, please again.
STATEMENT OF HON. COLIN KAHL, UNDER SECRETARY OF
DEFENSE FOR POLICY

Dr. Kahl: Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, and
distinguished members of the Senate Armed Services
Committee, thank you for the opportunity to join you today
to discuss the military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the
Department's role in Operation Allies Welcome.

Today, I am joined by Lieutenant General Jim Mingus,
Director, J3, Joint Staff, who will also provide opening
remarks following mine.

Let me start by echoing Secretary Austin and expressing
my pride in our servicemembers. Over the last 20 years in
Afghanistan, our men and women in uniform have performed
countless acts of bravery; 2,461 of them paid the ultimate
sacrifice while doing so. I know members of this Committee
share my gratitude to our troops, who have faithfully served
and sacrificed, spent months and years away from family and
loved ones, and endured repeated combat tours, all to
protect the homeland.

For 2 decades, our men and women serving in Afghanistan
acted with courage and compassion, yet, the performance of
our soldiers, airmen, sailors, and Marines during the
historic evacuation was unparalleled. In the 48-hour span
following the Taliban takeover of Kabul, our troops on the
ground secured an airport in contested territory. In just
17 days, they evacuated the largest airlift of people in history, unprecedented both, in scope and scale, enabling the evacuation of 120,000 U.S. citizens; lawful permanent residents; third-country nationals; Afghan partners, including those eligible for Special Immigrant Visas and the State Department's locally employed staff; and other vulnerable Afghans at risk. As I testified previously, no other military on Earth could have accomplished that feat, and we, as Americans, should be immensely proud.

The success of the U.S. evacuation operation was enabled by our military planners and their diligent development of contingency plans. Immediately following the President's April announcement of our military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Department of Defense went to work ensuring that the drawdown could be accomplished responsibly. Though we did not imagine a situation in which the Afghan Government and Security Forces would collapse in a matter of days prior to the conclusion of our retrograde, the Department began iterating on evacuation scenarios, including the possibility of a contested evacuation, in the spring of 2021. Not only did we plan, we proactively took steps in case of emergency.

In June, the Secretary pre-positioned forces in the region and sent the Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group to the Gulf to cover the withdrawal. In August, as conditions
worsened, additional forces were placed on alert. 

Forethought, as much as skill and bravery, allowed our

servicemembers to execute this extraordinary mission.

To be sure, there were complications and tragedy. 

While airlifting up to 9,000 people per day from Kabul, we

experienced overcrowding at the airport and at our interim

staging bases for evacuees on their way to the United

States. In a highly dynamic environment, we constantly had

to adapt to access and evacuate U.S. citizens, lawful

permanent residents, and Afghan evacuees, and in the end, we

were unable to reach some of those we sought to evacuate by

August 31.

There were also heartbreaking costs. In the final days

of the withdrawal, we lost 13 American servicemembers to a

horrific ISIS-K suicide attack on the airport. These 13

heroes sacrificed their lives to save tens of thousands of

innocent people. We will forever mourn the tragedy of their

deaths and honor the humanity that they demonstrated in

their final mission.

I am also acutely aware of the costs borne by Afghans. 

Last week, I met with the President of Nutrition & Education 

International (NEI), Dr. Steven Kwon. He told me of the

extraordinary life lived by Mr. Zemari Ahmadi, an aid worker

employed by NEI and one of the 10 civilians mistakenly

killed during the August 29 U.S. airstrike in Kabul. It was
clear from our conversation that among the 10 innocent lives lost, including children, Afghanistan lost a tremendous humanitarian in the erroneous strike, and for that, we at the Department, are deeply sorry.

Just as I committed to Dr. Kwon, I commit to each of you that the Department will ensure a thorough investigation and accounting for the August 29 airstrike; how we can more stringently prevent civilian harm in the future; and how we can support the family of those lost via a condolence payment.

Our military mission in Afghanistan may have ended on August 31, but our servicemembers, diplomats, and government employees remain hard at work. The U.S. Government continues to facilitate the departure of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents, as well as Afghans who worked for and with us, from Afghanistan.

From September 21 through October 25, the U.S. Government has directly facilitated the departure of 240 U.S. citizens and 157 lawful permanent residents, as well as others who have come out on private charters. Physically evacuating U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, third-country nationals, Afghan partners, and other Afghans at risk from Kabul Airport was only step one of the extraordinary accomplishment of our military.

Across the globe and throughout this country, over
10,000 of our men and women in uniform continue to support the Afghan people alongside our interagency partners via, Operation Allies Welcome. We built out our military installations across Europe and the Middle East to serve as temporary locations for evacuees as they underwent the necessary vetting and health screenings for them to come to the United States. This portion of the mission was enabled by America's network of allies and partners, a network that no other nation can rival. It demonstrates that our bilateral relationships across the globe continue to be a source of great national strength.

At home, we have drawn upon another wellspring of national power: the generosity and hospitality of the American people. We have welcomed over 65,000 Afghan evacuees to eight safe haven sites, located on domestic military installations, as they complete the necessary steps to be resettled into the United States. American communities are opening their arms and embracing the evacuees, and with their support, the resilient spirit of the Afghan people is coming to life.

For example, at Fort Bliss, Texas, an Afghan interpreter organized and started an informal education program for Afghan children, and at Fort Dix, New Jersey, volunteers organized weddings for Afghan couples who delayed their ceremonies during the fall of Kabul. American
servicemembers continue to work around the clock to ensure evacuees are safe and welcome on our installations. Every day, we see our men and women in uniform trading high-fives, giving fist bumps, and playing ball with Afghan children. This mission has not been without its challenges, but we are truly proud of all those supporting this historic operation.

Despite the end of our military presence in Afghanistan, the work of the Department is far from over. We are examining and learning from the past, reckoning with the uncomfortable truth that despite decades and billions of dollars of U.S. investment, the Afghan military evaporated in the face of the Taliban assault. Additionally, we are turning to the future, bolstering our capacity to engage in over-the-horizon counterterrorism operations to ensure that no threat emanating from Afghanistan can harm our homeland or our interests, even as we refocus the Department on the challenges posed by China, Russia, and other competitors and adversaries.

I know this Committee has many questions about the war, the evacuation, and our path forward. I look forward to taking them, but before I do, I would like to thank the members of this Committee for your enduring support and partnership, and with that, I would like to turn it over to General Mingus.

[The statement of Dr. Kahl follows:]
STATEMENT OF JAMES MINGUS, LIEUTENANT GENERAL,
DIRECTOR FOR OPERATIONS, J3, JOINT STAFF

General Mingus: Good afternoon. I would like to start by thanking Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, and all Members here today for your enduring support of our entire Joint Force. I would like to extend my appreciation to the SASC for providing me with the opportunity to speak with you today about the military's deliberate withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Department's contribution to the interagency effort to initially evacuate fully-vetted Afghan Special Immigrant Visa holders and execute a Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation for U.S. Citizens and other Afghans.

Our interagency coordination and partnership were, and continue to be, critical to the ongoing evacuation, processing, and resettlement of evacuees. I could not be more proud of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and civilians whose service and sacrifice throughout the Afghanistan Campaign is humbling. It has been the honor of a lifetime to serve alongside them.

As Dr. Kahl just explained, the breadth and depth of the simultaneous evacuation operations was unparalleled. NEO operations are among the most challenging missions a military can undertake. By their very nature they occur with little notice and are often within tenuous security environments. The Department recognized that a NEO could be
1 the most dangerous course of action and with the
2 interagency, we planned for this contingency.
3
4 This pre-planning allowed the Department to respond
5 quickly to the Department of State's NEO Declaration
6 deploying a force package of nearly 6,000 personnel to HKIA
7 within days. This NEO element executed the largest
8 humanitarian airlift operation ever undertaken. I am not
9 sure that there is another event that better demonstrates
10 what it means to be an American servicemember, the
11 willingness to sacrifice self, while demonstrating
12 compassion under fire, so that others may enjoy the freedom
13 and opportunities we would die to defend.
14
15 Unfortunately, 13 servicemembers did pay the ultimate
16 price and they will be regarded as heroes forever.
17 Americans were not the only heroes lost over the course of
18 the 20-year campaign. NATO allies and partners, and
19 especially Afghan civilians, were a part of our efforts
20 beginning with the initial invasion. Countless Afghan lost
21 their lives trying to help the United States navigate
22 Afghanistan's difficult human and physical terrain, and
23 countless more Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
24 were lost serving alongside U.S. servicemembers.
25 Unfortunately, we lost 10 more Afghan civilians leading up
26 to our departure during a precision strike we employed to
27 target ISIS-K.
As Dr. Kahl explained, we are committed to the ongoing investigation and to supporting the family members of those lost. We also understand how this strike may cause the Committee to question Over-the Horizon Counterterrorism operation now that we no longer have a physical footprint in Afghanistan. I look forward to discussing these issues with you today.

Furthermore, the ANDSF will be a case study the Department will pour over in the ensuing years. We will analyze their development and their ultimate dissolution to determine how to chart better paths for our partners in the future. While we cannot, and we will never be able to instill the will to fight, we can, and will take the opportunity to better understand those intangible factors that so significantly affect our mission and our nation's interests.

Our work did not end on 31 August. The interagency effort to quickly house, transport, vaccinate, and resettle the resultant evacuee population continues to be a herculean effort; one that would have been extraordinarily more difficult without our allies, partners, and NGOs. We are also continuing to support the interagency as they work to relocate U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, and Afghans to whom we hold special commitments, including SIV holders, who remain in Afghanistan and have expressed a
desire to leave.

Despite the Afghan withdrawal and evacuation, the Department remains focused on counterterrorism threats to the homeland. While we reprioritize following the withdrawal in the short term, we are actively setting the conditions to ensure we remain situationally aware and are postured to mitigate and neutralize developing terrorist threats and streams.

Dr. Kahl and I look forward to answering your questions today as we work together for the benefit of our country. Thank you again for your time and your support.

[The statement of General Mingus follows:]
Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, General, and thank you, Mr. Secretary.

For both the Secretary and General Mingus, when General Milley was here, he testified that although Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups had been significantly degraded in the past 20 years, that there may be a resurgence of international terrorism emanating from the region within 12 to 36 months, do you concur with that assessment, Dr. Kahl?

Dr. Kahl: I think the assessment depends on which group we are talking about. I think the intelligence community assesses that both, ISIS-K and Al Qaeda have the intent to conduct external operations, including against the United States, but neither, currently has the capability to do so. We could see ISIS-K generate that capability in somewhere between 6 or 12 months. I think the current assessments by the intelligence community is Al Qaeda would take a year or two to reconstitute that capability. And as you said in your opening, Senator, we have to remain vigilant against that possibility.

Chairman Reed: Thank you.

Do you concur, General Mingus?

General Mingus: I do, sir. And I know that it was further refined last week when the intel folks were here to refine that assessment. So, the Chairman's assessment, I concur with that.
Chairman Reed: Thank you.

And, General Mingus, when General McKenzie was here, he indicated, given the departure, the physical departure of American personnel from Afghanistan that our "over the horizon" situation will not give us the same picture that we have now. The ranges will be greater. The resources will be greater. The risks will all be greater.

Do you all assess at this time that despite these increased risks that we are appropriately postured to disrupt terrorist activities emanating from the region?

General Mingus: I'm sorry, sir. The last half of the question?

Chairman Reed: Despite these increased risks, which we all recognize, do you believe we are appropriately postured at this time to disrupt terrorist threats emanating from the region and are adapting so we can consistently disrupt these activities?

General Mingus: Sir, as you know, and the Chairman and the Secretary both briefed, and so did General McKenzie, the "over the horizon" counterterrorism capability that we have in place right now. And we will go, Dr. Kahl and I will go into much more detail during the closed session, but as you know, we have a command and control architecture set up in the Gulf. We are able to project sets from the Gulf. We are able to collect across all the sources of intelligence,
fuse that, and continue and analyze, and if necessary, take
action in Afghanistan.

As General McKenzie and the Chairman both indicated, it
is harder, but we believe we have the assets in place right
now, if necessary, to disrupt and/or degrade the terrorist
networks in Afghanistan.

Chairman Reed: Thank you.

Secretary Kahl, some have suggested that the
administration should have started evacuating people from
Afghanistan sooner. Was it is the administration's
assessment that doing so would have hastened the fall of
Kabul but suggesting that the United States did not have
confidence in the Ghani Government and did we, in fact, give
assurances to President Ghani that we would maintain a
presence and not signal our lack of confidence?

Dr. Kahl: So, Senator, the goal during the retrograde
was to assist the Afghan Government and not undermine them.
And there was concern that if you accelerated evacuations to
include of large numbers of Afghans, that it would create a
self-fulfilling prophesy of accelerating the collapse of the
Afghan Government. It is also something that President
Ghani raised as a chief concern.

We did bring out more than a thousand SIVs prior to the
NEO, but there was a concern that a mass exodus could
undermine the Government.
Chairman Reed: Thank you.

Finally, Dr. Kahl, can you give us updates with respect to our arrangement with Pakistan regarding their cooperation with us on counterterrorism. There have been press reports recently that they are working with the Taliban to attack ISIS-K, which is an enemy of both, but can you give us any further assessment?

Dr. Kahl: So, Pakistan is a challenging actor, but they don't want Pakistan to be a safe haven for terrorist attacks, external attacks; not just against Pakistan, but against others. They continue to give us access to Pakistani airspace and we are in conversations about keeping that airspace open and I am happy to talk about that more in the closed session.

