

**AFGHANISTAN 2001 TO 2021:
U.S. POLICIES LESSONS LEARNED**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2021

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:07 a.m., in room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Robert Menendez, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Menendez [presiding], Cardin, Shaheen, Kaine, Booker, Van Hollen, Risch, Johnson, Romney, Paul, Barrasso, Rounds, and Hagerty.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY

The CHAIRMAN. The hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will come to order.

First of all, in fairness to all those who have arrived on time and making sure that you are appropriately listed, and for the order of questioning, we will so recognize that, and I am going to briefly recess until the ranking member arrives.

We are in recess subject to the call of the chair.

[Recess.]

The CHAIRMAN. The committee will come to order. Let me thank our witnesses for bearing with us as the voting takes place.

In August, just before the fall of Kabul, the Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction released a report on the past 20 years of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

SIGAR estimated that the war and reconstruction efforts cost American taxpayers more than \$2 trillion. The war saw the deaths of nearly 2,500 U.S. servicemen and women and more than 20,000 wounded. Tens of thousands of Afghan civilians were killed and countless others were injured, but despite that high cost in blood and treasure, the United States struggled to enact a coherent strategy that would secure Afghan democracy and build strong governing institutions.

We are here today to examine the missteps and miscalculations over the past 20 years that led to the ultimate failure of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. The tragic events of this past summer were the culmination of poor decision making by both Republican and Democratic administrations, going back to 2001.

The failure to cement democratic gains in Afghanistan and to prevent the reemergence of a terrorist safe haven is a collective failure. It is a tragedy with many authors and origins.

We are here today to find out exactly who and what those are. We have a distinguished panel of witnesses before us today. My hope is that they will help us better understand why successive administrations made so many of the same mistakes repeatedly in Afghanistan.

Before turning to our witnesses, let me share my own views on what those mistakes were.

First, the Bush administration took its eye off the ball when it invaded Iraq, diverting desperately needed troops, equipment, and humanitarian assistance from Afghanistan. That's a war that I voted against.

Those resources could have made a difference in preventing the resurgence of the Taliban and building up Afghan governing institutions in their infancy.

Second, the Obama administration adopted a failed counterinsurgency strategy after taking office. I was skeptical from the very beginning that that strategy would work.

More than 33,000 troops were surged into Afghanistan, but given an extremely short time frame, just 18 months, to prepare the Afghan Government to take full control. That withdrawal date was repeatedly delayed as the weaknesses of Afghan institutions and security forces became all too clear.

Throughout the war, every Administration also, unfortunately, bought into the fiction that Pakistan would be a partner in peace in Afghanistan. Instead, Islamabad played a double game, continuing to provide shelter to the Taliban even as militants targeted and killed U.S. troops.

Third, the Trump administration signed a surrender deal with the Taliban that set the stage for precipitous withdrawal. That deal was built on a set of lies, chief among them that the Taliban would sever their connection with al-Qaeda.

Throughout the negotiations, the Trump administration excluded the Afghan Government and kept secret the details of its agreements from our closest allies, many of whom fought and died in the battlefield alongside us.

President Trump even traded away the release of 5,000 hardened Taliban fighters, boosting the militant group on the battlefield this past summer. The political and security environment for our withdrawal was a direct consequence of Trump's surrender deal and we should never forget that.

Finally, throughout the entire war, the executive branch failed to keep Congress adequately informed, particularly when the war was going poorly. Officials of both parties either misled or misrepresented the facts to Congress.

They told us that Afghan Security Forces could assume full responsibility for Afghanistan's security. They told us that the Afghan Government was taking corruption seriously and gaining legitimacy in the provinces. They told us that regional actors like Pakistan were playing a helpful role with respect to the Taliban. None of that was true.

In closing, we are here to learn what mistakes were made in the course of over a 20-year effort in Afghanistan. Only a full accounting of the situation will help us avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

We owe that to the American people. We owe that to our troops. We owe it to those in the public and nonprofit sectors who have dedicated years of their lives to improve Afghan democracy and governance. We owe it to the people of Afghanistan, women and girls, religious and ethnic minorities, who are most affected by our departure.

Let me turn to the distinguished ranking member for his opening comments.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH,
U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO**

Senator RISCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

As Congress wrestles with the fallout from the Administration's Afghanistan withdrawal, we are faced with two responsibilities. One is to look back and reflect on 20 years of conflict and gather lessons learned. These lessons should inform the future use of American power and, more importantly, define its limits.

The collapse of the Afghan army after nearly 20 years of enormous expenditures—enormous expenditures, as the chairman pointed out—calls into question the efficacy of DoD's efforts to build partner capacity.

Is it beneficial to build a foreign military in our own image when it makes them over reliant on U.S. technology and maintenance? What is the durability of these institutions in countries that lack a formal military tradition, lacks a central government, and place a priority on tribe or valley over nation?

The collapse of portions of the Iraqi army in 2014 during the Islamic State onslaught highlighted similar issues. DoD was the lead for training and equipping in both Iraq and Afghanistan and was unable to foster security sector reforms to make these institutions more durable. The State Department must and should take a larger role.

Our inability to effectively address Afghans' corruption hampered our diplomatic development and military efforts. We cannot accept corruption as a cost of doing business. Anti-corruption must be central to strategies in the future.

If we look back in history, I think we have learned a lesson from this. Shortly after World War II, we were very successful in nation rebuilding in both Germany and Japan. After the Korean conflict went on halt we were very successful in South Korea doing the same thing.

We have been unsuccessful since then, and it is important to note that the failures in those efforts were in countries where corruption was endemic to the culture.

That focus on corruption has to be a very important focus in the future as I think it will dictate what the possible success of the country will look like after a conflict.

Additionally, the failure to administer our Special Immigrant Visa program and assist American citizens on the ground is astounding. We must bolster efforts to assist those who served our country and improve any future versions of this program.

Finally, our approach in Afghanistan suffered from a lack of strategic coherence. What started successfully with a light American footprint and a quick removal of the Taliban evolved into more

than 100,000 troops and a focus on counterinsurgency and nation building.

We must better define our strategic objectives, assign resources accordingly, and resist the temptations to do more than is necessary.

The second and most urgent task in front of this body is to look forward and mitigate the negative impacts of U.S. withdrawal. This includes developing our counterterrorism plan, human rights roadmap, and regional approaches. These deserve the Senate's full attention, nothing less.

After all, the news from Afghanistan is jarring. According to open source reports, the Islamic State will be in a position to launch attacks outside of Afghanistan in a mere 6 months, and al-Qaeda could be in a position to conduct external attacks in just 2 years.

On the human rights front, women and girls in Afghanistan are worse off today than they have been for a decade. We must identify the right avenues to re-empower Afghanistan's women, minority, and youth. Our USAID implementers must have unfettered access to at-risk populations without Taliban interference or diversion.

On foreign assistance, we should debate the limits of practical engagement. As Afghanistan careens towards a humanitarian catastrophe this winter, we must strike the appropriate balance between helping ordinary Afghans and preventing benefit to the Taliban.

Many of my colleagues want to turn away from Afghanistan and focus on other issues. However, it is critically important that we do not waver in our commitment to oversight.

I find it disappointing that the Secretary of Defense has refused to testify before this committee. I hope this can be addressed soon, as well as having additional briefings and hearings from Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin, and Director Haines that will address the very real threats to Americans.

It has been almost 3 months since my initial request. I look forward to working with the chairman to finalize these important discussions.

Finally, I have introduced an Afghanistan oversight bill that has the support of nearly 30 of our colleagues. This legislation authorizes the task force responsible for the continued evacuation of Americans and our Afghan partners.

It would also sanction the Taliban for human rights abuses, terrorism, and drug trafficking. Additionally, this legislation directs strategies to address the very real terror threat in Afghanistan.

While we have held one initial meeting with the majority staff on this matter, I would like to see this matter move more quickly.

With that, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Risch.

With that, we will turn to our witnesses.

Ms. Laurel Miller, director of International Crisis Group's Asia program and former Deputy and then Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and with us virtually, Ambassador Ryan Crocker, a Diplomat in Residence in Princeton University and also a former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, at various periods of time in Pakistan, among other locations.

We thank them very much for sharing their insights. We would ask you to summarize your testimony in about 5 minutes or so, so members of the committee can have a conversation with you.

We will start off with Ms. Miller.

STATEMENT OF LAUREL E. MILLER, DIRECTOR OF THE ASIA PROGRAM, INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. MILLER. Good morning, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished members of the committee and thank you for inviting me to offer this testimony in which I will highlight five lessons to learn from the failure of U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

First lesson. Be very wary of regime change. A narrative has taken hold that because the invasion was motivated by counterterrorism, the nation building that followed was mission creep.