Chairman Reed: Uh-huh.

Dr. Kahl: But for right now, the counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan is pretty good.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much.

Senator Inhofe, please?

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

One of the many confusing things about this whole thing is that we really don't know how many Americans were left in Afghanistan. The administration's number of U.S. citizens left in Afghanistan keeps changing. We understand that and it is very confusing.
The administration always said a hundred to 200 U.S. citizens were left in Afghanistan, but it has already withdrawn 234 and is in contact with 363 others; 176 of whom want to leave. I am speaking slowly, because I am trying to put this together at the same time.

The administration, by its own count, left 600 Americans behind; over 400 of whom want to leave, not the 100 to 200 that has been referred to several times.

There are still thousands of Americans unaccounted for, based on Secretary Blinken's earlier claim that there were 10 to 15,000. Mid-August, Secretary of State Blinken told senators, we were all there that 10,000 to 15,000 Americans were in Afghanistan. On the 31 of August, the administration claims it withdrew 6,000.

Now, if you do the math as we are saying this, it withdrew 6,000 Americans from Afghanistan. Now, this would mean that somewhere between 4,000 and 9,000 Americans were left behind, but the administration says 100 to 200 are remaining.

In October, the administration stated that 234 Americans have been evacuated since January, since the 31 of August. The State Department says in contact, says it is in contact with 363 more Americans in Afghanistan; 176 of whom want to leave.

Now, if we can figure this out, you are doing a lot
better than I have done. And I have made a real effort to
go down and document everything that is in there. So, at
the very least, it is confusing.

During the August 18 interview on ABC, George
Stephanopoulos asked President Biden whether U.S. troops
would stay beyond August 31 if there were still Americans to
evacuate. President Biden responded quote, and this is a
quote, if there are American citizens left, we are going to
stay to get them out. Of course, this didn't happen.

So, Secretary Kahl, I would ask you the question: When
did you realize that the United States would not be able to
get all of the U.S. citizens out of Afghanistan by August 31
and did you present your leadership any options for
extending that self-imposed deadline to ensure that our
people were out of harm's way at that time?

Dr. Kahl: Well, as a first matter, nobody was
abandoned. We continue to get people out of Afghanistan,
including American citizens.

And, Senator, if you would like, I am happy to go
through the latest numbers on that, but --

Senator Inhofe: Well, now, I would ask you to pause
there. The latest numbers, I have already done the latest
numbers. And maybe there are later numbers than I just read
earlier.

Are there some later numbers?
Dr. Kahl: So I can give you some fidelity on the numbers.

Senator Inhofe: I agree with that.

Dr. Kahl: Okay. So, the validated numbers from the State Department during the NEO were 6,000 Americans. We estimate we evacuated about 5,500.

Since the end of the NEO, so since September 1, the State Department documented 240 American citizens who have departed Afghanistan since September 1 and 157 Green Card holders. When you account for additional individuals who did not, were not arranged for travel outside of Afghanistan by the U.S. Government, but came out through other private charters, DOD's numbers total out to 314 AMCITS total and 266 LPR, total, since the end of the NEO.

In terms of how many American citizens we estimate are currently in Afghanistan, the Department of State is in contact with 196 American citizens who are ready to depart and arrangements are being made for them to do so, either via area or over ground, and another 243 American citizens have been contacted and are not ready to depart, either because they want to stay in Afghanistan or aren't ready, is the current numbers.

Senator Inhofe: Now, the question that I asked: Did you present your leadership any options for extending that self-imposed deadline to ensure that our people were out of
harm's way --

Dr. Kahl: It was --

Senator Inhofe: -- and if it wasn't you, who would it be?

Dr. Kahl: It was the consensus of civilian and military leadership at the Department of Defense that we should stick to the August 31 deadline. If it extends beyond that would cause a risk to mission in force and would make it harder to get American citizens out beyond that date.

Senator Inhofe: The same military leadership that insisted that we leave troops down there at the time that we evacuated?

Dr. Kahl: That is correct.

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Inhofe.

Senator Shaheen, please?

Senator Shaheen: Thank you both for being here this morning and for your efforts to support the evacuation in Afghanistan.

I want to start by recognizing, as both of you did, the tremendous service of our men and women in the military who made possible, that evacuation and continue to support Afghan refugees. I was proud that 11 members of the New Hampshire National Guard volunteered to go to Joint Base
McGuire as part of Operation Allies Refuge and believe that they represent what we have seen across our Armed Forces.

We have also heard in our office from a number of those men and women who served in Afghanistan to continue to be concerned about people they served with, Afghans they served with during their time there, who are still in Afghanistan, whose lives are being threatened by the Taliban because of their service with the United States.

And so, General Mingus, you referenced those SIV applicants. I wonder if you can tell me what we continue to do to try and ensure that those SIV applicants and those who have received Special Immigrant Visas are ready, are going to be evacuated out of Afghanistan, either to the United States or somewhere else, where they will be safe.

General Mingus: Thank you, Senator.

As you know, the State Department has a group that they have established under Ambassador Jones and underneath that there is a group that solely focuses on the additional folks coming out of Afghanistan. They are also working with about 52 special interest groups that Dr. Kahl's office and the Joint Staff are a part of. We meet with those groups twice a week because they have knowledge and understanding and contact with other Afghans who are at risk, that continue to try and come out.

And as the State Department works the documentation,
there is generally a flight or two a week that does bring out not just American citizens and legal permanent residents, but also Afghans at risk.

Senator Shaheen: I am sorry to interrupt, but do you have a sense of how many SIV applicants remain in Afghanistan or Secretary Kahl, do you know that number?

Dr. Kahl: So, the total number of SIVs in the pipeline is 28,000, according to our records, of which 8,555 have come out with their family members. So, that would suggest there is a significant number of SIVs still in Afghanistan.

And, Senator, I share your concern and we will work to try to get them out and hold the Taliban to their pledge for safe passage with people with documents, which should include SIVs.

Senator Shaheen: As I am sure you are both aware, one of the challenges for those SIV applicants has been getting the documents that can confirm that they actually worked alongside our military. And one of the challenges has been that DOD has not provided documents in many cases, and so what are we doing to reform that issue for, not just for the current SIV applicants, but for future?

Dr. Kahl: So, as this Committee is aware, the SIV process was not designed for an emergency. It is very slow. Typically, it took a year or 2.

Nothing was done in the previous administration to
speed that up. Nothing was done to bring anybody out from Afghanistan after the Doha Agreement in 2020.

At the beginning of the Biden administration, the State Department took some steps that shrunk the time to about 8 months; that is still way too long.

The Department of Defense created an enormous database and has refined that data over time to try to speed up the confirmation of employment. The DOD, itself, doesn't provide the documents, the visas; that obviously comes through the State Department.

In some cases, they have provided physical visas to people who are in Afghanistan and other cases, there are electronic documents that have been transmitted because, obviously, our embassy is not in Afghanistan anymore.

Senator Shaheen: Well, Senator Ernst and I worked on legislation that has passed the Congress to try and speed up that process, but if there are other changes that need to be made, I hope that you will share that with the Committee so that we can continue to try and ensure that we don't have bureaucratic impediments to getting people out of the country.

My other question, because my time is short, has to do with the status of ISIS-K and Afghanistan. And we have seen an increase in the number of attacks in Afghanistan.

Is it our assessment that the Afghan or that the
Taliban has the capacity to defeat ISIS-K in the country?

Dr. Kahl: I think it is our assessment that the Taliban and ISIS-K are mortal enemies. So, the Taliban is highly motivated to go after ISIS-K. Their ability to do so, I think, is to be determined.

Senator Shaheen: Do you share that, General Mingus?

General Mingus: I do, ma'am.

Senator Shaheen: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Shaheen.

Senator Wicker, please?

Senator Wicker: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I, first of all, have a statement. The Under Secretary in his prepared remarks on page 3 talks about, "the work of the Department is far from over. We are examining and learning from the past, reckoning with the uncomfortable truth that despite decades and billions of dollars of U.S. investment, the Afghan military evaporated in the face of the Taliban assault."

Let me just remind everyone that for the past 6 or 7 years before the debacle in Kabul, the Afghan military took almost all of the casualties and fatalities and fought bravely on behalf of their country.

And, General Mingus, I appreciate the fact that you have been deployed a number of times and have served in
dangerous situations, but on the final page of your written
statement, you talk about the ANDSF, Afghan National Defense
Security Forces, you say there will be a case study for the
Department in ensuing years; indeed, there will be a case
study for historians in the coming years. And you make the
statement, "While we cannot, and will never be able to
instill the will to fight, we can and will take the
opportunity to better understand," and so forth.

May I suggest that both of those statements are
unworthy of the Secretary of Defense for Policy of this
administration or of the Director of Operations for the
Joint Staff and, in fact, it was a decision by this
administration to pull support for the Afghan National
Defense Forces that led to the debacle? And to suggest that
this group of armed forces, supported by the United States,
but populated almost entirely by Afghan soldiers was
unwilling to fight or evaporated in the face of combat, is a
shameful and unworthy statement.

Now, Mr. Secretary, on August 10, the White House said
that President Biden believed that it is not inevitable that
the Taliban takes over Kabul or the country, and I am
quoting directly, 5 days later, we abandoned the embassy in
Kabul.

Do you think this sent a signal to the Afghan National
Defense Forces that we were out of there and that they could
not depend on us anymore?

And was that part of the, was the abandonment of the embassy part of the troop-withdrawal plans?

Dr. Kahl: It was not part of the plan. The embassy was evacuated once the ANDSF has essentially already collapsed. So, starting on or about August 11, you saw a cascade of provincial capitals that culminated in the Taliban entering Kabul. The ANDSF evaporated. President Ghani left the country on the 15 and we moved our diplomats to the airport.

Senator Wicker: General Mingus, who took the vast majority of the casualties in combat from, say, 2014 to the abandonment of Kabul?

General Mingus: It was the Afghan National Security Forces.

Senator Wicker: And do you think it is fair to suggest that they did not have the will to fight?

We cannot and never will be able to instill the will to fight; is that a fair statement, General?

General Mingus: Sir, agree how the Chairman and the Secretary qualified it when we talked about this very topic during their testimony. The leadership and the will to fight, when we pulled off, at the tactical level, from an advisory perspective several years ago, our visibility in terms of the condition of the Afghan National Security
Forces became less and less.

What I would offer, based on my experience, is that I have fought alongside the Afghans and there is no issue with their will to fight. I think the follow-on thing that we will need to study as part of history is, the will to fight for what, and that, I think, is the fundamental question; i.e., did they have the will to fight in Afghanistan against other Afghans, and that is the part, I think, that we will have to determine going forward.

Senator Wicker: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, very much, Senator Wicker.

Now, Senator Gillibrand, excuse me, Senator Hirono?

Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Kahl, did I hear you say that Al Qaeda and ISIS-K are developing the capability to attack the U.S. within 2 years?

Dr. Kahl: What I said was that the current intelligence community's assessment is that ISIS-K could potentially develop the capability within 6 to 12 months and that Al Qaeda could potentially develop that capability within 1 to 2 years, but it is precisely that threat that we need to remain vigilant to disrupt.

Senator Hirono: Yeah. So, how do we determine whether they have the intention or the will to attack once they have the capability to do so?
Dr. Kahl: Well, I think we are fairly certain that they have the intention to do so. And I think the Committee had the opportunity to hear from the intelligence community in a classified setting not too long ago, and we can follow-up in the closed session, but we have considerable evidence that they have the intent. The question at the moment is the capability.

Senator Hirono: Well, you just said they will have the capability within 2 years.

Dr. Kahl: They could have the capability within 2 years.

Senator Hirono: So, since they have the intent and then they will develop the capability, and so I don't know whether it is in the closed session that you will tell us what we are doing to defend against the culmination of both, the capability and the will to attack.

I have an ongoing concern shared by others on this committee about how the Taliban are treating women and girls in Afghanistan, given their brutal history. It is not likely that this will improve.

This is for you, Secretary Kahl: What is your understanding of the conditions on the ground for women and girls in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, following our withdrawal, and what is your assessment of our ability, along with the international community, to effectively
provide and direct aid directly to these vulnerable groups under Taliban control?

I have a series of questions, so I will just put them to you. Are there any ongoing operations to assist prominent female Afghan leaders who are at risk from retribution from the Taliban?

And back in May, I joined my colleagues, Senators Shaheen and Collins, in asking President Biden to appoint an ambassador-at-large for global women's issues to coordinate the protection of women and girls' rights in Afghanistan. I think that position is needed now more than ever. To your knowledge, has anyone been nominated to fill this spot?

Could you respond to my series of questions?

Dr. Kahl: I am happy to. So, as it relates to the situation on the ground in Afghanistan, I think we all have to be a little humbled that the reports are largely anecdotal, not systematic. But the conditions are not good. The Taliban are a ruthless authoritarian band. They promise to put forward an inclusive government. They did not do that.

Our reports suggest that women and girls are having a hard time going to school. We have not seen evidence yet of widespread reprisals, but that doesn't mean it is not happening; it just means we haven't seen that evidence yet. But there clearly are violence levels of human rights abuses
to include against women and girls.

I think that the international community has some leverage points with the new Taliban government. The Taliban government wants recognition. They should not get that recognition unless they are a very different government than the one that they are now. They have profound economic needs; that provides some leverage. And we should continue to provide humanitarian assistance, not to the government, but around the government, to at-risk populations.

As it relates to the State Department's position on women and girls, I don't have any information on that and I would ask that, I would defer that to the State Department.

Senator Hirono: I know that the international community has come forward with, literally, billions of dollars and aid that is supposed to go directly to non-governmental entities, but my understanding is that they have to work with the Taliban in order to make sure that the aid gets to the people that they are providing the aid to.

So, how much of the aid that the international community, including the United States, is providing will actually get to these organizations and out of Taliban's hands, do you have some sense of that?

Dr. Kahl: So, obviously, that falls more in the writ of the USAID and I would defer that, on specifics, to them. But my understanding from my USAID colleagues is that, and
from our U.S. U.N. colleagues is that NGOs and international organizations are able to operate around the Taliban government to provide aid directly, but it is harder.

Senator Hirono: We know that there are still a number of people who are seeking SIV status. So what agency is leading that effort to enable that the documentation, et cetera necessary for these applicants to get that status and then to leave Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: So, the State Department is in the lead for the SIV issue, but to degree that they need assistance from the Department of Defense to verify employment, we set up a project called Project Rabbit to streamline the data and make sure that we can make that process as efficient as possible.

Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Hirono.

Senator Fischer, please?

Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Last month, Generals Milley and McKenzie both testified on the challenges of conducting "over the horizon" counterterrorism strikes against targets in Afghanistan. Unlike other places in the world where we conduct "over the horizon" CT operations, Afghanistan is landlocked. We have no reliable partners on the ground and we don't have any basing agreements with neighboring countries.
Secretary Kahl, in the months since Secretary Austin, General Milley, and General McKenzie testified, have we secured any basing agreements or arrangements with any country bordering Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: We have not secured firm basing arrangements. We have had extensive conversations, which --

Senator Fischer: Thank you.

Dr. Kahl: -- I would be happy to discuss in closed session.

Senator Fischer: Thank you.

Also, Secretary Kahl, since President Biden made the decision to withdraw in April is touted "over the horizon" CT operations as our strategy going forward, can you share with the Committee any tangible steps the administration has made in trying to secure basing agreements with those countries, and keep it short, please; I have a number of questions.

Dr. Kahl: Sure. We have arrangements already in the Gulf, as you know. We are in conversations with Pakistan to keep the air line of communication open.

We have also had conversations with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which we can talk about in the closed session.

Senator Fischer: Okay. Thank you.

I look forward to learning about the status of all of those negotiations with those countries.
General Mingus, with the Taliban in control of the Afghan Government and absence of reliable on-the-ground partners, is it more challenging or less challenging to collect intelligence on ISIS-K and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and that is particularly looking at the intelligence that is needed to identify and also to locate targets for counterterrorism operations.

General Mingus: Yes, ma'am, that is a fair characterization. It is more challenging to collect and in the closed session, we will lay out some of the percentages for you across all the different intel specialties, in terms of what that degradation looks like.

Senator Fischer: Thank you.

Secretary Kahl, prior to August, were you aware of reports of extremely low morale among Afghan forces or of reports that they had not been paid in months?

Dr. Kahl: Broadly aware, but I think our visibility onto the exact conditions was highly degraded.

Senator Fischer: Were you concerned in June when the Taliban took control of 21 districts across nine provinces over the course of 4 days, most of them without a single shot being fired?

Dr. Kahl: Yes.

Senator Fischer: At this point or any other point prior to August 14, did you ever question the intelligence
community's assessment that the Afghan Government and Afghan
Security Forces would remain viable for weeks to months,
even years, following our departure; that is a quote.

Dr. Kahl: I repeatedly engage any intelligence
colleagues, and as you know, Senator, the estimate shifted
from 1 to 2 years, to months to year, and then weeks to
months, and then days to weeks.

Senator Fischer: I think this disconnect between the
reality on the ground and what the Biden administration
assessed would happen with respect to the collapse of the
Afghan Security Forces is deeply troubling. It was not just
that our predictions were overtaken by events, some of the
underlying assumptions, upon which the analysis were based,
were very flawed.

Mr. Secretary, how can you possibly assure us that such
a disconnect is not happening between the reality on the
ground and the Biden administration's analysis of how long
it is going to take Al Qaeda or ISIS-K to gain ability to
attack the United States, and when you speak of 6 months as
a possibility when our homeland would be in extreme danger,
those were numbers that were given to us several months ago.
Will we here an update on that in the classified?

Dr. Kahl: So, on the latter, we will give you the
update. I think there was also a number of our intel
colleagues that were here a few days ago that provided you
with the latest.

I think we should all be humbled that we have all known less about Afghanistan than we thought we did. I think that especially after the Doha Agreement in 2020, our forces declined substantially and we pulled off the Afghan Security Forces, so we had less feel for what was going on --

Senator Fischer: So, Secretary --

Dr. Kahl: -- and that got worse in 2021.

Senator Fischer: Mr. Secretary, would you agree with General McKenzie's testimony, then, that, quote, "The war on terror is not over, and the war in Afghanistan is not over, either"?

Dr. Kahl: There are terrorist threats all over the globe; in fact, the biggest ones, as you are aware --

Senator Fischer: Specifically to Afghanistan --

Dr. Kahl: -- are currently emanating from the Somalia and Yemen area.

Senator Fischer: Mr. Secretary, specifically to my question, it is on Afghanistan. That war is not over either?

Dr. Kahl: I think the war, as we know it, isn't continuing, but the terrorist threat continues.

Senator Fischer: And do you agree with General Milley's testimony that the outcome of this war was a strategic failure?
Dr. Kahl: I think the strategic objective of decimating Al Qaeda and getting Bin Laden was achieved. I think the broader, nation-building mission that several administrations had, was not successful.

Senator Fischer: Do you believe that the Biden administration bears any responsibility for the outcome of this war or for the Taliban now being in charge of Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: I think what we saw unfold in the past few months would have happened whenever we left Afghanistan.

Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Fischer.

Senator King, please?

Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I feel like we are in a time warp where history started on January 20 of 2021, when, in fact, history in this case started on February 29 of 2020 when the Doha Agreement was signed. I have read it, I don't know, probably 10 times.

I am a country lawyer, but it is not conditions-based. It guarantees that we will withdraw from Afghanistan in a certain number of months and a certain number of days. It even sets the day. It does talk about that the Taliban guarantees that Al Qaeda won't have safe haven. As far as we know, that is still the case. It does talk about negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan Government,
but that does not appear to be a condition of our withdrawal.

The decision to leave Afghanistan was made by the former administration in February of 2020. The question before President Biden was, do you abide by that agreement or do you abrogate it?

And we are talking now about the consequences of abiding by it. But let's talk for a minute about the consequences of abrogating it.

General Mingus, what would have happened, had the President said in April of 2021, we have decided not to withdraw our troops from Afghanistan, but to maintain our presence there, what would have been the result of that decision?

General Mingus: It is my belief that attacks from the Taliban, the one condition in the Doha Agreement that they did generally adhere to, would have resumed.

Senator King: And in order to respond to those attacks, it would have been necessary to augment our presence, would it not?

General Mingus: Potentially, although, the assessment by General McKenzie and General Miller, at the time, was that 2,500 was sufficient to be able to deal with that. But time would have only been able to tell, based on the voracity and the type of attacks, that would have started to
occur.

Senator King: And then to get to August 31, I remember the discussions. I remember the phone calls, the conference calls around that time.

Was it not the unanimous recommendation of the military that staying beyond August 31, which would have violated the agreement with the Taliban, would have subjected our troops and the citizens who remained, to greater danger than leaving and working with the Taliban to extract the remaining citizens, which, in fact, has happened. Wasn't that the consensus that the danger to the troops both, from the Taliban, who would have been free to attack us at that point under the, because of the abrogation of the August 31 agreement, but also the terrorist threat, which we saw play itself out at the airport?

General Mingus: That is correct, Senator.

The consensus amongst the Joint Chiefs, the commanders on the ground, that staying past 31 August, the attacks would have resumed and the ability to get additional American citizens and legal permanent residents out, would have actually, the risk to that would have gone up higher than had we departed as we did.

Senator King: And, in fact, since August 31, the Taliban has honored, I don't know if it is an agreement or it is an understanding or an implicit understanding, that
they let these Americans out, and, in fact, they have been
letting SIVs out; is that correct?

General Mingus: That is correct, Senator.

It has not been without challenge, but they continue, those that are properly documented, they have continued to let them depart in the numbers as Dr. Kahl briefed earlier.

Senator King: Mr. Kahl, what is your assessment of if the President had made the opposite decision, which the military, admittedly, we have established through testimony, recommended an additional 2,500? Would 2,500 been enough had the Taliban resumed attacks on Americans in the country over the course of 2021?

Dr. Kahl: I think there are two points that weighed heavily on the President. One was the issue that, in the exchange that you just had with General Mingus, which was if we had stayed beyond, would we have come under attack and, therefore, would the President have faced pressure to send in reinforcements for force protection. But the other issue, which gets less attention, but I know the President considered was that the assessment by the intelligence community was that us staying at 2,500 was not producing a stalemate. It was an eroding stalemate; in other words, the Afghans were losing.

And so, at some point, even if we weren't taking casualties, the President would have faced pressure to
escalate, just like Barack Obama did at the beginning of his administration when the Afghans were losing and just like President Trump did at the beginning of his administration when the Afghans were losing.

So, the President did not believe that 2,500 troops was a stable equilibrium. If we had kept at that level, he would have been under pressure to put in more.

Senator King: Thank you.

And I appreciate this. I think it is, like Senator Duckworth's proposal, that we have a nonpartisan commission to examine this to really get to the bottom of it. I would point out that I think this is our sixth hearing on Afghanistan in the last several months. I have had three or four in the Intelligence Committee. We had zero hearings that I can recall on the Doha Agreement, which was really the heart of the departure from Afghanistan.

So, the umbrage and outrage about what has happened since this summer rings a little hollow for me because there was no umbrage or outrage when the former administration essentially made an agreement with the Taliban, unconditional, essentially, really, unconditional to get our troops out by a certain date, which, by the way, was May 1 of 2021, not August 31.

So, with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator King.
Senator Ernst, please?

Senator Ernst: Yes, thank you, Mr. Chair.

And, gentlemen, thank you for being here today as we continue to examine the repercussions of President Biden's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan and the abandonment of Americans to the hands of the Taliban.

Dr. Kahl, is it true that President Biden said we wouldn't leave when there were Americans left behind?

Dr. Kahl: We have not left Americans behind; they continue to get out.

Senator Ernst: We left Americans behind.

Dr. Kahl: We did not leave Americans behind; they continue to get out.

Senator Ernst: You represent the DOD, Dr. Kahl. Did the DOD leave before all Americans were out?

Dr. Kahl: It was the consensus judgment that leaving on the August 31 was the best way to continue getting Americans out.

Senator Ernst: General Mingus, did the DOD, did our soldiers leave before all Americans were out?

General Mingus: Yes, ma'am. The last airplane left the evening of the 30, the morning of the 31 of August.

Senator Ernst: Thank you for your straightforward answer, General Mingus.

Dr. Kahl, is there more or less risk of terror attacks
against Americans and American interests because of the precipitous withdrawal of American military capability from the region?

Dr. Kahl: I think the intelligence community assesses that the overall risk to the homeland across the world is at its lowest point since 9/11. We have already discussed the possibility that ISIS-K and the Al Qaeda could reconstitute and we have to be vigilant against that in Afghanistan.

Senator Ernst: That does not sound like a low risk when you have just told us that the possibility of attack from ISIS-K to our homeland could be 6 to 12 months from now.

Dr. Kahl: The intelligence community assesses they could build that capability. We need to be vigilant in disrupting that.

Senator Ernst: So, it doesn't sound like low risk. So, Dr. Kahl, what threat assessments did you use for planning the security environment that would occur after the U.S. withdrawal, what assessments?

Dr. Kahl: Well, when I came into office, the decision had already been made and I was overseeing, from a civilian perspective, the retrograde operations.

Senator Ernst: Yes, I understand. You informed me last time in a closed session that you were busy sitting on the couch, so you weren't paying attention to those
assessments, which I disagreed with, because I do believe that in a position such as yours, you should absolutely be keeping up with various assessments, especially as we are pulling out our military troops, leaving Americans, and SIV holders behind.

So, since you came into office, those assessments that were used by others, did they provide to be accurate?

Dr. Kahl: I think the consensus, as we discussed a couple of minutes ago, the assessments constantly change. So, originally, the intelligence community assessed 1 to 2 years after a withdrawal of U.S. forces, would be the point where the ANDSF might collapse. It then became closer to a year, and then months to years, and then weeks to months, and then days to weeks in August, and I was paying attention to all those assessments once I was in the position.

Senator Ernst: Thank you.

And that would mean that any policy recommendations and planning recommendations that were made at that time are now ill-fit for the security environment that we are now facing.

Dr. Kahl: We were posturing to an "over the horizon" posture even before the ANDSF collapsed. Obviously, the ANDSF collapse makes that mission harder, but harder is not impossible.

Senator Ernst: What regional force postures, and this is going back to a number of questions you are already had,
what regional force postures, capabilities, ISR, are we now recommending be readied to deal with the security environment that is now true on the ground?

Dr. Kahl: So, we have a robust presence in the Gulf; beyond that, we should really talk about this in the closed session.