In reality, the decision to not only chase the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, but also oust the Taliban regime meant it would have been the height of irresponsibility to make little effort to build something in its place.

The U.S. started with a strategy that assumed it could eliminate the Taliban simply by killing many of them and then other Afghan groups would come together and easily sort out their political arrangements.

As reality hit, a shift to nation building began just 4 months into the mission. The die was cast. By adopting a policy of creating a partner in Afghanistan and needing that partner to succeed at governing, U.S. success became dependent on Afghan Government success.

Second lesson. If your strategy depends on particular conditions, be sure that you can control them. Instead of shaping policy to avoid or adapt to obstacles, the U.S. adopted a policy that required surmounting obstacles.

Foremost among these was Pakistan. From the first days after 9/11, the U.S. relied on getting Pakistan to cooperate in eliminating the Taliban, contrary to how Pakistan saw its own interests.

Pakistani reluctance was perfectly clear. From the start, they said they disagreed with the U.S. strategy of militarily eliminating the Taliban and they wanted to see the Taliban included in Afghanistan's governance.

There were naturally limits to how far the U.S. would or could go to pressure Islamabad and they knew it. Because strategic success in Afghanistan was not existentially important to U.S. national security, it would have been unwarranted and unrealistic for Washington to widen the war to include military action against Pakistan, a nuclear-armed nation of 225 million people some 8,000 miles away.

Third lesson. Recognize how much you do not know and embrace what you do know. Early on, lack of understanding of Afghanistan might be excused considering how little the U.S. had been engaged there during the prior decade, but more problematic was the failure to appreciate how poorly conditions were understood and, therefore, how little confidence the U.S. could have that a bold strategy made sense.

By the end, all the factors that led to the Government's collapse had been well known for years, including the precarity of state in-

stitutions, the Government's extraordinary aid dependence, the bubble effects of a wartime economy, and crucial weaknesses within the Afghan Security Forces, including ones that would understandably affect will to fight.

Absorbing rather than resisting the facts in plain sight should have led much earlier to a judgment that the war was not likely to be won and that the main effort should be diplomacy, seeking a negotiated end of the conflict or at least of American involvement in it.

Fourth, aid conditionality does not work if your strategy depends on the recipient's success. Because the U.S. was well aware that corruption was fueling support for the insurgency and political disunity was weakening the state, it tried repeatedly to address such problems by conditioning aid.

Conditionality suffered from a fatal flaw. Because the U.S. had a policy requiring the Government's success, cutting off vital aid would have been self-defeating. Afghan leaders knew that and, therefore, were not particularly motivated by conditionality.

A fifth lesson. The mission proved politically unsustainable in the end because the extent of the American commitment exceeded the magnitude of the importance of the mission to U.S. national security.

Now, looking forward, Afghanistan is headed toward being the world's greatest humanitarian crisis. The country has suffered an enormous economic shock. Suspension of U.S. and Western aid, freeze of state assets, and effects of sanctions have produced widespread joblessness, hunger, and a severe liquidity crisis.

The disaster already underway shows it will not be possible for the U.S. to both stand with the Afghan people and fully isolate the regime governing them. The U.S. needs to be clear eyed about how best to advance its interests in Afghanistan and consider objectively the importance of helping millions of Afghans.

Greater impoverishment of Afghanistan under the Taliban is likely, but a glide path to a lower level of international support would be more humane than allowing the economy and public services to tip over a cliff.

This will require flexibility in providing aid beyond strictly humanitarian and some easing of sanctions. As the situation worsens in days and weeks to come, politically difficult decisions will need to be made.

The Taliban cannot be made to be less Taliban, but there are many Afghans who can be saved.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Miller follows:]

Prepared Statement of Laurel E. Miller

Good morning, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for the invitation to testify today on policy lessons that can be learned from American involvement in Afghanistan over the last two decades, and on recommendations for the immediate future of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of the U.S. failure—after enormous sacrifice of lives and treasure—to defeat the Taliban, establish a self-sustaining Afghan democracy and economy, and ensure the durability of health, education, and other social gains, it may be too easy to assume the United States will never do *that* again. But it is crucial not to brush past an examination of how and why this failure happened. The future

is too uncertain to assume that the United States will never again encounter circumstances analogous to those that impelled its leaders to invest so heavily in Afghanistan for two decades. After the failed American war in Vietnam, counter-insurgency was anathema in national security policy; after nation-building in the Balkans, the George W. Bush administration initially derided the concept as an inappropriate use of U.S. resources, even though the policy had been relatively successful. Yet both became central to the American intervention in Afghanistan. 'Never say never' may be the most basic lesson to learn from Afghanistan at this time. Therefore, a thorough accounting will be needed of U.S. policy decisions, the means chosen to implement them, and their results.

Another basic lesson is that the United States could not have achieved its goals in Afghanistan solely through its own policies and actions, because both its partners and its adversaries had at least as much influence over the course of events. Likewise, the failure is not uniquely an American one. Nevertheless, there were strategic choices that were controlled by the United States and were especially consequential in leading to failure. I will focus my remarks on five lessons that can be learned from errors in these choices.

FIVE KEY LESSONS

1. Be Very, Very Wary of Regime Change

A narrative has taken hold that, because the motivation for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan was counter-terrorism, the nation-building that ensued represented mission creep. In reality, the Bush Administration's 2001 decision not only to chase and punish the terrorist perpetrators of the September 11 attacks, but also to oust the Taliban regime that had harbored Al Qaeda leaders, necessarily required a nation-building mission.¹ It would have been the height of irresponsibility to wipe away the existing regime in Afghanistan and make little effort to support the construction of a reasonably functional state in its wake. Indeed, in the early years, the United States was criticized for doing too little, not too much, to build up an Afghan state, including indigenous security forces.

After initially assuming away the complexities of regime change, the recognition quickly took hold that political disorder and the absence of state institutions could give rise to the persistence of conditions that led to Afghanistan being an exporter of security threats. But Washington was unprepared for the implications of regime change and struggled over how committed to be to managing them.

The United States started with a strategy based on the assumption that it could eliminate the Taliban simply by killing them—as if essentially all of them could be killed, with no replenishment of ranks—and that, after the Taliban's elimination, other Afghan groups and factions would come together and decide their own political arrangements without much fuss.² The central idea, in other words, was that the United States could invade, wipe the political slate clean, move on, and somehow the situation would sort itself out without considerable U.S. effort, which was to turn to military involvement elsewhere in the world. This idea was a theory with no empirical support. As the theory quickly proved itself false, the U.S. shift to nation-building began as early as April 2002.³

By choosing to engage in regime change and install a new regime that would act in alignment with U.S. interests, the United States chose to engage in nation-building.⁴ The specific aims and the resources devoted to the mission expanded over time as recognition of the challenges expanded and as paltry results seemed to demand greater effort, and the ways and means of implementation evolved. But, fundamentally, the policy die was cast at the very beginning. The United States had adopted a policy of constructing an Afghan state, of making a 'partner' in Afghanistan, and of needing that partner to succeed at governing in order for U.S. policy to succeed at leaving Afghans, eventually, to sustain their own system and ensure their own security in accord with U.S. security interests. U.S. policy became dependent on Afghan Government success.

2. If Your Strategy's Success Depends on Particular Conditions, Be Sure You Can Create or Control Those Conditions

Several essential conditions for success of the U.S. military and civilian missions in Afghanistan were no mystery to U.S. policy makers, and yet the implausibility of creating those conditions was never adequately factored into shaping strategy. Instead of adjusting policy to reflect obstacles that were unlikely to be surmounted, the United States adopted a policy that required surmounting the obstacles, based on the belief, or hope, that willpower, military might, and financial wherewithal would prevail.

Foremost among these obstacles was Pakistan's policy. From the first days after 9/11, the U.S. relied on its presumed ability to get Pakistan to take steps to cooperate in eliminating the Taliban that Pakistan had made quite clear it did not see in its own interests to take.⁵ That clarity was evident in Pakistan's supportive relationship with and material aid for the Taliban prior to 9/11,⁶ and also in what Pakistani officials said to U.S. officials afterward. There was no need to read between the lines, though there was a need to pay attention to how seriously Pakistanis meant what they said. And what they said consistently from the start and over the years since was that they wanted a government in Kabul that would be amenable to Pakistani interests, disagreed with a U.S. strategy of militarily eliminating the Taliban, and wanted to see the Taliban included in Afghanistan's political dispensation.⁷ Just 3 days after 9/11, Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf agreed to cooperate with the United States in counter-terrorism, but said there would be implementation details to work out, including that "Islamabad, [Musharraf] said, wants a friendly government in Kabul."⁸ There should have been no misunderstanding that "friendly" meant including the Taliban.

Pakistan's consistent pursuit of its interests in Afghanistan as it perceived them—regardless of U.S. diplomatic remonstrances or financial enticements intended to convince Islamabad to change its national security calculations—contributed significantly to U.S. failure in Afghanistan. To be sure, Islamabad also facilitated the U.S. war, especially by providing air and land access to land-locked Afghanistan. But this duality of Pakistani policy only reflected that Islamabad had two distinct and irreconcilable policy goals: on one hand, maintain a constructive relationship with Washington beyond Afghanistan matters, and on the other, see the Taliban return to at least a substantial share of power in Kabul.

Although Pakistan enabled the United States to fight the Taliban, its officials regularly stated explicitly that Pakistan itself would not fight the Afghan war on Pakistani soil—meaning that Pakistan would not take steps to make the Taliban its own adversary. As a result, the Taliban enjoyed the crucial benefit for an insurgency of safe haven in a neighboring state. Pakistani officials occasionally denied safe haven existed, but the denials were virtually irrelevant because the reality was known to the United States and Pakistan never suggested it would dismantle the safe havens that it generally declined to acknowledge.

Sharing a long frontier with Afghanistan and being well-practiced in opaque means of providing support to the Taliban, helping the insurgency to survive and thrive was not difficult for Pakistan. Getting Pakistan to switch to a policy of opposing the Taliban proved unrealistic; there were naturally limits to how far the U.S. would go to pressure Islamabad, and the latter knew as much. Because strategic success in Afghanistan was not existentially important to U.S. national security, it would have been unwarranted and unrealistic for Washington to widen the war to include military action against Pakistan, a nuclear-armed nation of 225 million people some 8,000 miles away.

Being stymied in counter-insurgency as it was, the United States could instead have changed its policy much sooner than it did from one centered on war-fighting to one centered on diplomatic efforts to reach a political settlement among Afghans, bringing the Taliban into a share of power. That policy shift, from late 2018, was one that Pakistan, unsurprisingly, embraced and supported. Unfortunately, however, by that stage the Taliban had a clear upper-hand on the battlefield and U.S. leverage was greatly diminished by having made it evident that U.S. forces would be withdrawn sooner rather than later regardless of whether a political settlement was reached. The effort to motivate the Afghan contestants to negotiate the end of the war failed and, of course, the U.S. military withdrew nonetheless, in accordance with a bilateral deal signed between the U.S. and Taliban on February 29, 2020.⁹

A second key condition resistant to U.S. efforts to change it was the weakness of the Afghan Government Washington helped build and saw as its partner. The disunity and endemic corruption that plagued the Afghan Government has been well-documented for many years.¹⁰ The strategic error was not in failing to recognize those problems existed but, rather, in expecting that they could be sufficiently ameliorated fast enough to deprive the insurgency of fuel and to align with any plausible duration of American political willingness to prop up the Kabul Government. The political disunity reflected a competition for power driven by Afghan dynamics that the United States was unequipped to modify. And there is simply no historical precedent for an external actor to remake the patronage basis of a society through foreign policy and foreign aid measures.¹¹

A third condition outside the ambit of U.S. control was that Afghanistan was in 2001, and remains, one of the poorest and least institutionalized countries in the world, and one that is also land-locked and historically dependent on external resources. There was every reason to expect that the time-scale would be generational

for Afghanistan to develop a self-sustaining economy and a government able to fully, or nearly so, provide for its own security and public services. Decision makers often assumed, however, that these developments could be sped up through funding and diplomatic pressure to fit U.S. policy urgency.

3. Recognize How Much You Do Not Know, But Also Embrace What You Do Know and Change Your Policy Accordingly

Looking back at the earliest strategy decisions related to regime change cited above, policy makers appear woefully naïve about what the United States could achieve in Afghanistan. Perhaps U.S. lack of understanding of conditions within Afghanistan could be excused considering how little the United States had been engaged there during the preceding decade and the consequent paucity of U.S. Government expertise regarding the country. What was more problematic—and where a lesson for future U.S. policy lies—was the failure to appreciate how little the conditions were understood and, therefore, the lack of a firm basis for confidence that the U.S. strategy made sense. The less you know, the greater the uncertainty about policy effects, and the greater the risk of unintended consequences.

As the U.S. intervention wore on, many essential facts emerged into view. Indeed, the seeds of failure were present for many years, and none of the factors that ultimately produced the collapse of the Kabul Government and the disintegration of U.S. policy were unknown. Even if the specific timing of the Afghan Government's collapse could not be predicted, it was widely anticipated as at least a plausible scenario. The precarity of state institutions, the Government's extraordinary aid dependency (about 75 percent of public spending was donor financed), the bubble effects of a wartime economy, and crucial weaknesses within the Afghan security forces were all well known. Within the Afghan security forces, problems that would naturally affect morale and will to fight, such as irregularity of pay and inadequacy of equipment, living conditions and other forms of support, were regularly observed and publicly pointed to as critical weaknesses.¹² These problems were not left unfixed because they were obscure; rather, they were very difficult to fix, through very slow processes at best.

The amalgamation of these and other problems led to routinely pessimistic publicly reported assessments by the U.S. intelligence community for the last dozen years, at least. Instead of shaping policy in accordance with these assessments, until the final push toward exit, decision makers shaped policy in accordance with a hoped-for ability to prove the assessments wrong.

Although there were routine claims, including in testimony to the U.S. Congress, that progress was being achieved in improving the capabilities of the Afghan security forces and in setting a course toward winning the war, some called out the war as unwinnable as early as 2009.¹³ Public reporting of steady Taliban battlefield gains has been plentiful, especially since the major U.S. military drawdown of 2014. There was no shortage of public reporting, too, of the U.S. intelligence community's negative assessments of the sustainability of Afghan Government and security forces without a continued U.S. military presence and exceptional scale of financial support, as well as warnings more generally of the impending failure of U.S. policy.¹⁴

Embracing rather than resisting the facts in plain sight should have led much earlier to a judgment that the war was not likely to be won and that the main effort should have been diplomacy, seeking a negotiated end of the conflict or at least of American involvement in it, years earlier than occurred.

4. Aid Conditionality Does not Work if Your Strategy Depends on the Recipient's Success

Because the United States was well aware that corruption in Afghanistan was fueling support for the Taliban insurgency and political disunity was weakening the state, it tried repeatedly to address these and related problems by conditioning aid disbursements on improvements in these areas. The latest iteration of conditionality was the Afghanistan Partnership Framework agreed upon by the Kabul Government and donors in November 2020.¹⁵

The use of conditionality in Afghanistan suffered from a fatal flaw: Because the United States had a policy that required the success of the Afghan Government (as discussed earlier), it could not deprive the Government of resources considered essential to ensure that success. Given the policy in place, cutting off vital aid would have been self-defeating. Afghan counterparts, of course, were well aware of this conundrum, and, understanding the limits of conditionality, were not highly motivated by it. The leverage, in other words, operated in both directions.

5. *Recognize the Limits of U.S. Ability To Impose its Will Where Doing So is not Existentially Vital*

An over-arching lesson to draw from Afghanistan, and one that will require rigorous examination to define thoroughly, is that the experience shows the limits of America's ability to impose its will. Those limits can be seen in some of the more specific points highlighted above. But there are also broader questions to explore about the political judgments that were made to support the invasion and regime change in the first place, to sustain the military effort against the evidence of its poor results, and to end the intervention through the 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement in a way that virtually assured the Taliban's return to power.

The Bush administration decided to invade Afghanistan not only to go after Al Qaeda but to punish the Taliban and make an example of them. It did not invade because Afghanistan itself was a place central to U.S. national security interests. For the next 20 years, the intervention cost nearly 2,500 American lives, tens of thousands of Afghan lives, enormous financial resources, and the time and energies of thousands of U.S. service members, diplomats, aid workers, and others. And yet it remained—except for the threat of terrorism, to which the nation-building work was only tangentially related—peripheral to U.S. interests. That is not a circumstance conducive to success at so difficult a set of tasks. Afghanistan was, for most of twenty years, considered too important to fail but, ultimately, not important enough to stay forever, staving off the Taliban's return.

WHAT TO DO NOW

In the wake of the U.S. military withdrawal, the Afghan Government's collapse, and the Taliban's August 15 take-over, the United States must now entirely reformulate its policy. I will briefly suggest a few ideas related only to immediate steps.