Senator Ernst: And just in the time remaining, as well, what measures have you recommended to address the reconstitution that we are now learning about with ISIS-K and Al Qaeda?

Dr. Kahl: Well, I think we need to remain vigilant against that threat in collecting intelligence and we can talk about exactly how we are doing that in the closed session. But we also need to build out more capabilities, so it is not just reliant on the facilities we have in the Arabian Gulf.

Senator Ernst: And just in the remaining time I have, thank you, gentlemen, again, for being here today. We are going to continue looking into this. I do hope we are able to form an outside committee that can take a look at the past 20 years of the war on terror.

But I also want to express my heartfelt gratitude to the men and women that have served our great United States Armed Forces and all that they have given and their families have given over the course of the past 20 years. They have
faced significant and sometimes insurmountable challenges, and yet they have overcome and they have served us well. And we can never diminish their service, especially in the face of an administration that would not listen to our military leaders. So, God bless them and their service to our great United States.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman Reed: Thank you.

Senator Gillibrand, please?

Thank you, Senator Ernst.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I, too, want to commend the service of all of our servicemembers who have served in Afghanistan and the intelligence officers and Afghan personnel who supported them.

I want to focus on the last point that Senator Ernst made about a review. Dr. Kahl and General Mingus, Members of the Committee, myself included, have proposed a comprehensive, rigorous, and objective audit on the war in its entirety.

At last month's hearing, General Milley acknowledged that there have been many lessons to be learned from America's longest war. Secretary Austin further stated any commission or review of the war should be an interagency effort.
Do you have any recommendations for an external, independent review of the war in Afghanistan; for example, what do you think Congress' role should be? What U.S. agencies, countries, and organizations do you recommend be included?

Chairman Reed: So, we are supportive of Senator Duckworth's proposal for an independent commission on this, strongly supportive of that. We also have efforts underway. At the Department of Defense, we are about to be underway. The Joint Staff has an effort. My organization is working to identify an independent institution that can do an independent review, especially of the time period from February 2020 through the end of the NEO. And we are in conversation with the NSC and the State Department and intelligence community to make sure whatever we do is aligned with their ongoing lessons-learned activities.

Senator Gillibrand: General?

General Mingus: Ma'am, I would echo Dr. Kahl's comments. I fully support, after 20 years, and all the treasure and resources, we owe our nation some better answers in terms of what we have learned.

Senator Gillibrand: With the testimony that has been given earlier in this hearing of an estimate that ISIS-K could launch an attack within 6 to 12 months, that Al Qaeda could launch an attack within 1 to 2 years, acknowledging
that we are in an unclassified setting, what are some of the broad objectives our adversaries may have within Afghanistan and planning is DOD doing in response to those recommendations and objectives?

Dr. Kahl: Yes, so I think the intelligence community would say that ISIS-K and Al Qaeda could have the capability to do attacks within that time frame. Whether they do or not is, of course, not something that can be predicted with any degree of certainty.

We are deploying ISR over Afghanistan every single day. We also have national technical means, which we can talk more about in the classified setting. We are sharing intelligence with regional partners and with our other partners, the U.K. and others, who are very focused on this problem set. So, we will get after this challenge and we will try to grow our capability to get after it.

I will say, I do think the Taliban is highly motivated to go after ISIS-K for the reasons we discussed earlier; they are a mortal enemy. I think Al Qaeda is much more complicated because the Taliban, especially the Haqqanis have a relationship with Al Qaeda. But we have seen signs, and we can talk, again, more in the classified setting, that the Taliban is wary about Afghanistan being a springboard for Al Qaeda external attacks; not because the Taliban are good guys, but because they fear international retribution
if that were to occur.

General Mingus: Ma'am, if I could?

Senator Gillibrand: Please.

General Mingus: This has come up several times in terms of the time frames for Al Qaeda and ISIS-K. Those estimates from the intel community, that is based on no U.S. or coalition intervention.

When applied, and we will talk about in the classified session in terms of our strategy and what we are doing, the goal would be to keep those times around where they are at now; if not, even further.

Senator Gillibrand: Can you give an assessment in the setting of what your view is with regard to regional instability and how that may impact with Russia and China.

Dr. Kahl: So, I think both, Russia and China, are nervous, frankly, despite what their propaganda outlets would suggest. Afghanistan is now a problem that is much more on their doorstep than on ours.

I think both of them have counterterrorism concerns inside of Afghanistan. I think both, Moscow and Beijing, are more willing to work with the Taliban than we are. But I think they are concerned.

I think Afghanistan's other neighbors, we have already talked about Pakistan, but the Central Asian States, they worry about the counterterrorism challenge. They also worry
about the implosion of Afghanistan leading to refugee flows that would spill across their borders.

Senator Gillibrand: What resources, trade agreements, military operations, or bilateral relation improvements do you think will be necessary to gain support from regional partners, such as Uzbekistan, to enable "over the horizon" operations or any other collaborations?

Dr. Kahl: We have some very specific ideas, but on that score, I would recommend that we talk about that in the closed session. It is very sensitive.

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Gillibrand.

Senator Tillis, please?

Senator Tillis: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you. I think you have done an extraordinary job with the oversight on this matter and I appreciate your willingness to do that. You know, we have gathered a lot of very important information through these hearings.

And Secretary Kahl, I would like to, I think it would be helpful, I like the fact that you support an independent commission, but I think it would also be helpful as that ramps up for our Committee to compile a bipartisan, comprehensive report on what we have all learned through these oversight hearings.
So, can I get your commitment to work with the minority and majority staff to put such a report together?

Dr. Kahl: You have my commitment to provide you the information you need for that effort.

Senator Tillis: General Mingus, when we talk about the 2,500 troops, and Secretary Kahl, I may come back to you if I have time, but I think we need to understand more broadly what I believe. I just want to confirm that I have my facts correct.

Generals Miller, Milley, McKenzie have all said that there was a consensus with 2,500 troops that we could maintain a relatively stable situation. Nothing is guaranteed.

But weren't we, in fact, talking about 2,500 fighters, the intelligence community largely remaining in place in Afghanistan, and another almost 6,000 troops from our NATO partners and allies, so we are talking somewhere on the order of about maybe 8,000, 8,500 being present in Afghanistan. Is that roughly the numbers?

General Mingus: If the NATO coalition contractors, civilians would have stayed consistent, sir, yes, that number is accurate.

Senator Tillis: And that would have been our ISRS assets, our strike capabilities, all the other things that would be inherent with that sort of troop presentation?
General Mingus: Those ISRS, that actually was inside, largely inside the 2,500, but then there was, from a strike perspective, you had both, assets in Afghanistan and from the Gulf.

Senator Tillis: And, by the way, Senator King, I have been against the Doha Agreement since September or since February 29. I thought it was a bad idea; it was fundamentally flawed, and I am not surprised where we are today.

But I do have to question, it seems to me, based on briefings that we have received, that there were a number of examples since the signing of the agreement where the Taliban has either, did not live up to the letter or the spirit of the agreement. I think one thing we heard consistently is that they were doing targeted attacks of Afghan national leadership, which was one of the destabilizing influences with respect to the eroding confidence in the Afghan National Forces.

General Mingus, you said that they have generally honored the agreement, or it may have been Secretary Kahl, but I can tell you in two real-life examples where they haven't, in terms of allowing people to leave. They slit the throat of a pregnant woman that we were working on to get out who had, she was in, I think, the P-1 category. They also slit the throat, we have pictures that family
members ultimately sent to us, 2 of the 900 people that we have on a list that we are still trying to get people out of the country. So, the Taliban may be doing a better job in the marketing department, but we know every single day, people are dying there that have a legitimate reason to be out of the country.

So, with respect to the broader agreement, though, can you give me other examples? You said they generally adhered to the terms of the Doha Agreement. Can you give me a couple examples where that is not the case.

General Mingus: I apologize if I misspoke. I meant they had only complied with one of the many, and that was largely not attacking U.S. forces since the Doha Agreement.

Senator Tillis: Okay.

General Mingus: So, on the others, they were in clear violation.

Senator Tillis: I am glad to hear that, because that is consistent with what General Milley testified to a couple of weeks ago.

And so, we can't say that the agreement did not have terms or did not have conditions, and they broke that.

So, now, Secretary Kahl, I want to go back to you. You testified before that some of the decisions or the recommendations of the remaining 2,500 troops predated your confirmation. But after you were confirmed, were you
briefed on that and to what extent did these discussions or
to what extent did these proposals even get considered when
we saw the eroding process occurring in Afghanistan or was
it pretty much covered ground at that point, not considered
by the time you got in at the end of April?

Dr. Kahl: So, by the time I got in, the decision had
been made by the President and the Department was executing
on that decision. There was not a major re-litigation of
kind of reversing course. I think as you heard from General
Miller in closed briefing to you, in his view, once we did
the retrograde, because we were already so small, so
compact, speed was safety. So, we really had the bulk of
the retrograde done by, I think, the beginning of July.

The remaining mission was to protect the embassy, which
is why we concentrated at the embassy compound and then a
few hundred troops at HKIA. We did put in a couple hundred
additional troops to assist with close air support in the
July-August time frame as the Taliban was making gains, but
that was, essentially, a short-term measure. We were still,
the plan was still to stick to the August 31 date and that
was not relitigated to the best of my knowledge.

Senator Tillis: Thank you.

And, Secretary Kahl, I will look forward to our
Committee being able to compile a report based on what we
have learned through these oversight hearings.
Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Tillis.

Senator Warren, please?

Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The U.S. went into Afghanistan almost exactly 20 years ago now. It took us only about 2 months to dislodge the Taliban from power and another 3 months to root out Al Qaeda from the mountains east of Kabul. But then we just stayed. We started nation-building and attempted to create an Afghan National Army. We were used by warlords and other government officials to target their enemies, not our enemies. We had little understanding of the underlying political dynamics.

We went into places like Pesh and the Korangal Valley in search of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda and created new enemies, instead. Wesley Morgan's, The Hardest Place, details how those areas were actually not fertile ground for the Taliban before our arrival, but that with each civilian we accidentally killed, and we killed many, we drove their friends and their families into the arms of the Taliban.

The opium fields created another dilemma. We would bomb or otherwise destroy the opium crops and drive those farmers into the arms of the Taliban or we would allow the opium to grow and watch the Taliban shake down the farmers and use the proceeds to finance their operations or we would
give the farmers fertilizer to grow something else and then watch the farmers sell the fertilizer to the makers of IEDs.

On top of all of that, we flooded the country with billions of dollars, fueling the epidemic corruption that was undermining the very legitimacy of the Afghan Government that we were trying to prop up.

So, Dr. Kahl, what do you believe has been the impact of U.S. actions in Afghanistan on the conditions that allowed the Taliban and Al Qaeda to regroup and gain strength?

Dr. Kahl: So, I think, Senator, the stories and examples that you just used, I think, strongly suggests that we have never known as much about Afghanistan as we thought we did. I think the Secretary testified that we didn't have a 20-year strategy in Afghanistan and we had 21-year plans. All the zigzagging, the examples on the counternarcotics front that you provided are illustrative of that.

I think that we made some progress in Afghanistan. I think living conditions for many were improved. I think access to schooling for women and girls was improved. I think things got better, but a lot of the deep, structural challenges that Afghanistan had, its tribal structure, its endemic corruption, the fact that it has never had a long history of a strong, central government that could impose its will on the hinterlands of the country, we were not able
to overcome any of that. And the Taliban were fearsome fighters who were going to fight forever. And so, I think those were realities that we were not able to overcome.

Senator Warren: And I only want to push back on one point. I understand that we can point to women made progress in the country and they may be losing a part of that, but I think it is hard to describe, overall, that things got better in Afghanistan.

Who was caught in the middle of all of this violence? Who watched various government officials enrich themselves through corruption? Who suffered the most?

Innocent Afghan civilians.

The Costs of War Project at Brown University estimates that approximately 47,000 Afghan civilians were killed, along with another 66,000 Afghan military and police. And while all of this was happening, while we were creating the very conditions that were used to justify our continued presence, military officials came before this Committee, one after another, time after time, and said, we are making progress. We are turning the corner.

General Milley told this Committee last month that our presence would have been needed indefinitely.

Dr. Kahl, do you agree with that assessment?

Dr. Kahl: Yes.

Senator Warren: And what would that have meant for the
1 Taliban and Al Qaeda?
2
3 Dr. Kahl: It would have meant that we would have had
4 thousands of people, probably more than 2,500 over time, as
5 the ANDSF continued to lose, or we took casualties. That
6 was, at least, the President's assessment. We would have
7 been spending tens of billions of dollars every year and
8 also sacrificing our servicemembers and our participation in
9 the war and the costs that you described would have
10 continued.
11
12 Senator Warren: And I would argue that if our presence
13 would have been required indefinitely, that casts grave
14 doubt on the years of military assessments that we were ever
15 making progress here. This whole enterprise was a catch-22
16 and it should humble everyone in this room. It should cause
17 all of us to reflect on how badly everyone got it wrong.
18 And above all, it should be a call for Congress, and this
19 Committee, in particular, to start exercising more oversight
20 of the Pentagon during ongoing military operations, instead
21 of waiting until it is over and then politically
22 advantageous to do so.
23
24 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
25
26 Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Warren.
27
28 Senator Cotton, please?
29
30 Senator Cotton: Mr. Kahl, you testified to Senator
31 Tillis that you were not yet sworn in when President Biden
announced his decision to withdraw from Afghanistan. A few weeks ago in our closed session, you had dismissedly told Senator Ernst that you were on your couch during that period.