Afghanistan is headed toward becoming the world's greatest humanitarian crisis. Drought, increased displacement due to conflict, economic deterioration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other factors were worsening the humanitarian situation even prior to August 15. Since then, the country has suffered an enormous economic shock. The suspension of U.S. and other foreign aid, freeze of state assets, and effects of sanctions have produced widespread joblessness, hunger, and a severe liquidity crisis.¹⁶

A collision has occurred between two long-standing themes of U.S. policy. For years, U.S. officials told the Taliban that if they gained power through military means, rather than through a negotiated political settlement, they would rule only as a pariah regime, starved of resources. At the same time, the United States offered regular assurances that it would not abandon the Afghan people and that the lesson had been learned from the post-Soviet withdrawal period in the 1990s that washing its hands of Afghanistan could ultimately come to harm U.S. security interests. The humanitarian and economic crisis already emerging in Afghanistan shows that it will not be possible to both stand with the Afghan people in any practical sense while isolating the regime governing them.

It will be important for the United States now to be clear-eyed about how best to advance its interests in Afghanistan, not allowing the pain and distastefulness of losing the war to stand in the way of an objective assessment of the importance of helping millions of Afghans. Greater impoverishment of Afghanistan under the Taliban is likely, but a glide path to a much lower level of international support rather than allowing the economy and public services to tip over a cliff would be more humane. That approach—which would entail some relaxation of sanctions and easing the complete cut-off of development aid—would also take account of U.S. participation in enabling over the last 20 years Afghanistan's extreme aid dependency and, thus, the state's precariousness.

An at least modestly more-engaged approach—in terms of diplomacy and development—would also take account of the reality that isolation of the Taliban regime is not likely to produce results favorable to U.S. interests. Having proved resilient in the face of significant U.S. military pressure, the Taliban are highly unlikely to shape core policies or modify their ideology in response to financial pressure or the use of aid as leverage. They might, however, cooperate in limited areas, even potentially (if only secretly) on counter-terrorism—or at least such cooperation is a possibility to probe through engagement. Isolation, on the other hand, holds no chance of producing cooperation.

As the humanitarian and economic situation worsens in Afghanistan in the days and weeks ahead, politically difficult decisions will need to be made, and robust diplomacy will be needed to bring into alignment with U.S. policy, as much as possible, the policies of allies and of Afghanistan's influential neighbors. The U.S. policy

agility and pragmatism now needed in dealing with Afghanistan's new rulers requires the support of the U.S. Congress.

Notes

¹ For a more detailed version of this argument, see Laurel Miller, "Biden's Afghanistan Withdrawal: A Verdict on the Limits of American Power," *Survival*, May 25, 2021.

² Office of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld "snowflake" to Douglas Feith, "Strategy," October 30, 2001, with Attachment, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/24546-office-secretary-defense-donald-rumsfeld-snowflake-douglas-feith-strategy-october-30>.

³ Office of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld "snowflake" to Doug Feith (cc to Paul Wolfowitz, Gen. Dick Myers, Gen. Pete Pace), Subject: "Afghanistan," April 17, 2002, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/24548-office-secretary-defense-donald-rumsfeld-snowflake-doug-feith-cc-paul-wolfowitz-gen> (see also contextual discussion at this linked page by the National Security Archive).

⁴ In Libya, after toppling Gaddafi, the U.S. did not follow regime change with large-scale nation-building, but instead adopted more of a hope-for-the-best model. U.S. counter-terrorism concerns in Afghanistan in the immediate post-9/11 period made this approach implausible there.

⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld "snowflake" to Douglas Feith, "Strategy," October 30, 2001, with Attachment, "U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/24546-office-secretary-defense-donald-rumsfeld-snowflake-douglas-feith-strategy-october-30>.

⁶ Sajit Gandhi, ed., *The National Security Archive*, "The Taliban File Part III: Pakistan Provided Millions of Dollars, Arms, and 'Buses Full of Adolescent Mujahid' to the Taliban in the 1990's," March 19, 2004, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB97/index4.htm>.

⁷ A memorandum from Secretary of State Colin Powell to President Bush describing Powell's Oct 15–16, 2001, visit to Islamabad noted that "Musharraf is pressing for a future government supportive of its interests," and that Powell assured Musharraf that "the U.S. supports the formation of a broad-based government in Afghanistan, friendly to its neighbors." <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB358a/doc21.pdf>. Over the years since, Pakistani officials have referred to the need for broad-based or inclusive governments as a way of indicating the perceived importance of including the Taliban.

⁸ U.S. Embassy Islamabad cable, "Musharraf Accepts the Seven Points," September 14, 2001, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB358a/doc08.pdf>.

⁹ "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America," February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," September 2016, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-16-58-LL.pdf>.

¹¹ For an excellent treatment of this subject, see Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Quest for Good Governance: How Societies Develop Control of Corruption*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

¹² See Jonathan Schroden, "Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan's Security Forces," *CTC Sentinel*, October 2021, Vol. 14, Issue 8.

¹³ Gordon M. Goldstein and Fredrik Logevall, "We Need Richard Holbrooke More than Ever," *Politico Magazine*, December 6, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/12/afghanistan-isis-richard-holbrooke-213416/>. In 2010, the U.S. intelligence community reportedly expressed skepticism about winning the war, citing corruption and Pakistan as factors: Mark Hosenball, "US intelligence pessimistic on Afghan war success," Reuters, December 15, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-afghanistan/us-intelligence-pessimistic-on-afghan-war-success-idUSN1517095920101215>

¹⁴ Ernesto Londono, Karen DeYoung and Greg Miller, "Afghanistan gains will be lost quickly after drawdown, U.S. intelligence estimate warns," *The Washington Post*, December 28, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/afghanistan-gains-will-be-lost-quickly-after-drawdown-us-intelligence-estimate-warns/2013/12/28/ac609f90-6f32-11e3-aecc-85cb037b7236_story.html?tid=a_inl_manual; Dion Nissenbaum and Gordon Lubold, "Military Believes Trump's Afghan War Plan is Working, but Spy Agencies Are Pessimistic," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/military-believes-trumps-afghan-war-plan-is-working-but-spy-agencies-are-pessimistic-1535707923>.

¹⁵ See Afghanistan Study Group Final Report, February 2021, p. 27, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/02/afghanistan-study-group-final-report-pathway-peace-afghanistan>.

¹⁶ International Crisis Group, "Thinking Through the Dilemmas of Aid to Afghanistan," 7 October 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/thinking-through-dilemmas-aid-afghanistan-0>; International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan's Growing Humanitarian Crisis," 2 September 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-growing-humanitarian-crisis>.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.
Ambassador Crocker, who is with us virtually.

STATEMENT OF HON. RYAN CROCKER, NONRESIDENT SENIOR FELLOW, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ambassador CROCKER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Risch, for convening this important hearing. These are weighty issues and they will be weighty issues for a long time to come.

I would give you two lessons learned and they sound pretty simple. Be careful what you get into, particularly if it involves military forces, as we have seen in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq.

The consequences of a military intervention are not just to the third and fourth order. They go to the thirtieth and fortieth, and that we did not really seem to appreciate.

The second lesson, be careful what you get out of, that a withdrawal of a U.S. military presence—indeed, diplomatic presence in this case—can have consequences as grave or graver than the original intervention.

The third is the issue of strategic patience. That overarches, I think, the previous two lessons and has been a huge, huge problem for the United States, not only in Afghanistan.

Be careful getting in. In Afghanistan, I think we did what we needed to do, that we were responding to 9/11. We did so with the minimal force. I had the privilege of establishing our embassy there January 2002, just weeks after President Karzai was named in Bonn as the chairman of the Afghan interim authority.

We knew why we were there, to ensure that there was never again an attack on the United States from Afghanistan. 9/11 was seared into our brains at that time and, subsequently, for me. It was about American national security. That was the mission.

It was the mission when I opened the Embassy. It was the mission when I visited Afghanistan from Pakistan in the years 2005–2006. It was the mission when I returned as ambassador to Afghanistan 2011–2012.

The ways and means of achieving that goal, of course, prompted a lot of debate, a lot of mistakes, and confusion on the way forward, but the fundamental goal never changed.

Mr. Chairman, if we did reasonably well going in, we did exceptionally poorly going out. We have all seen the images from August seared in—again, into our brains of desperate Afghans clinging to a C-17 as it took off. Does not get much worse than that.

That was the conclusion of our endeavor. Now, as you rightly said, both parties and both administrations, President Trump and President Biden, bear a great responsibility.

When President Trump authorized talks with the Taliban without the Afghan Government, and I said this publicly at the time, these are surrender talks. These are not peace negotiations, and that is exactly how this has played out in the time since 2019.

The February 2020 agreement that was, again, a surrender document. We delegitimized the Government that we had said we supported. It is no wonder to me that there was no fight left in the Afghan military as they saw the United States disappear over the horizon.

Briefly, looking ahead, what we have seen will have consequences in many places for many years. We have emboldened Is-

lamic extremist movements everywhere, in particular in Pakistan where that country now faces a threat from groups like the Pakistan Taliban that aim at the overthrow of the Government in Islamabad. We will be fighting these struggles for a very long time.

Finally, to return to the issue of strategic patience, this is one of our greatest failings, I think, as a nation. Afghanistan was not the first time. We had pulled out of Afghanistan after the defeat of the Soviets.

The Pakistanis, according to their narrative, were left with the exploding Afghan civil war and came to mistrust, as many others now have, the staying power of the United States.

I heard it during my 3 years there over and over: we are with you on al-Qaeda, but do not expect us to turn the Taliban into a mortal enemy because someday you are going to get on a plane again—that is what you do—and we are going to be left with the mess.

Pakistanis felt vindicated, I think, for about 15 minutes, and then realized that the threat to them was graver than it had ever been with, again, emboldened Islamic militants within their own borders.

Going forward, I hope we do find levers. We will need to work with others, obviously. We will need to work with the United Nations. We will need to work with our NATO partners who also felt betrayed by our swift decision to leave the country.

We need to stay engaged. We need to do what we can to support the vulnerable populations. I ask myself, did we make a huge mistake educating girls and asking women to step forward into the military, into Parliament, into business, saying, effectively, we have got your back, until we did not?

We have accrued a great debt there. That extends also to the thousands of Afghans who helped us in their mission. The SIV process has let them down. I am a member of the Advisory Committee for a group called No One Left Behind that has for years sought to move interpreters to safety. We left thousands behind and that, I think, is a stain, again, on our national honor.

We need to figure out ways to go ahead. It will not be easy. We gave up the leverage we had, but we cannot give up the fight that goes on without us.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Crocker follows:]

Prepared Statement of Ryan Crocker

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Risch, it is a privilege to appear before you today to discuss the lessons learned from 20 years of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan post 9/11. The consequences of our intervention, our presence and our departure will reverberate in the region and beyond in the years to come, in ways we may not even be able to imagine today. These are grave and complex issues that bear directly on American security and American values, and I commend the Committee for focusing attention on them. Your initiative will inform and illuminate questions that are of great significance for all Americans.

In that spirit, I will impart to this Committee all of the lessons that I learned during my professional engagement in the broader Middle East spanning almost 40 years. Actually, there are only two, plus one overarching principle: strategic patience, or in our case, the lack thereof. They are deceptively simple. The first is to be careful about what you get into. Military interventions bring consequences not just of the third and fourth order, but the thirtieth and fortieth, consequences that we cannot even imagine, let alone plan for. So the good you seek to achieve, or the bad you wish to eliminate must be of a magnitude sufficient to justify not just the

dangers you can foresee, but also those you can't. I learned this not in Afghanistan or Iraq, but in Lebanon at the time of the Israeli invasion in 1982. That operation, aimed at eliminating the ability of the PLO to attack Israel's northern border areas. That goal was achieved within days. And then came the unforeseen consequences: the massacre of Palestinians in the Shatila refugee camp, the return of our Marines without a clearly defined mission, the bombings of the American Embassy and the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983. That was enough for us—the Marines were withdrawn in 1984, ending our military presence in Lebanon. Israel hung on for 16 more years, losing over 1,100 IDF soldiers before withdrawing in 2000 with nothing to show for it. Unintended consequences.

With respect to Afghanistan after 9/11, there was no serious debate over U.S. military intervention after the Taliban refused our demand to hand over al-Qaida leaders. I was certainly all in. At the beginning of January 2002, I reopened the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, shuttered for security reasons since 1989. As Ambassador to Pakistan 2005–2007, I visited Afghanistan several times at the invitation of Ron Neumann, my colleague in Kabul, to meet with President Karzai. In 2011, I returned to Afghanistan as Ambassador. These different visitations provided me with different perspectives over time. But they also provided a very important and consistent answer to the question of why we came to Afghanistan and why we stayed: to insure that Afghan soil would never again be used to launch an attack on the American homeland.

It is important to stress this point, Mr. Chairman. The sound and fury swirling around the current debate on U.S. policy in Afghanistan can create the mistaken impression that successive Administrations have been confused over what that policy actually was. That is not the case. It was not the case on March 11, 2002, 6 months after 9/11, when we commemorated the placing of a fragment of the World Trade Center at the base of the Embassy flagpole in Kabul. It had been brought to Afghanistan by the commander of the Fifth Special Forces Group, Colonel (later Lieutenant General) John F. Mulholland Jr. It was clear to me a decade later when President Obama asked me to return to Afghanistan as Ambassador and to negotiate a long term Strategic Partnership Agreement with the Afghans that he could sign. He did so in May 2012 in Kabul.

So in my view at least, the end goal for the U.S. in Afghanistan was clear from the beginning and never shifted: the security of the United States. Everything else was about ways and means. That was on my mind that first week in January 2002, driving from Bagram to Kabul (the airport in Kabul was closed, its runways cratered and littered with destroyed aircraft). The landscape was a total wasteland of abandoned structures and endless fields of frozen mud. There were few signs of life—plant, animal or human. Kabul was not much better. Entire city blocks were destroyed, reminiscent of images from Berlin in 1945. Most of this destruction came not from the Americans or the Soviets. It was wrought by the Afghans themselves during the vicious civil war that followed the Soviet retreat in 1989.

Hamid Karzai's Interim Administration had nothing—no army, police, governmental institutions or rule of law. Long term stability in Afghanistan, and security for America, would require focus on these issues. Education was a top priority, especially for girls who had been deprived of that opportunity when the Taliban took over. USAID moved immediately to establish girls' schools, and that January, I took our first Congressional visitor to see a first grade class. Ages ranged from 6 to 12, the older girls having reached school age when the Taliban was in power. Did it bother them that they were in a class with girls literally half their ages? Not at all. They were just happy to be in school. That visitor was Senator Joe Biden, then Chairman of this Committee, and he offered solid support for our educational initiatives. Through sustained effort over the years, the U.S. helped Afghanistan move from some 800,000 students on 9/11, all of them boys, to nearly eight million when I left as Ambassador in 2012, some 35 percent of them girls. That is a powerful tool for social change that would transform the country, but it takes time. And patience. I want to be clear. Education for Afghan girls and opportunities for women were consistent with American values. These initiatives also supported our key national security priority of an Afghanistan that would never again threaten United States soil. If women's rights are human rights, it is also true that women's security is national security. Dr. Valerie Hudson at Texas A&M's Bush School and her colleagues have done exhaustive research to support that hypothesis.

Part of the argument for a complete U.S. troop withdrawal was that we were not "winning" in Afghanistan. And if we are not winning, we should withdraw. Winning and losing, victory and defeat were terms that I did not use in war zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq. In an era of limited warfare, these terms lose their meaning. Take the word defeat. It only has meaning if a people feel defeated. That is an argument put forward to justify the Dresden raids of February 1945 and their heavy ci-

vilian casualties. Coming just 2 months before the final German surrender, the argument is that the attacks were primarily intended to break the will of the German people. The same could be said of Sherman's march through Georgia at the end of the Civil War. We do not do total war anymore, with the consequence that the Taliban did not feel defeated in Afghanistan. We saw the first signs of this during Operation Anaconda against al-Qaida and Taliban fighters in a rugged area in Afghanistan's northeast at the beginning of March 2002 when young Afghans tried to penetrate our lines, not to get out of the fight but to get into it. As was the case in Iraq as well, if an enemy does not feel defeated, an insurgency is virtually inevitable.

This combines with another phenomenon in the broader Middle East. Peoples of this region learned long ago that it is not possible to prevail by force of arms over the better trained and equipped forces of the West. So put up enough of a fight to save face, then scatter. Lie low for a while, regroup, refresh and then, sometime after the western power thinks it has won, start counterpunching. It happened to the French in Morocco, the Italians in Libya, the British in Iraq, the Brits, the Soviets and the Americans in Afghanistan. It has been an enduring element of the region's political culture for several hundred years and is unlikely to change anytime soon.