While you were on your couch, were you preparing for your confirmation hearing and then to take the office that you now hold?

Dr. Kahl: It was after my confirmation hearing and I was preparing as best I could by reading the newspaper and open source materials. I was not in the Pentagon.

Senator Cotton: From the time you were nominated until the time you were confirmed, did you speak with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan?

Dr. Kahl: I don't believe so.

Senator Cotton: Never once?

Dr. Kahl: No. I was under instruction not to do anything that would presume confirmation.

Senator Cotton: Okay. But you were following the news through open sources.

At what point did you become aware of President Biden's decision to withdraw all of our troops in Afghanistan by September 11?

Dr. Kahl: On April 14.

Senator Cotton: When he announced it to the nation?

Dr. Kahl: Yes, sir.
Senator Cotton: From your couch, what was your opinion on whether we should withdraw all those troops or whether we should remain some residual troop presence in Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: Well, I think as I said in my testimony during my confirmation hearing, I think it was in exchange with Senator Holly, I was supportive of a conditions-based drawdown, conditioned most prominently on a peace agreement between the Afghan Government and the Taliban.

Senator Cotton: And did President Biden's decision to withdraw all troops by September 11 comport with that conditions-based drawdown?

Dr. Kahl: It did not.

Senator Cotton: Once you were confirmed, did you express a personal opinion similar to what this Committee has heard from Secretary Austin and Generals Miller, McKenzie, and Milley, that we should maintain a small residual troop presence in Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: Well, by the time I came in office, the debate had moved on. The President had made his decision and we were executing on that decision.

I was involved in what our presence should look like at the U.S. embassy and at the airport, to make sure that we could safeguard the embassy, and I was involved in the oversight of the retrograde and NEO planning.

Senator Cotton: So, you did or did not have a personal
opinion on that matter?

Dr. Kahl: My personal opinion never changed, but by the time I came into office, the President had made his decision and we were moving out on that decision.

Senator Cotton: Did you agree that September 11 was an appropriate date by which to withdraw?

Dr. Kahl: I have no insight into why that date was picked.

Senator Cotton: Since you have been confirmed, you have never once spoken to Secretary Austin or Jake Sullivan or anyone else in the administration about why September 11 was chosen?

Dr. Kahl: I have not.

Senator Cotton: In retrospect, do you believe September 11 was a wise date, by which to withdraw from Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: I don't know.

Senator Cotton: The Biden administration has also said there was no intelligence indicating the Afghan National Army would collapse so quickly.

Were you also surprised by the speed in which the Afghan Security Forces collapsed?

Dr. Kahl: I think we were all surprised by the speed.

Senator Cotton: Are you aware that the intelligence from the intelligence community consistently shortened the
timeline of their assessment of how long the Afghan Government could survive, from a matter of years at the end of last year to a matter of weeks at the end of July?

Dr. Kahl: Yeah, and, in fact, by August, I think on the eve of the fall of Kabul, they were down to days to weeks. But, yes, it went from years, to months to years, to weeks to months, and then to days to weeks.

Senator Cotton: General Miller has testified that in June there was a brief pause at the drawdown and ultimate closure at the Bagram Air Base to decide whether or not they should proceed; obviously, it did proceed.

Was it your opinion in late June, given the conditions you saw in Afghanistan, that the closure of Bagram Air Base should proceed?

Dr. Kahl: It was General Miller's recommendation. My recollection is, you know, the President, of course, had instructed the Department to leave Afghanistan, so there was no scenario in which we were going to leave Afghanistan and not close Bagram Airfield and the residual mission was that the embassy at HKIA, which is where the concentration of a few hundred forces we would have left beyond August, that is where they would have been concentrated.

Senator Cotton: Okay. In 2011, Mr. Kahl, in your role as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, you stated the following, despite the often
exaggerated media narrative that depicts Iraq on the verge
of unraveling, the underlying security situation remains
strong. Unfortunately, not long after that statement, Iraq
was very much on the verge of unraveling. The Islamic State
rose and rampaged across Syria and Iraq, and a third of Iraq
collapsed, which necessitated a new counterterrorist
operation.

You couldn't foresee the unraveling of Iraq. You
didn't foresee the unraveling of Afghanistan.

Are there any other countries that may be about to
cause national security debacles for America that you think
you are not foreseeing now?

Dr. Kahl: I don't know. I have paid pretty close
attention. I think we are focused on the counterterrorism
front on Somalia, the growth of violent extremists in places
like the Sahel. We continue to have to be vigilant in Iraq
and in Syria and in Yemen, and as we have talked about
earlier in this hearing, in Afghanistan, and, of course,
there are even greater challenges when it comes to China,
Russia, Iran, North Korea. So, there is a lot that we have
to focus on.

Senator Cotton: There are many challenges out there.
Let's hope that we foresee them a little bit better than we
have in the past.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Cotton.
Senator Peters, please?

Senator Peters: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Kahl, I would like to start with Bangladesh and the ongoing wave of violence against minority Hindu temples and homes, which is just, yet another reminder that disinformation spread on social media all too often results in real-world violence. Acts of terrorism like these not only threaten innocent civilians, but also the political stability of an ally, with whom we have a long history of cooperation on security, development, and humanitarian assistance, as well as disaster relief.

So, my question for you is, as you consider our strategic interests in a regional security context, how do you prioritize the information domain and can U.S. Security Assistance in South and Central Asia enhance our allies' resilience to information warfare?

It is an issue that I have raised in this room many times with General Nakasone and Admiral Aquilino, as well, but I would love to hear your thoughts.

Dr. Kahl: So, Senator, I agree with you that information and information operations envelope everything. They can enable our adversaries or they can enable violent extremists, whether they be of one sect or religion or ethnicity. I think social media platforms don't do nearly enough to crack down on misinformation and disinformation.
along the lines that you suggested.

I think that there are things that the Department of Defense can do to help our partners, especially in the cyber realm, and also to coordinate with them, like we have in instances in the past in the counter-ISIS campaign, for example, of coordinating to push back on propaganda and disinformation. But a lot of this will also fall outside of DOD's writ.

Senator Peters: So, the Department of Defense does play a pretty vital role. You know, obviously, if you can counter these activities, that ally becomes less vulnerable to external influence. We see the external influence from both, the Chinese, as well as the Russians, so you would acknowledge that piece of it needs to be something that the Department of Defense is thinking about, in particular?

Dr. Kahl: Absolutely.

Senator Peters: All right. Thank you.

Dr. Kahl, India's policies towards Afghanistan have been conceived largely through the lens of competition and proxy conflict with Pakistan. So, it stands to reason that New Delhi should be no less concerned about the possibility that a Taliban government could benefit anti-Indian terrorist groups, especially those oriented towards Kashmir.

In view of our commitment to joint cooperation and interoperability with this critical partner and the fact
that India is the only designated major defense partner of the United States, I believe it is important for us to understand how its view towards Afghanistan has, and will, evolve. So, if you could please discuss this, but before you answer that question, I am not asking you to speak for an ally, just for your thoughts or any insights that you have gained from co-chairing the U.S.-India Defense Policy Group earlier this month.

Dr. Kahl: Yes, thank you.

I have had a number of encounters to include the one you just mentioned with my Indian colleagues. I would say a couple of things. One is, as I am sure you are aware, they are concerned about the situation in Afghanistan. They are concerned about the intersection between instability there and their counterterrorism concerns. They want to work with us on those issues; sharing intelligence, cooperating where we can.

But I would actually, Senator, I think in line with your question, I would zoom out. I think that there is a tremendous convergence between U.S. and Indian national interests right now that provides a lot of opportunity for us to cooperate with Indian, not just on Afghanistan and counterterrorism, but on broader, regional security questions in the Indian Ocean, and as it relates to the broader Indo-Pacific.
Senator Peters: Thank you.

General Mingus, prior to the Taliban's takeover, Russia bolstered its military and security posture in Central Asia. Regional military bases and the leadership of the Collective Security Treaty Organization make Russia the primary security guarantor against spillover from Afghanistan into Central Asia.

So, my question for you is, could this necessitate some kind of deconfliction mechanism for our "over the horizon" operations, similar to what we used in Syria?

General Mingus: Senator, I think we can probably go into a little bit more detail in the closed session, but the relationship with Russia, the Central Asia States, the next census of our counterterrorist goals and objectives there are all intertwined, and we can go into more detail.

Senator Peters: I will look forward to that.

Thank you, gentlemen, for your answers.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Peters.

Let me recognize Senator Cramer.

And I am going to depart for the vote, which is ongoing, and ask Senator King to recognize appropriately in my absence. Thank you.

Senator Cramer?

Senator Cramer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Senator
Inhofe.

And, thank you, gentlemen, for being here.

As I have been listening to all of this, I am struck by the fact that several people have referenced the miscalculation of things; whether it is the intelligence community, you know, through the intelligence itself or analysis of the intelligence or the communication of intelligence, it does seem like for the last 20 years or so, we have been miscalculating on the wrong side, the capabilities for whether it is for Afghanistan and Iraq to reconstitute or ISIS or ISIS-K in Afghanistan.

And I don't know what the answer is going forward, but, you know, management of expectations sometimes becomes part of the formula, I am afraid, and I worry a little bit about that, you guys. And that is to say, maybe I will put it in the form of a question for you, Secretary Kahl, and this is just an honest, raw, almost spontaneous question.

Do you feel whether it is just a feeling or whether it is deliberate, do you get a sense of political pressure in your job to communicate something other than the worst news, you know, possible at any given moment? I know there is not a strategic advantage to that from a military standpoint, but, politically, do you feel that as a political nominee?

Dr. Kahl: I have never felt that, personally, and I try to call it as I see it. But I do think it is true what...
you said at the outset, which is on a number of issues there has been, as it relates to Afghanistan, there have been serial miscalculation, probably over 2 decades.

Senator Cramer: Yeah. And there is obviously a lot of consequence to that. And like I said, we can have a longer time, sometime about how to do better, obviously.

I am just going to get to one point related to the miscalculation of ISIS-K and maybe talk about what we do know or what you might know, if we can talk about it here, and if not, later in the closed session. I mean, how financially healed is ISIS-K, and as part of that calculation, obviously, that is a big part of it. How well off are they, financially, do you think?

Dr. Kahl: You know, I don't have a precise number of what is in the bank. I don't think they are nearly as well-resourced as ISIS in Iraq and Syria were back in the heyday, you know, think the kind of 2014-2015 time frame when ISIS controlled all those oil wells and had, you know, a billion dollars of annual revenue. It is nothing like that.

I think for the moment, ISIS-K is mostly focused on creating havoc within Afghanistan, but they do have a cadre of a few thousand folks, some of which would love to conduct external attacks. ISIS-K is obviously the link to the broader ISIS network globally, and so I think we have to be vigilant that a subset of ISIS-K could develop the resources
and the capability to strike outward toward the U.S. homeland, and as General Mingus said, we have to be poised to disrupt that so that, that never comes to pass.

Senator Cramer: So, regarding your statement about raise havoc within, obviously, that can be part of the strategy to, I don't know, access generosity and acquire both, financial resources and recruitment resources. I mean, how do you sense that is going for them?

Dr. Kahl: I have not seen a lot of evidence that they, you know, going back to the Iraq example, you know, ISIS was able to knock off a bank in Mosul and seize hundreds of millions of dollars of Iraqi money. There has been no version of that that I am aware of.

I also think that the Taliban is pretty committed to going after ISIS-K. I don't think there is a willpower question there. You know, I Taliban capability to be determined, but they are pretty intent on doing it.

So, I have not seen huge gains by ISIS-K. We have seen them carry out some horrific bombings against minority populations inside Afghanistan. I think we should expect that some of that will continue.

But from a U.S. national interest perspective, we have to be particularly focused on the subset of the threat streams that could emanate outward towards us.

Senator Cramer: Do you worry about all of this, again,
raising havoc, as you put it in what you just described, as
inspiring to others, you know, whether it is, it could be Al
Qaeda for that matter, as well, but whether it is financial
resources or recruitment?

Dr. Kahl: I do think that that is something that we
have to watch. I think the Taliban is not keen for a lot of
Arab foreign fighters and others to flow into Afghanistan,
frankly, for either Al Qaeda or ISIS-K. I do think we have
to look about how events in Afghanistan or anywhere else in
the world, it could be Nigeria, it could be Somalia, it
could be Yemen, it could be Syria, could have a galvanizing
effect on the internet and elsewhere that inspires recruits.
And I know that the Department of Homeland Security and our
intelligence community is pretty focused on that.

Senator Cramer: General, anything you would add to any
of that?

General Mingus: If you look at kind of how we parse a
violent extremist organization out and how you analyze our
ensuing level efforts, the threat itself, whether it is
internally or externally focused, does it have host-nation
capacity that can interdict that, the will and the intent
and the capacity and the capability.

Right now, as Dr. Kahl pointed out, they are internally
focused and the capacity and capability to be externally
focused is still limited. Our efforts in the months going
ahead and as we continue to improve our "over the horizon" architecture is to ensure that that external capability never comes to fruition.

Senator Cramer: Thank you both. Thank you.

Senator King: [Presiding.] On behalf of the Chair, Senator Rosen, via Webex.

Senator Rosen: Well, thank you, Senator King. I appreciate that; of course, Ranking Member Inhofe, as well, for convening this critically important hearing on security in Afghanistan.

I also want to, once again, thank our troops who served our nation there no nearly 20 years and, of course, their families who love them and serve alongside with them.

As we look ahead to the future of security in South and Central Asia, we must also take stock of how we got to this point. We have 20 years of decisions in Afghanistan to evaluate. Plenty of responsibility to go around, particularly, to the prior administration, which sets us on the path to capitulation to the Taliban; nonetheless, it remains frustrating and shameful that over the past few months, despite our efforts to save lives and bring vulnerable individuals to freedom, we have failed so many. For this, the American people deserve accountability and they demand answers.

Like others on this committee, I am also concerned
about the regional implications of our withdrawal on
security, counterterrorism, and American interests.

So, I would like to follow-up on some of the questions
that I asked Secretary Austin last month, but which he
didn't have time to answer at that moment, so about our
ability to combat terrorism in the region now that we no
longer have a "boots on the ground" presence in Afghanistan.

So, to both of you, Secretary Kahl and General Mingus,
what is our plan for executing an enduring counterterrorism
strategy that will be able to fully address and counter the
influence of the violent extremist organizations that
everyone is talking about in Afghanistan and how has this
changed now that our Afghan partners are no longer in
control of the country?

I guess we could start, General, we could start with
you.

General Mingus: Yes, ma'am.

First, I would start with no two of these organizations
are the same. Each one of them has to be looked at
independently. In those variables that I talked about, what
is the ensuing level of U.S. effort to ensure that you
continue to disrupt and degrade so they don't pose a threat,
either to our partners or our U.S., our homeland?

We look at, from my perspective on the military side,
the resources necessary to be able to prosecute and continue
to disrupt and degrade, and we move those based on recommendations that come up from the combatant commanders, through the Chairman, to the Secretary of Defense, to ensure that from an authorities and a resources standpoint, we are postured to be able to do that.

In this session, before we go to closed, I can say that we continue to routinely conduct operations in Syria and Iraq and other places where, like, these threats are emanating to make sure that they are not there.

In terms of Afghanistan, we continue to mature that, but we are going to talk in a few minutes in terms of what the specifics assets that are applied to that.

And Dr. Kahl, I will defer to him in terms of his thoughts on the broader strategy for violent extremist organizations.

Senator Rosen: Thank you.

Dr. Kahl: I think in Afghanistan, as it relates to the problem set there, you need to think of it in terms of layers. So, ideally, you would have partners on the ground. That doesn't happen. That is not the case in Afghanistan. This isn't the first time where that has been the case. Libya is a good example of where we were able to knock ISIS back pretty hard in Libya in the kind of 2019 time frame without boots on the ground, and we can talk about that more in the closed session.
But as it relates to Afghanistan, we have these assets in the Gulf that we are projecting ISR into. We have national technical means, SIGINT imagery, et cetera, that gives us insight into these organizations.

We are sharing intelligence with regional actors and international partners who share our counterterrorism objectives. We are seeking to build out a more robust ecosystem for "over the horizon" CT, which would include regional players. We are in conversations with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and others and, again, we can talk about more in the closed session.

I also think we, to Senator Peters' point, we also need to think that this isn't just what we are doing on the ground in these places, but what we are doing in the cyber realm to disrupt their activities, their finances, what we are doing through sanctions, what we are doing through information operations. There is a lot that isn't kinetic.

Senator Rosen: Well, I want to kind of build on that, Secretary. How do you assess the collapse of the Afghan Government, the effect on ISIS and Al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria, do you think Afghanistan is going to see a surge of foreign fighters coming in?

Dr. Kahl: I think it is possible and we need to be vigilant against that possibility. My read, at least, based on the intelligence community's assessment, is the Taliban
is not keen to see a large number of Arab foreign fighters, in particular, come in to Afghanistan to kind of repopulate either ISIS-K or Al Qaeda; in particular, ISIS-K, because as I mentioned earlier, the Taliban and ISIS-K are mortal enemies.

Senator Rosen: Thank you. I see that my time is just about expired, so I will yield back. Thank you.

Chairman Reed: [Presiding.] Thank you, Senator Rosen. Now, let me recognize Senator Sullivan, please.

Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, gentlemen.

I want to talk the issue of Taiwan and our policy there. Mr. Secretary, 20 years ago, President Bush had said in an interview that the full force of the U.S. military would come and defend Taiwan.

A prominent U.S. Senator in an op-ed was very critical. He said, in this case, President Bush's inattention to detail has damaged the U.S. credibility with our allies, sown confusion throughout the Pacific Rim. Words matter, this prominent senator said; of course, that was Senator Biden.

Last week or two weeks ago, his words have dramatically sown confusion on this very sensitive issue. I was just out in the INDOPACOM region. The men and women in the military are doing a great job preparing for contingencies, military
contingencies.

But the President said, we are going to defend Taiwan, publicly. Is that our new policy?

Dr. Kahl: The White House clarified that the President wasn't trying to establish new policy. I think the policy remains that it was established under the Taiwan Relations Act.

Senator Sullivan: So, the President's statement was incorrect?

Dr. Kahl: I will defer to the White House. The White House --

Senator Sullivan: Well, you are the Secretary of Defense for Policy, so?

Dr. Kahl: From the White House, the view is that our policy remains that under the Taiwan Relations Act, which is that we are prepared to ensure that Taiwan can defend itself and that we also have the capabilities to deter and prevent coercion across the strait.

Senator Sullivan: So, do you agree with President Biden 20 years ago when he criticized President Bush, saying that his statement and his inattention to detail, words matter, has damaged U.S. credibility with our allies and sown confusion throughout the Pacific Rim?

Dr. Kahl: I see no evidence that our allies are confused about our resolve on Taiwan or China or anything
else. I have engaged with our Indo-Pacific allies and partners repeatedly. They know that the Department and the U.S. Government treats China as the pacing challenge. That Taiwan is the pacing scenario.

Senator Sullivan: Let me talk about that.

Dr. Kahl: We are doing everything to get after that.

Senator Sullivan: Let me talk about that. This is our budget, relative to China's budget.

[Chart.]

Senator Sullivan: When national Democrats get into office, unfortunately, they cut Defense spending. You see the blue is our cuts during the Obama years. The blue up there is the increase that Republicans and the Trump administration put to our budget.

But one thing is certain: China keeps spending 10, 14 percent increases in GDP growth.

Can I see the next slide?

[Chart.]

Senator Sullivan: So, the one issue I keep hearing about with our allies is this, the prioritization of our military. If you look at the Biden budget, a six-trillion-dollar budget, the two agencies that they actually cut, they are proposing to cut is DOD and Homeland Security. Those are cuts. That is your budget. That is what matters to the Chinese and our allies, more than anything. That is
President Biden's budget. That is Bernie Sanders' budget. That is Senator Schumer's budget.

But something happened recently, Mr. Secretary. This Committee and the House Committee rebuke that pretty dramatically, the budgets that we have put forward in the NDAA, and the House version of the NDAA increases Defense spending by a real increase of 3 percent. That would be moving from about $715 billion to $740 billion.

Does the Department now agree with what, in a very bipartisan way, this Committee and the House Armed Services Committee said, we shouldn't do that; that is a bad message to the Chinese?

Do you agree with what we did here on this Committee? Are you going to change your budget submission?

Dr. Kahl: It is obviously within Congress' prerogative to do exactly what you did.

We can just say from the Department's perspective, China is the number one pacing challenge. The Secretary of Defense has been laser-focused on it. Our budget --

Senator Sullivan: But do you --

Dr. Kahl: -- is oriented around it.

Senator Sullivan: Do you agree with it? Do you agree with this? Do you agree with what we did in the Committee?

I know it is our prerogative, of course. I am asking you --
Dr. Kahl: I agree that we should be spending significant resources to get after China as the pacing challenge.

Senator Sullivan: General, what about you? I know it is a difficult issue because you have to support the President's budget.

I know that the members of the uniformed military don't support it, but they have to constitutionally. I get that. But in your personal opinion, would you rather have the House and the Senate's seven-hundred-and-forty-billion top line or the Biden administration's seven-hundred-and-fifteen-billion top line?

General Mingus: My personal opinion is, yes, given the modernization bills and the force design and force structure challenges that we are going to have in the future, I agree.

Senator Sullivan: With the 740?

General Mingus: Predictable, sustainable is the most important to the Department of Defense. But when you look at the modernization bills that are coming forward in the coming years, the 740 is a better number than what was proposed in my personal opinion.

Senator Sullivan: Thank you, General, for your honesty on that.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Sullivan.
Now, let me recognize, via Webex, Senator Duckworth.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for your support of the Afghan Study Commission proposal I drafted with a backing of a number of my colleagues who are sitting here today. I am also looking forward to authorizing my Afghan Study Commission as part of the National Defense Authorization Act.

I am further pleased to hear our witnesses confirm their support for an independent commission, because this is just too important to get wrong. If we set too narrow a scope, we will fail to understand the true causes of our barriers or worse, we will learn the wrong lessons. If we don't look at the role of all government agencies involved and only look at DOD, we will similarly miss important conclusions.

If we simply settle for, yet, another report without incurring a truly non-partisan, independent body to make forward-looking recommendations, then we won't have done our duty to prevent future generations from repeating past mistakes. And if we don't resource a commission appropriately or if we rush the commission's work because we want to look like we are taking action, but we don't really want to commit to doing the work thoroughly, then we will have wasted everyone's time. After listening to today's hearing, I am even more convinced we need a non-partisan,
independent commission to examine the entire scope of the war in Afghanistan.

General Mingus, thank you for expressing your support for an independent commission to study the entire span of the war in Afghanistan. Can you please elaborate on why existing lessons-learned exercises are not sufficient and what further lessons could be examined by an independent commission looking across government agencies? How would this benefit future strategic planners and policymakers?

General Mingus: Thank you, ma'am.

I think, and you alluded too much of this, when you look at, and General Milley shared some of these a couple of weeks ago, but just from the mission sets, we started off with a counterterrorism mission, which moved into a stability mission, which moved into a nation-building mission. We invaded Iraq 2 years into the operations in Afghanistan. We never dealt with the sanctuary in Pakistan adequately. Corruption has been discussed several times. The legitimacy, how we mirror-imaged both, the Government and the Afghan National Security Forces. We didn't understand the culture as well as we should have. The will, that component of it, as well.

But when you take all of those, and there are several that I am omitting, that is much larger than just a DOD or interagency thing. It has got to be a whole-of-government
Senator Duckworth: Thank you.

Dr. Kahl, thank you, as well, for your statement of support. Before you were confirmed, much of your recent work focused on analysis of American grand strategy, post 9/11. So, I know you have been thinking about many different agencies that shape our national security.

Did the failures from Afghanistan result from the actions of the DOD alone or did the actions of the Department of State, the intelligence community, and multiple Congresses and administrations also impact the event for outcome in Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: Well, I think it is important to have a scope and scale that matches the actual war. So, it needs to look holistically at 20 years. It shouldn't just look at the DOD involvement, but the interagency involvement, what we were doing diplomatically from an economic and development perspective, from an intelligence and counterterrorism perspective, to include those pieces that are outside of DOD's lane. But, frankly, I think it also is an opportunity, Senator, to explore the mentality, the overall approach to foreign policy that we had after 9/11 and how that really manifested in 20 years in Afghanistan.
Senator Duckworth: Thank you.

So, I am going to ask you the same question that I just asked General Mingus: How could this work of such a broad committee of an independent commission benefit future strategic planners and policymakers?

You just mentioned that we understand the mentality of what happened post-9/11 and as we were making these decisions. How could the lessons learned from this type of independent commission benefit future strategic CRT planners and policymakers?

Dr. Kahl: Well, I think it is crucial because it is really a major opportunity to take a holistic view. The Department of Defense will do various reviews with different time frames, but inevitably, we will be looking through our soda straw. Now, it is a big soda straw, but it is a soda straw. The State Department will do the same. The intelligence community will do the same. The NSE might even pull all those threats together, but at the end of the day, there is a wider context and I really think the opportunity to make this bipartisan and to make it independent and to have the scope and scale be appropriate will have tremendous value.

Senator Duckworth: Thank you.

General Mingus: Ma'am, the other thing that I would add that needs to be a part of this, when you look at the
vast nature of the NATO and coalition component of it, there has to be a partner and coalition aspect to that Commission Report.

Senator Duckworth: Very good point, General. I agree with you, because we certainly expected our partners to do a little bit more and they were not as able to help maintain Afghanistan as we had hoped.

So, thank you. Gentlemen, I thank you for your testimony today. Bottom line, for 20 years, we prosecuted this war without a viable strategy. We failed to consider long-term costs and consequences, and if we fail to learn from our history in Afghanistan, we will be doomed to repeat it.

I urge my colleagues to join me and pass my Afghanistan War Commission Act. We owe it to our constituents. We owe it to the veterans who served honorably and the families that lost loved ones, and we owe it to future generations of American servicemembers. Thank you.

Thank you, Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Duckworth.

Let me recognize Senator Scott, please.

Senator Scott: Thank you, Chairman Reed.

General Mingus, given that the President committed to evacuate all the Americans before our military would leave, would you say a successful evacuation would have included
all Americans being evacuated before our troops left?