There are other consequences of armed intervention and regime change we need to absorb. One is the likelihood of industrial strength corruption in the wake of regime change, something I encountered in Iraq as well as Afghanistan. Without respected institutions and the rule of law, corruption will flourish. Institutions cannot be imported and they do not grow overnight. Looking back, metastasizing corruption seems as inevitable as the insurgencies themselves. If we look at our own history, we can see how slow, uneven and painful the development of such institutions is. When you add significant sums of money, you get corruption, as inevitably as you get an insurgency. As our own history shows, institutional development takes time, and a lot of it. But it is also critical for a stable, pluralistic society. In my experience, institutions are far more important to the building of a democracy than elections, which can be counterproductive if conducted without a stable institutional base. We have seen this too in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

This brings me to my second lesson: Be at least as careful in deciding what you get out of. A withdrawal can have consequences as far reaching and as serious as those of an intervention. We do not end a war by withdrawing our forces. We simply cede the field to our adversaries. In Iraq, there was a grace period. The last of our deployed forces left the country at the end of 2011. Islamic State forces swept through western and northern Iraq in June of 2014, 2 and a half years later. That threat was met by the formation and legitimization of Shia militias, most of them influenced by Iran. So the space left by our withdrawal was filled by our two most potent adversaries in the region. Not exactly the outcome we desired.

In Afghanistan, it was worse. We saw the horrific images of a panicked mob chasing a C-17 taxiing for takeoff. Several clung to the wheel wells, only to fall to their deaths minutes later when the plane was airborne. There was no grace period. Taliban fighters ousted the Afghan Government that we had supported before we had managed to get out of town. It made the final evacuation of Saigon look orderly. We were anything but careful in our withdrawal, with potential consequences that could play out for years. It did not have to go this way.

When I left Afghanistan as ambassador in the summer of 2012, President Obama's surge had brought over 100,000 US troops to the country. The Taliban controlled none of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals. Beginning with President Obama and continuing under his successor, troop levels steadily dropped. By the end of President Obama's second term in 2017, there were around 15,000 US troops, and still the Taliban controlled no provincial capitals. And when President Trump left office, the number was just 2500. Only when President Biden made clear that all forces would be withdrawn by a set date did the Taliban begin to move.

Challenges to stability in Afghanistan such as endemic corruption are real and they are serious. But they are not new. The one new and decisive factor in the process that enabled the Taliban to move from controlling none of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals to controlling the entire country almost overnight was the final U.S. withdrawal. President Biden owns the consequences of his withdrawal decision. But the process that led there began under President Trump. In 2019, President Trump authorized direct negotiations between the United States and the Taliban without the participation of the Afghan Government. It was a concession to a long-standing Taliban demand: they were ready to talk to the Americans, but not with their illegitimate puppet regime in the room.

This action delegitimized the Afghan Government and its security forces, and began the process that culminated in the collapse of the Government and the trium-

phant return of the Taliban. It was the virtually certain outcome of a negotiation that was never about peace. It was about American withdrawal and a Taliban return to power. In an NPR interview in September 2019, almost 6 months before the conclusion of the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, I said that a planned Camp David meeting between the Taliban and President Trump that had been cancelled by the President and the talks with the Taliban suspended following a Taliban attack that killed an American might be a net positive if the U.S. abandoned these negotiations with the Taliban which were not peace talks but a discussion on the terms of a U.S. surrender, reminiscent of the Paris peace talks on Vietnam in the 1970s. “At the end of the day, there has to be a negotiated settlement. You don’t end wars without it. But the tack this Administration has taken since the beginning of these talks was going in absolutely the wrong direction.” And so they did, bringing us the horrific spectacles of August. It is a grim irony that two Administrations so different in so many respects were united on a disastrous policy in Afghanistan.

Mr. Chairman, this hearing as well as similar exercises elsewhere will produce a number of lessons learned that will be important for our future endeavors. But I believe there is a single overarching problem that is at the root of what we have seen in Afghanistan and elsewhere. It is the failure on our part to demonstrate strategic patience. This is not new, and it is not unique to Afghanistan. But it has perhaps had its greatest impact there and next door in Pakistan. Our allies have come to fear our lack of strategic patience, and our adversaries to count on it. A comment attributed to the Taliban has circulated for years in Afghanistan: “You Americans have the watches, but we have the time.” In Pakistan, where I served as ambassador 2004–2007, much of the Taliban leadership enjoyed sanctuary, and it was a major source of friction in our bilateral relationship. The Pakistani narrative on the Taliban runs like this: We were close allies in the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s in Afghanistan. But when we prevailed, you went home. And once you no longer needed us, you stopped getting waivers for the Pressler Amendment which stipulates the withholding of all U.S. economic and military assistance to any country pursuing a nuclear weapons program. So almost overnight we went from being the most allied of allies to the most sanctioned of adversaries. And we were left with a vicious Afghan civil war on our borders, threatening our own stability. So when the Taliban emerged as a force that could stabilize most of Afghanistan, they had our backing. Then 9/11 happened and you’re back. We’re happy to see you, and we’ll take whatever is on offer while the taking is good. Because we know that at some point, you will be leaving again—it’s what you do. Oh—there you go now. We’re so happy we didn’t turn the Taliban into a mortal enemy just to watch you ride off into the sunset.

So the Pakistanis saw their strategic position vindicated. But I doubt the high fiving in the corridors of power lasted more than 15 minutes or so. The U.S. withdrawal and the manner in which it was conducted has emboldened Islamic radicals everywhere, not least in Pakistan where the Pakistani Taliban seeks the overthrow of the Government in Islamabad. Islamic destabilization of a state with nuclear weapons is a terrifying prospect.

The list of damage to our national security and our values is long. We have allowed the Taliban and al-Qaida to reunite. The threat this poses to our own security is not theoretical—9/11 actually happened, brought to us from Afghanistan by these same actors. At the same time, our complete withdrawal has degraded our intelligence capabilities. The strike in Kabul on what was supposed to be an Islamic State target but wasn’t foreshadows the future. We urged Afghan women and girls to step forward, into parliament, private enterprise, the classroom and the military. They did. And now they will pay the price for our lack of strategic patience. That has already started. Afghan interpreters and others provided direct assistance to our military and civilian personnel. They were critical to our efforts, and put their lives and those of their families at risk by working with us. We said we would take care of them through the Special Immigrant Visa program, bringing them to safety in our country. I am a member of the advisory board for an NGO dedicated to fulfilling our promise to them—No One Left Behind. We left thousands behind.

I will conclude on a personal note. One of the projects that had the greatest impact in Afghanistan cost the least amount of money. It was the reconstruction of Ghazi Stadium in Kabul to FIFA standards, meaning that it could host World Cup matches. It was a joint endeavor by International Security Assistance Forces Commander John Allen and me. For a soccer mad country, this was huge. But there was a deeper meaning. Ghazi Stadium was used by the Taliban to carry out public punishments after Friday prayers, including beheadings and the stoning of women. The reborn Ghazi stadium was the symbol of the new Afghanistan. I wonder how long

it will take the Taliban to turn it back into a killing ground. We had agency, and we gave it up. We bear responsibility for these consequences.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

We will start a round of 5-minute questionings. I will start off. Throughout the 20 years of our involvement in Afghanistan, the United States shifted from a narrow counterterrorism mission to a broader nation building effort. That effort cost taxpayers, by SIGAR's estimate, \$2.3 trillion. I would like to talk about some of those key strategic decisions.

To both of you, do you believe that the Taliban should have been included in the Bonn Conference in 2001? Did the Bush administration miss an opportunity early on when the United States was in the strongest possible position to demand Taliban disarmament?

Ms. MILLER. If you would like me to go first—

The CHAIRMAN. Sure.

Ms. MILLER. —I could say, yes, in retrospect, the Taliban should have been included in the political arrangements for Afghanistan. They did represent a certain kind of constituency there, and their potency might have been greatly diminished if they had been included as just one of multiple factions. You might never have had an insurgency in the first place.

However, I think to be fair, you have to look at what the thinking was at that period of time: the fervor of the post-9/11 period for counterterrorism, the anger at the Taliban for not turning over Bin Laden, and the perception that there was no more Taliban, that it was a quick victory, that they were eliminated, and that it was only a mopping up operation.

So when you talk to people who were involved in the decision-making at that time, I think it is apparent that it was not particularly realistic to expect that kind of perceptivity about what events would unfold and how the insurgency would arise.

I think you can look to somewhat later periods of time when there were overtures in the several years that followed the intervention.

There were some overtures from Taliban individuals who sought to make accommodations with the Afghan Government, and the U.S. at that time, I think, should have had a greater sense of the value of allowing the Afghan Government—President Karzai at the time—to make some Afghan style deals to incorporate Taliban figures into governance and that might have prevented the insurgency.

The CHAIRMAN. It makes me think, is there an intelligence failure? We thought it was a mop up operation. We, obviously, underestimated that reality.

Ambassador Crocker, do you believe Iraq, another place where you served as ambassador, was deemed a higher priority by the Bush White House? Did the Administration pay sufficient attention to Afghanistan at a time that the Taliban were regaining strength?

Ambassador CROCKER. I was not in or engaged with Afghan affairs at that time, Mr. Chairman. I was fully immersed in Iraq as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State covering the Gulf, including Iraq, in that period 2002–2003.

I would say this. We are the United States of America. We actually can do more than one thing at once. We did so in World War

II. We were able to prosecute a total war and defeat both Germany and Japan.

I find it a little difficult to believe that suddenly we do not have the ability to focus on two regional conflicts at the same time.

The other point I would make here is that we did not really seem to understand what was possible and what was not.

As Ms. Miller has said, engaging the Taliban right away would have been politically impossible also inside Afghanistan. We would have had a Northern Alliance mutiny if we had done so. I do not think that was a valid interpretation at all.

Again, had we surged more forces sooner into Afghanistan we might have simply fueled a earlier and stronger insurgency. Like almost every other question on the table about Afghanistan, the issues are complex, they are difficult, and they are multiple.

The CHAIRMAN. Yes. It seems to me we took our eye off the prize, and we went to a place where there were supposedly weapons of mass destruction and we found none. We may be the United States and we may be a superpower, but when you have two regional conflicts, but of significant consequence and you take your eye off the main prize, which is where September 11 emanated from, I am not sure that was the greatest decision.

Let me ask one final question. President Trump's approach towards Afghanistan was, from my view, erratic, first promising a military victory before signing a surrender deal, as Ambassador Crocker has said, that saw the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and the withdrawal of U.S. forces within 14 months and a deal that which the Taliban made good on none of it.

Do you think that that deal was a good one? Did the Taliban uphold their commitments? Is there any real way to have enforced it, Ms. Miller?

Ms. MILLER. A fundamental problem with the deal was one that you pointed to yourself, Mr. Senator, which is that the Afghan Government was excluded from the deal, that it was a bilateral deal between the U.S. and the Taliban.

The reason why prior U.S. policy had been not to make a separate deal between the U.S. and the Taliban was that it was seen that that would greatly enhance the leverage and the appearance of legitimacy of this insurgency group and it would embolden them and strengthen them both at any subsequent negotiating table with Afghans, but also on the battlefield, too.

I think there is reason to criticize that approach, though it has to be said that the prior efforts to get a negotiation going among the Afghan Government and the Taliban and the U.S. failed and I think that is why the Trump administration, looking for a way to get out of Afghanistan, took that less favorable route, one that was more advantageous to the Taliban.

I do also think that inclusion of the prisoner release was a very serious error in the deal, and it is not particularly because of the 5,000 individuals who were returned to the battlefield.

It is because of what that signified. That had the United States negotiating something that was not for the United States to negotiate. This was not—these were not American prisoners. These were Afghan Government prisoners and the Afghan Government was not at the table.

So the U.S. making that agreement to release them was a signal that it did not really matter what the Afghan Government thought. It reinforced the Taliban perception that the Government was just a puppet of the United States and the U.S. could roll them over on any kind of agreement that it made.

Because of that dynamic, it led to a 6-month delay in any kind of launch of peace negotiations, which was quite costly, given how late in the game this was.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Risch.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, let me say I think this is one of the more important hearings that we will hold. I think it is really important that we look back and analyze what happened and what mistakes that we made.

So I am sure as history goes along there is going to be a lot of books written about this. I hope both of you, from whom I have heard some very introspective thoughts, I hope you will be part of that discussion as history goes forward. One of the important reasons, I think, why we need to do this is that the United States is going to face these kind of decisions again in the future.

Indeed, right now we are looking at some conflicts around the globe that are beckoning the United States to get involved. I think that as we act like the superpower we are on the planet, I think all of these things that have happened in the past are important to look at.

As I said in my opening statement, the culture in Afghanistan was so different than the culture that we are used to dealing with, and one of the things that—the corruption issue is a huge issue as you try to stand up a nation and move forward.

If you cannot get a handle on that, if it is endemic in the culture, it is a problem. We have a tendency, I think, to look at past successes as we did after World War II where we were, importantly, involved in nation building in both Germany and Japan, and then after the Korean conflict how we were involved in South Korea, and they were wildly successful. Those countries were stood up in our own democratic, freedom, human rights interests.

Since then, we have been pretty much unsuccessful in doing that, but we have been dealing with different cultures. I suspect, and I think as I talk with people around the country, we all have a tendency to weigh these things and view these things using our own deep American interests that we have had over so long a period of time in freedom, democracy, and the rule of law and those kinds of things.

It is hard to swallow, but there are cultures on the planet that do not want this or at least some of the culture does not want it. Certainly, we all make speeches about how all around the globe people hunger for the freedoms that we have—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, all the other freedoms that we have, and yet these freedoms are only widely practiced in a small portion of the population of the globe.

As we think about the policies as we go forward, I think every one of these instances is very different and I think every one of

these instances needs to be analyzed as we make policy decisions, going forward.

It is pretty easy to sit here and criticize decisions that were made over the last two decades. I mean, there is no question that there were bad decisions made and there is also no question that this is not a partisan issue. There were people on both sides of the aisle that made decisions that were not appropriate, but in any event, I would like to hear your thoughts, briefly, because I am almost out of time, on the issue regarding the difficulty in standing up a government in our own image in a culture that does not reflect that.

Ms. Miller, I would like to hear your thoughts on that.

Ms. MILLER. I think the point about corruption that you made, I would say that if your strategy requires fixing corruption in a society where it is endemic and where you have a sort of patronage basis for society and politics, then change your strategy.

Do not assume that you can fix the problem of corruption because there is simply no historical precedent anywhere in the world for fixing that problem in any policy relevant timeline through foreign policy and foreign aid.

There just are no examples to point to. It is a generational challenge that has to be dealt with through organic and indigenous processes over time. It cannot be done by the United States through foreign policy, to put it very bluntly.

I think in terms of standing up the Government, I think it was not entirely a question of standing up a government in our own image. There were many aspects of the constitutional system put in place and the way that politics operated in Afghanistan that were, in fact, quite Afghan.

There was a lot of Afghan agency here in designing the constitution, which was predominantly based on an earlier constitution they had. It was an extremely centralized system of government, far beyond ours or anything any American expert would have advocated for Afghanistan. That reflected Afghan preferences, too, and had a lot of negative consequences for politics, for the competition for power and resources, and relates to the point about corruption.

I do not think that it was a failure because we tried to impose democracy in Afghanistan. I think there was a thirst for choice among Afghans, who turned out in droves in the initial elections there, and if democracy is principally about choice then that is something that Afghans wanted to exercise, but there are many other lessons we can draw from the specifics beyond that.

Senator RISCH. That is great insight.

Ambassador Crocker.

Ambassador CROCKER. Senator Risch, you mentioned South Korea. South Korea is, indeed, today a model of an economically sound democracy, but it did not start that way.

What we were able to do in the case of Korea was exhibit some strategic patience, to see this as a long-term problem, a threat to our security, and that would need a long-term commitment.

We made that commitment. Our forces are still there. It was absolutely the opposite in Afghanistan, of course. We became impatient when a government was unable to instantly create viable rule of law and institutions that are respected. That kind of thing takes years and years.

There are certain inevitabilities that come with that process. One of them is corruption. If you have overthrown a regime and swept away whatever law and institutions may have existed, you are starting over. You are starting from scratch.

All of this takes a lot of time, and if you add large sums of money to the void of respected institutions and rule of law, bingo, you get corruption. You also have an inevitability of insurgency if your opponent, your enemy, does not feel defeated.

The Taliban did not feel defeated because they ran. That is when the big guys come get under the porch, and that is exactly what the Taliban did, taking a leaf from many chapters previously where indigenous forces went to ground in the face of a foreign military intervention only to emerge later in an insurgency, and that is exactly what happened in Afghanistan.

One could see the early signs of that, Senator, when I was in Afghanistan in that early period, March 2002, Operation Anaconda, where we were undermanned and under-gunned for the challenge that al-Qaeda and some Taliban gave to us.

We saw individual Afghans trying to get through our lines, not to get out of the fight, but to get into it. That was an issue and we were all aware of it, our military and our civilians.

In the absence of total war, you can pretty well count on an insurgency, and in the absence of strong stable institutions, which can only be built over years, you are going to get corruption, too.

Senator RISCH. Thanks so much to both of you for your insights on this. Thank you.

Senator CARDIN [presiding]. Senator Menendez will be back shortly. He had a vote in the Senate Finance Committee. I will take my time at this particular moment, and let me just join our chairman and ranking member in thanking our two panelists for your service to our country.