General Mingus: Defining success is hard and I know this has been talked about and debated, what the President said, with the decision, with the recommendation by the military to leave. But, historically, we have gone back and we looked and I am not even sure that there is an example of where we have done a NEO where we brought all the American citizens out of a given country.

And so given the remote nature of Afghanistan and the various locations of the American citizens, I am not even sure that it is a reasonable expectation that we could have gotten 100 percent out before the 31.

Senator Scott: But the President commit that we were going to get all the American citizens out before we would remove troops.

Do you think it should be the policy of the United States that we will remove the U.S. military and its assets from a hostile country with enemy forces bearing down on us before we evacuate American citizens and partners in the future?

General Mingus: I think it would be hard to quantify a hypothetical, because there were so many variables in this one and no future NEO scenario will be identical. So, the decision and the recommendation by the Joint Chiefs and the Chairman to depart on the 31, took into account the
situation on the ground for this particular situation and it was deemed that the calculus was actually, and the risk to American citizens was actually higher had we stayed beyond the 31, than we did when we left actually on the 31, to include the risk to our troopers that were on the ground at HKIA.

Senator Scott: If you were an American citizen and you listened to the President say that our troops would not leave before American citizens were, all American citizens were evacuated, would you feel like our President and our military let them down?

General Mingus: There may be some that have that view, but I think our commitment to continue to bring American citizens out has been important.

Senator Scott: So, I assume the military leadership understood the risk of removing the military and its assets before evacuating American civilians and our partners.

Did you see the analysis and did you warn the administration of the risk of bringing out troops and our equipment before all Americans were evacuated?

General Mingus: Did we provide that risk?

Senator Scott: Did you provide any, any you warn the administration that if we did it the way it ended up happening, where we brought the troops out first before everybody was evacuated and the fact that we could have
evacuated people earlier and we didn't, did you warn the administration that the path they were going down was putting American citizens at risk?

General Mingus: I know, and I was not present for those conversations, and I was not with the Chairman when he made those recommendations to the President, but I do know that he went prepared even before the NEO part, but the decision to come out in April, I know that he was prepared and armed to provide the risks associated with the withdrawal.

Senator Scott: Did the statements from the Department or the Pentagon choose to rely on the Taliban for security at the airport as we withdrew?

General Mingus: They were a part of that security ecosystem.

Senator Scott: Who made the decision, the State or the Pentagon?

General Mingus: If memory serves, it was a combination of the commanders on the ground up through the chain of command.

Senator Scott: So, the commanders on the ground made by the decision that the Taliban would do the security, knowing the Taliban's history?

General Mingus: It was deemed that it had to be a relationship that we had to work through and whether they
had stayed on the outside of Kabul or on the outskirts of HKIA, once the collapse occurred and the ANSF folded, that was the outer perimeter that was the outer security for forces that were outside where we were at.

Senator Scott: Was the President warned about the risks of relying on the Taliban for security around the airport?

General Mingus: I am not aware whether he was informed of that or not.

Senator Scott: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you very much, Senator Scott.

Now let me recognize Senator Blumenthal, please.

Senator Blumenthal: Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for your continuing attention to these issues and having this hearing today.

Gentlemen, last week I had the opportunity to visit Quantico Camp Upshur. As of the date of my visit, Camp Upshur housed 4,410 Afghan men, women, children who were able to escape Afghanistan. The camp has a maximum capacity of about 5,000 people; a number that it will probably soon reach.

I want to, first of all, commend the extraordinary work done by the United States Marine Corps at Quantico and their partners from other military branches, as well as the civilians from the State Department, CDC, and others.
But during our briefings there, we had the opportunity to not only meet those Marines who were hosting these Afghan guests, they call them guests, quite correctly, but also representatives of the civilian agencies charged with their resettlement. And we were fortunate to speak with the people housed at Camp Upshur, the refugees who have escaped and who have managed to avoid the torture or death that is threatened to many who remain there.

I met with a family of five that were able to escape on charter flights from Mashori Sharif. They left after withdrawal had been completed, our withdrawal of our military. These were flights that my office was involved in facilitating. So, I was just incredibly moved to meet with this family. It happened by coincidence that this family was chosen to meet with me. They were the beneficiaries of the charter flights that my office worked day and night to facilitate. Sadly, more members of their very family are hiding and seeking assistance so they can leave Afghanistan; literally, brothers and other family members who are in grave danger. More needs to be done, in short, to help these people escape and keep faith with them.

After my visit to Camp Upshur, I have, still, significant concerns about the case of resettlement. We were tragically slow in planning the execution of the evacuation mission, the airlift of 120,000 people that was
accomplished, even though many, many remain. We cannot, again, rely on optimistic expectations. We must plan for reality and be ready to use, be ready for the worst-case situation.

We were told that the Afghans brought to Camp Upshur would be departing for resettlement in 3 to 4 weeks. I don't believe that number can possibly be accurate, 3 to 4 weeks. When I had visited, there had already been 52 births; a joyous occasion for sure, but one that prevents not only the mother and child from being able to travel and be resettled, but the entire family unit. That is just an example of the impediments to resettlement.

And I think we need to focus on the fact that the pace of resettlement, very simply, is not keeping up with the pace of new arrivals. As these locations reach maximum capacity, we face a looming crisis, the processing of our Afghan guests is completed quickly, 1 or 2 days, for intake. At that point, they await resettlement opportunities.

Currently, the weather is good. It is the fall, and a temperate one at that, but it will change and even with the heating in those tents, life will become more and more difficult. The tents and other expeditionary structures used for housing and feeding people do not currently afford the kind of heat that is necessary if the temperature drops. This inevitability may force closing of the tents at Pioneer
City, which currently houses approximately 1,000 individuals.

So, before my time expires, I just want to close by saying, we face 75 to 80,000 seeking resettlement. Of those Afghan refugees, a total of 120,000 evacuated, we have failed to provide the resources so far that will enable effective resettlement. It is a looming crisis and I am going to ask for your response in writing since my time has expired as to how medical care, housing, and other services will be provided at the camps and what will be done to ensure more expeditious resettlement. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.

Senator Blackburn, please?

Senator Blackburn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Under Secretary Kahl, you are going to recognize my questions, because I asked them at the hearing in September and you didn't want to answer them then, so let's take another round, another go at it.

So, as I view the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy or in the time between President Biden's inauguration and your confirmation, did you ever have a conversation with General Scott Miller about the future of Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: No.

Senator Blackburn: You did not, okay.
During your September testimony on the topic, you told Senator Ernst that you basically didn't have an opportunity to participate in the decision process on Afghanistan because you were at home sitting on your couch. We are all aware that you were pending confirmation prior to late-April, but were you actually at home sitting on the couch or were you involved in the President's decision calculus on when and how to withdraw from Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: I had no interactions with the administration because I was trying not to presume confirmation.

Senator Blackburn: Okay. Were you ever part of a ROC walk in which a General Miller was in the room?

Dr. Kahl: Yeah, the ROC drill happened on May 8, about a week after I took office.

Senator Blackburn: So, you were present for that May ROC walk?

Dr. Kahl: The ROC drill on the retrograde, I was.

Senator Blackburn: Okay. Thank you.

What we are concerned about, and I what I hear from Tennesseans about is that you all have a tendency to point the finger at the Trump administration and say they didn't know how to lead, but you have taken over and what you have done is to fail to lead.

And the DOD leadership is something that people in
Tennessee have a lot of concern about. They are seeing apathy. They are perceiving apathy. And they are perceiving a self-righteous indignation that the individuals or the military would question you all.

So, in this vein, I want to read for you, portions of a letter that I received in my office this week. And I am reading from the letter.

Thank you for your work in trying to find the answers about the horrible Afghanistan withdrawal. I saw a news report yesterday that the suicide bomber who took my son's life and 12 others was actually a prisoner at Bagram. So, then, not only did we leave all of our military equipment, but we also just left these terrorist prisoners in Bagram and now we find out that the Taliban just released them, which is not a surprise.

I am not expressed my anger or political thoughts through this grieving time, but now I hear that this coward had been locked up and someone on our side made the decision to just let these bad guys evaporate into the wind. It really frustrates me beyond belief.

Please, continue to try to find out who is responsible for the decision to run from Bagram. It sounds like that decision is directly related to the death of my son and the 12 other U.S. servicemembers.

Now, I am duty-bound to my constituents, to
Tennesseans, and to these military families from our state who have reached out to me about this horrific debacle in Afghanistan. So, I need to ask you a few questions, and please bear in mind that you are not speaking to me, that you are speaking to them. So, let's throttle any animosity that you have toward me and speak to the Tennesseans, to our servicemembers that want these answers.

Who, specifically, is responsible for the decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Bagram Airfield?

Dr. Kahl: When the President decided that we would withdraw from Afghanistan, we were always going to leave Bagram as a consequence of leaving Afghanistan.

Senator Blackburn: So, it was the President's decision?

Dr. Kahl: The President directed that we leave Afghanistan, then General Miller executed a retrograde that included the leaving of Bagram Airfield.

Senator Blackburn: Okay. So, the President. Who, specifically, is responsible for the decision to leave terrorist prisoners in Bagram, despite the impending advance of the Taliban forces?

Dr. Kahl: So, Parwan Prison, which is the prison you are speaking of, isn't actually at the airfield; it is off the airfield and it was transferred to the Afghans in 2013. So, it wasn't part of the retrograde to transfer that
prison; it had been transferred 8 years prior.

Senator Blackburn: Okay. So, you are saying that leaving Bagram had absolutely no impact at all on the prisoners being freed. Is that the position of this administration, that you had nothing to do with this?

Dr. Kahl: I mean, I think people of good character and good judgment can disagree. I think that the Afghan National Security Forces had control of the prison and they were handed control of Bagram Airfield. So, when the Taliban overran those forces, they took over both, the airfield and the prison.

Senator Blackburn: Yes. So, that was a decision made by the President to give up Bagram Airfield and to execute a speedy withdrawal from Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: The decision was to leave Afghanistan, which means we were going to leave Bagram and General Miller's retrograde plan included leaving Bagram.

Senator Blackburn: Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Blackburn.

Senator Kelly, please?

Senator Kelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Secretary Kahl, countries like China have long benefited from our presence in Afghanistan and the stability that we provided in the region. The conclusion of U.S.-led operations has forced countries in the region to reassess
their policies towards Afghanistan and nations, including China and Russia, are developing closer relationships with the Taliban. China, in particular, has sought to call attention to aid donations and pushed the U.N. to lift sanctions, without asking of much accountability from the Taliban.

So, Secretary Kahl, how would you assess China's intentions and priorities with respect to Afghanistan and what concerns do you have for how these could impact U.S. interests?

Dr. Kahl: There are important questions. I think China is actually quite worried at the moment. They did benefit from our presence in Afghanistan, despite the fact that they rail against our military interventions across the world. They are worried about growing instability on their border, because, remember, China does share a narrow border with Afghanistan. They are also, frankly, worried that our withdrawal from Afghanistan will allow us to refocus elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, in checking back the challenge that they present. We know that.

You are absolutely right that China is trying to influence events in Afghanistan, largely through economic levers. They are not able to do that unilaterally because of U.N. sanctions. It is a policy of the Biden administration not to recognize the Taliban government or
lift those sanctions unless a bunch of conditions are met and that the Taliban aren't currently meeting.

Senator Kelly: And how should U.S. policy towards Afghanistan and China's activities there fit into the broader context of our strategic competition with China?

Dr. Kahl: Well, I think we do have to be mindful of competing with China in a lot of places. I would not put Afghanistan at the top of that list.

First and foremost, we have to focus on the Western Pacific and on places like the Indian Ocean. There are also places in Africa where the Chinese are seeking to turn dual-use facilities into military bases and other things.

So, I think we should have an eye on what China is doing on Afghanistan, but I would not make it the focal point of my strategy in checking back Beijing's aspirations.

Senator Kelly: All right. Well, thank you.

General Mingus, the U.S. military relationship with our allies in South and Central Asia is critical to regional stability and our national security and many of these relationships are strengthened through our continued commitment to joint exercises and training. And these activities can also serve as a deterrent to regional aggression.

We have continued to see Russia-led exercises with regional actors, including a joint-military exercise near
the northern Afghanistan border with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan this summer. Similarly, China and Tajikistan conducted a joint-military exercise in August.

From an operational standpoint, are we doing enough militarily to train, equip, and prepare our South and Central Asia partners?

General Mingus: Senator, thank you.

And that is one of the things that Dr. Kahl has kind of alluded to that we would like to talk about in the closed session in terms of the recent trips that was just made in terms of the outcomes of that. But we are looking at ways to expand our training opportunities and those kinds of things in Central Asian States.

Senator Kelly: All right. Well, I am looking forward to hearing more about that in the closed session.

Dr. Kahl, I want to come back to you for a second here and talk a little bit more about China and how, well, actually, let's switch here and talk about a Taliban for a second. In media interviews and in public discourse, the Taliban have attempted to downplay the threat posed by ISIS, including the recent attack on worshippers in Kunduz. At the same time, they have tried to play up their own efforts to counter ISIS, pointing to several arrests and suggesting that they have averted ISIS plans.

What can we learn from the fact that the Taliban is
more interested in putting a positive spin on its ability to govern than they are in working to address known threats to both, Afghan and international security?

Dr. Kahl: Yes, Senator. First of all, I don't think we should trust the Taliban, whatever they say. I think we have to watch what they do. I think the only thing we can have any confidence or faith in is that they will try to advance their own narrow interests.

I think as it relates to the ISIS-K problem set, they do not have an interest in ISIS-K establishing a beachhead in Afghanistan, either to destabilize Afghanistan or to conduct external operations. So, I actually believe that the Taliban is highly motivated to go after ISIS-K.

Their ability to do so, I think, is to be determined.

Senator Kelly: Have we seen any success? Is there any intel that you can talk about that shows any success with them going after ISIS-K?

Dr. Kahl: So, I think we have seen instances of them going after ISIS-K. During the war, of course, there were ferocious battles at times between the Taliban and ISIS-K, as well. But, you know, we, I do want to keep in mind for this committee that as it relates to the threat streams that we are most focused on from ISIS-K, it is the ones that might be externally projected out from Afghanistan, we have not yet seen those threat streams yet materialize and we
would not count on the Taliban to be the ones responsible for disrupting for that. We will have our own unilateral capabilities to do that.

Senator Kelly: And what can we do right now to contain that threat?

Dr. Kahl: Well, I think we should continue to engage the Taliban on these questions. We did have a delegation in Doha a couple of weeks ago, a high-level delegation to, you know, to hold the Taliban accountable for their commitments under the February 2020 Doha Agreement to not allow Afghanistan to be a safe haven for international terrorism.

The Taliban tell us that they remain committed to that, but like I said, it is not just their words that matter; it is going to be their actions.

Senator Kelly: Well, thank you, Dr. Kahl.
And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Kelly.

Senator Hawley, please?

Senator Hawley: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Dr. Kahl, I understand on August 18, the Consul General in Kabul sent the following email to his team. I am going to quote it for you, quoting now:

President Biden phoned Ambassador Wilson with the following directive about who to clear to board the evacuation flights: number one, anyone with a valid form of
ID should be given to go on a plane. If that person plausibly falls into the categories. We will evacuate U.S. citizens and LPRs, plus their immediate families, LES, plus their immediate families, those entitled to an SIV, and Afghans at risk. Number two, families, including women and children should be allowed through and held to fill out the planes. Number three, total inflow to the United States must exceed the number of seats available; err on the side of excess. I am still quoting. This guidance provides clear discretion and direction to fill seats and provide special consideration for women and children when we have seats. I expect that C-17 flight volume will increase. End quote.

Are you aware of any guidance from the White House to evacuate Afghans who might plausibly fill out these categories, to fill seats, regardless of whether the passengers actually were eligible or not, and to err on the side of excess. I mean, are you familiar with this directive?

Dr. Kahl: So, our priorities, so I can't speak to that specific engagement, but our priorities in that time frame were, as you mentioned, first and foremost, American citizens and legal permanent residents, Green Card holders, also, locally employed staff at the State Department, but also other agencies and departments, SIVs, and others with
documents.

But it was also the case that as we were bringing forces in, we had excess capacity to bring people out. And to what the President was signaling was, if there are other clearly Afghans at risk that we can safely bring into the airport and get off the airfield, we should do that.

Senator Hawley: But that is not what the email says. The email doesn't say clearly; it says plausibly. It says that the flights need to be filled out. It says that we need to err on the side of excess.

I mean, what I am driving at is we now know that we have major problems with vetting of the people who were brought to this country, who were evacuated and brought to this country. This email seems to indicate that the administration was saying, just fill up the planes. I mean, if they plausibly fall into a category, put them on a plane.

Is that wrong? Is that --

Dr. Kahl: So, vetting was always foremost in our mind, but just keep in mind, Senator, the vetting wasn't happening at HKIA.

Senator Hawley: Where did the vetting happen?

Dr. Kahl: So, all the vetting happened at what we called the lily pads. So, these were --

Senator Hawley: And the vetting consisted of what?

Dr. Kahl: Yeah, so in places like Qatar, Kuwait,
Bahrain, Ramstein, and elsewhere; essentially, teams of DHS, CBP, DOD would collect biometric information, fingerprints, et cetera, biographic information, and then that information would be fed through the NCTC, CBP, and FBI databases and only people who had cleared that vetting, so that they didn't have contacts with the Taliban or the Haqqanis or Al Qaeda or ISIS, were to be manifested to be brought to the United States, and people who required further processing were not brought to the United States.

Senator Hawley: Was there ever any in-person vetting done?

Dr. Kahl: Well, all of this was in-person, in the lily pads.

Senator Hawley: Well, those aren't interviews; that is just fingerprinting.

So, were there ever any in-person that is a screening, was there actually any vetting done, where you sit down and you ask a person questions?

Dr. Kahl: So, it is a good question.

For those where there was any either, there wasn't sufficient information or there was derogatory information, now, keep in mind, the derogatory information could be that you shared the same name with somebody or that your phone number touched a phone number of a phone number. For people where there was any derogatory information then, yes,
follow-up interviews and additional vetting was done.

Senator Hawley: At the lily pads?

Dr. Kahl: Yes.

Senator Hawley: And in the United States, too, or just at the lily pads?

Dr. Kahl: There may have been instances in which people came to the United States, who also received additional vetting, but I would direct you to the DHS to get the full accounting of that.

Senator Hawley: Oh, I am talking to DHS, believe me, and what is interesting is what DHS says is there was never any in-person vetting done anywhere; not at the lily pads, not in the United States.

Your testimony here today, under oath, is there was in-person vetting done. That you sat down and did interviews with them; is that right?

I just want to be clear on this.

Dr. Kahl: So, my understanding is that at the lily pads, so forward --

Senator Hawley: Right.

Dr. Kahl: -- Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, et cetera, that those who popped derogatory information, if they couldn't be cleared because it was some misunderstanding, so, for the example of someone with the same name --

Senator Hawley: Right.
Dr. Kahl: -- if it required further information, there were times where the FBI spoke to those individuals.

Senator Hawley: So, you testified in September that those evacuated, about 6,000 American citizens. You testified in September that the SIVs were about 1,200 or 1,300. That leaves 116,700 people, based on the 124,000 NEO number that you have been offering, 116,700 people who were not citizens, who were not SIVs, and we just don't know much about, who were those people?

Dr. Kahl: Yeah, so, just so we are all working off the same set of numbers, so we evacuated around 2,000 U.S. embassy personnel. We evacuated 5,530 American citizens. We evacuated 3,335 third-country nationals. So, think of that as, you know, somebody who worked for another embassy, not an Afghan. We evacuated, during the NEO, 2,496 SIV holders. And then we evacuated 64,052 other Afghans at risk. Some of those were on our P-1 or P-2 refugee rolls and others were, you know, some of those were, I know every office on Capitol Hill was calling to try to get people out. Whether they had a formal relationship or not, it might have been because they had a relationship with an organization like NDI or, you know, some other NGO. We also got out 2,004 NATO citizens. And we facilitated 44,874 people coming out on non-U.S. aircraft by other folks. So, it is a mix-match of a lot of different categories. About 84
percent of the people we brought out were Afghans at risk of various kinds: SIVs, P-1s, P-2s, or others.

Senator Hawley: My time is expired. The Chairman has been very indulgent. I will have a number of questions for you for the record.

Dr. Kahl: I will take those for the record.

Senator Hawley: Dr. Kahl, there is a lot to sort through here.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Hawley.

Senator Tuberville, please?

Senator Tuberville: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Gentlemen, thank you for your service. Thanks for being here today. I know it has been a long day.

Dr. Kahl, I want to talk a little bit about the Doha Agreement and the timeline. I would think that you would say there was probably around four main parts of the Doha Agreement; one would have been a ceasefire permit and comprehensive. Another condition was withdrawal of American troops, April 12. President Biden said September 11. We have talked about that.

How long was it before the Taliban violated the terms of the Doha Agreement, in your mind?

Dr. Kahl: I think, as General Mingus has already testified, from the very beginning, the only part of the
agreement they stuck with was not attacking U.S. forces.

The rest of the agreement, they did not stick with.

Senator Tuberville: Right. May 1, you know, they did some damage, obviously, over in Afghanistan.

Now, you were in your seat April 27. Given that the Taliban broke their end of the deal so quickly, did you change your policy assessment on May 1?

Dr. Kahl: Well, by the time that I came into office, the decision had already been made, so --

Senator Tuberville: Yeah, but did you change, did you have a change?

Dr. Kahl: My position, which I testified to during my confirmation, was that we should have a conditions-based withdrawal. My personal position never changed, but by the time I came into office, the President had already made his decision and that wasn't going to be relitigated.

Senator Tuberville: But, you know, in the first full month, they kept breaking their promises. And I have a couple of slides here that I just want to show you.

Did things get better in the second month, you know, in June, the Taliban, you know, they captured 69 districts in June and it was starting to ramp-up. Not only did they capture 69 districts, but that month, the Taliban captured 700 trucks, Humvees, dozens of vehicles, and all that kind of stuff.
Did you rethink your policy at that time, given how badly it was ramping up? Did you give your preference upstream, so to speak, to the people that needed to listen?

Dr. Kahl: So, you were right that security situation deteriorated in June. It got worse in July. And, obviously, it got catastrophically worse in August.

We were focused on executing the retrograde, because that was the direction from the President of the United States.

Senator Tuberville: Yeah. All right. Let's move on to July. How many districts did the Taliban capture in July, do you remember?

Dr. Kahl: I don't know off the top of my head, but I have no reason to disagree with the --

Senator Tuberville: I will get it for you. Sixty-four.

Dr. Kahl: -- map behind you.


The President said on July 8, quote, I am briefed daily on the battlefield updates, end quote.

So, President Biden knew how badly it was going, it was ramping up in Afghanistan and, yet, we gave up Bagram Airfield that month, correct?

Dr. Kahl: General Miller's plan for the retrograde called for us to give up Bagram in early July.
Senator Tuberville: Right. By the end of the third month on the job, the Taliban had entered the capitals of Helmand and Herat and they controlled 223 districts.

Dr. Kahl, do you know how many districts there are in Afghanistan?

Dr. Kahl: Well, by that time, it must have been more than half the districts.

Senator Tuberville: There are 407, total, and there are 223 districts that they had overtaken.

So, let's talk about the fourth month on the job, August. After three straight months of losses and bloodshed, did the OSD policy suggest changing course with how bad it was getting?

Dr. Kahl: The President had directed that we leave Afghanistan. There was no set of deliberations about --

Senator Tuberville: But there were Marines that talked back and forth?

Dr. Kahl: So, there were conversations about whether we should position forces to provide more close air support and we did that in the July-August time frame. We put a couple hundred of additional forces into HKIA to do personnel, recovery, and other things, so we could do more airstrikes. But the course of the policy was set in April and we carried out that policy.

Senator Tuberville: But in August it got worse and the
fighting was ramping up. To recap, in 3 and a half months that you were there, due to this administration's, I guess we can call it incompetence, we saw a complete collapse of Afghanistan in that short period of time; a waste of 20 years' of blood and treasure.

Since President Biden took office, America, to me, is less safe. Our allies are less safe. And we, once again, have to confront radical Islamic terrorism somewhere down the road. I just don't understand those 4 months of how we can make a timeline and then we can get away from it.

General Mingus, just a couple quick for you. From the beginning in Afghanistan 20 years ago, can you tell me what time of the year the Taliban traditionally counterattacked our forces.

General Mingus: There is the summer fighting season, which typically starts in the spring. They plan throughout the winter. They build up supplies and those kinds of things. It typically starts in April and May and runs until the fall. But that is not to suggest that there isn't fighting during the winter. It does subside a little bit, but given the mountain passes and the snow and the challenges with, you know, moving about, that is typically why the fighting does subside a little bit in the wintertime.

Senator Tuberville: So, it wouldn't surprise you that
any of our guys would say, listen, we are going to have more fighting in the summer, right, because of the heavy snow. So, why didn't we reduce our presence in the fall and the winter when the weather was worse? I am going to ask both of you real quick.

I know my time is up.

Why wouldn't we have that in that time of year, other than the time of year when they were ready to fight? They were all away from home congregating, ready to do whatever they needed to do to fight and take over Afghanistan. Why wouldn't we not -- was there any talk, Dr. Kahl? Let's go with you, first.

Dr. Kahl: Well, the timeline for the departure was set --

Senator Tuberville: Well, I know that.

Dr. Kahl: -- so I can't, and I wasn't part of those deliberations, so it is not a satisfying answer for you, Senator, but I don't know the rationale beyond that the President calculated that the longer we stayed beyond the deadline established by the Doha Agreement, the higher at risk our forces would be.

Senator Tuberville: Yeah. General, was there any military talk on that, that you can remember?

General Mingus: Sir, there was, and as you know, as the Chairman, General Miller, and General McKenzie, I was
Not present with their personal recommendations, but as they testified, their personal feelings is that the 2,500 should have stayed and should have become a conditions-based withdrawal.

But as Dr. Kahl pointed out, I think what the President was wrestling with was the 1 May, which was extended towards the "end of the summer" kind of deadline and the potential for the recommencing of hostilities with the Taliban, had we stayed any longer than that. I think that was the strategic dilemma.

Senator Tuberville: Thank you both for your service and time.

I apologize, Mr. Chairman. Thank you.

Chairman Reed: Thank you, Senator Tuberville.

The Committee will stand in recess and reconvene in SVC-217 at 2:15 for a closed session. 12:15. I have been corrected, appropriately.

So, the Committee will stand in recess.

[Whereupon, at 12:05 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]