I agree with much of what Senator Risch just said in regards to mistakes made by four administrations, and in hindsight it is a lot easier to see those mistakes, but in real time it is more challenging, as everyone has pointed out.

I want to, first, underscore the point that Senator Menendez made and that is the decision to go into Iraq when we thought they had weapons of mass destruction. That was a mistake of intelligence. At least, that is as it was presented to us at the time.

There was no evidence that Iraq was involved in the 9/11 attacks. We changed our mission in the Middle East at that time. Afghanistan is a result of the attack on our country. Iraq distracted our military, at least, from the mission in Afghanistan.

It is clear to me that that had an impact on our success in Afghanistan if we would have not been also engaged at that time in an act of war in Iraq and dealing with the challenges in Iraq.

I recognize that America could do more than one thing at a time, but when we are engaged in two recent military operations and we had not completed the first, and the missions are somewhat inconsistent, it does, to me, distract from our ability to carry out our responsibility in Afghanistan.

I want to get to the issue of corruption. Ambassador Crocker, I thought you made an excellent point. We recognize that we could not change a society overnight. We did not understand the patron-

age society. We recognize that, but where America is filling a significant part of the financial needs of a country, there seems to me that there could have been safeguards put in place to make sure that the aid that we gave went to the people and not just to fuel the corruption of the principal leaders.

This was over a 20-year period that we were unable to reach the people of Afghanistan to the extent necessary to get the type of popular support for the type of governance that they had, causing the counter insurgencies and the aftermath that we see today.

Yes, I understand patience. Twenty years may not have been long enough for some, but I think there was wasted time during the 20 years in trying to establish a more responsive government for the people of Afghanistan.

In the United States lessons learned, there has to be a way that we can reinforce a governance where the people get the benefit of our assistance rather than the corrupt leaders.

Ambassador Miller, I heard your point when you said never in the history have we seen a successful example. Corruption exists in all countries. I recognize that, but it seems to me that our engagement in Afghanistan actually assisted the corruption of the regime, causing significant dissatisfaction among the populace for the United States presence.

Ms. MILLER. I would agree that our assistance helped to fuel corruption. It was just an enormous scale of money to be pumping into a country with a very limited economy and where there was a lot of competition for resources, especially on the military side in terms of large-scale contracting for transportation and fuel, which were just two of the areas where a lot of corruption has been—a lot of siphoning off of resources has been revealed, and there are a lot of Afghans who became very wealthy as a result of American contracting there. Villas in Dubai do not build themselves. That is, ultimately, funded with American taxpayer resources.

I think part of the problem, and it is a real conundrum, is that it is very difficult for us, given our system—our political system and our foreign assistance system—to pace ourselves in these kinds of interventions.

Initially, there were very small sums, relatively, spent in Afghanistan. As the situation worsened and it became a higher political priority, there was a perceived need and an opportunity to gain appropriations of larger resources and then to have to spend them within the timescale of those appropriations.

So it leads to a dynamic where there is an impulse to get as much funding as you can as quickly as you can and spend it as quickly as you can when it is a political high priority, knowing that that is going to fade and you are not going to be able to sustain it over time.

It is very difficult for us to pace our spending in an intervention like this with 1- and 2-year funding cycles as opposed to longer-term funding cycles that some other governments, for instance, the European Union, have in their civilian assistance programs.

I do not have an answer to that. As I said, it is a conundrum. If less had been spent at the peak, there probably would have been criticism that not enough was being spent even though the people involved in spending it knew the absorptive capacity was just not

there to spend that much money that quickly and maintain the oversight that is necessary to prevent corruption.

Senator CARDIN. Lessons learned, as I see it, is that we have to have a strategy to make sure that our engagement does not reinforce the greed of corrupt leaders, and that was, I think, absent in Afghanistan.

Senator Johnson.

Ambassador CROCKER. If I could—

Senator CARDIN. I am sorry. Ambassador Crocker, briefly?

Ambassador CROCKER. Yes, if I could. Our most successful programs in Afghanistan cost the least and went directly to the Afghan people. Education and health care—the number of students in Afghan schools when I arrived in 2002 was about 900,000, all boys, and when I left as ambassador in 2012, over 8 million, 35 percent girls.

Similarly, in healthcare we reduced dramatically the death rate from infant and maternal mortality. They worked, they cost less, and they went directly to the Afghan people. We should look for programs like that and avoid major infrastructure projects.

I agree completely with Ms. Miller. We need to look at our own budget processes. Our internal processes contribute a great deal to waste and mismanagement in Afghanistan.

Senator CARDIN. Thank you. I appreciate that response.

Senator Johnson.

Senator JOHNSON. Thank you, Senator Cardin. I also want to thank the witnesses. Ambassador Crocker, thanks for your service.

I read an interesting book well over 10 years ago. It was written by members of our Special Ops that served in Afghanistan. Their basic conclusion was that we pretty well accomplished what we needed to accomplish before General Franks ever stepped foot on the ground there.

In hindsight, it is kind of hard to really argue with their conclusion, except for one point—Osama bin Laden had escaped from Tora Bora—and I think there was a political imperative to do everything we could to track him down and bring him to justice.

Ambassador Crocker, I have two questions for you, one looking back. This is, obviously, in retrospect. It is important for us to examine what mistakes were made, but I think, even more importantly, one looking forward having to do with Pakistan.

First, the backward-looking question. To what extent was Pakistan complicit in harboring Osama bin Laden? Then looking forward, obviously, Pakistan is a nuclear power.

In your testimony, you mentioned that they are going to be under pressure from the Taliban. It is almost unthinkable to contemplate the Taliban getting hold of the Pakistani Government and those nuclear weapons.

What do we need to do to prevent that? First, what do you know about the complicity of Pakistan harboring Osama bin Laden?

Ambassador CROCKER. Senator, it is a great question to which I do not have the answer. There has, obviously, been a lot of speculation over that both before and after the Abbottabad raid that killed him.

Pakistan was a reasonably good partner in the fight against al-Qaeda leaders inside of Pakistan, including several ops chiefs,

number threes, in the al-Qaeda organization, and enough pressure that while we did not find Osama bin Laden in those years prior to his killing, he was not communicating.

I really cannot say that they were complicit in harboring him, that they knew all about him and where he was. I just do not know.

Going forward, I think it is critically important that we do some listening as Afghanistan's neighbors gauge their own risk and threat. As you say, it is an appalling thought that the Pakistani Government could be so destabilized that they would lose control over their nuclear weapons, and that is the point I made earlier.

We have got to act like a global leader because, trust me, this is now an absolute global problem. The enormous boost that the fact and the nature of our withdrawal has emboldened Islamic extremists everywhere, we are going to be dealing with that for a long time and we are going to have to deal with it collectively.

Senator JOHNSON. The reason I asked the questions in combination, if we truly do not know Pakistan's—whether they were complicit or not in harboring Osama bin Laden, based on the imperative, moving forward, I think we have to give them the benefit of the doubt and we need to do everything we can now to assist Pakistan from being overrun by the Taliban. Would you agree with that?

Ambassador CROCKER. I would. Again, we have got to be careful. We have got to be measured and we have got to be suspicious, but I would judge the potential threat to Pakistan's own stability to be so severe that we are going to have to figure out—again, I would hope, collectively—how that threat can be reduced.

Senator JOHNSON. Ms. Miller, I think many of us on this committee—I know Senator Shaheen has been active in this issue supporting the women in Afghanistan. I think we mourn their upcoming, probably present, loss of freedoms that we helped establish for them.

It is kind of hard to just turn away from that. It is hard not to acknowledge the fact that America, despite all the mistakes made, all the bad decisions made on a bipartisan basis, our intentions were still good.

I know in your testimony you covered this, but could you just reinforce again what can we do if—or is there nothing we can do to try and reinforce the gains that the Afghan women have made during our time there?

Ms. MILLER. Yes. There are understandable reasons why it might be the impulse in American policy now to isolate the Taliban regime, to punish the regime, to make good on what the United States long said to the Taliban, which is that if you take power through military means rather than in a negotiated settlement, you will be a pariah regime starved of resources.

On the other hand, I do think we have to consider what you get out of a policy like that. What do the Afghan people, what do Afghan women, get out of an isolation policy?

What does the United States get out of an isolation policy vis-à-vis the Taliban? My conclusion, and it is a difficult conclusion to make and I have personally struggled with it, is you do not get anything at all.

If there is any prospect of even slightly moderating Taliban policies, if there is any even slight prospect of having some, perhaps, secret cooperation with the Taliban on counterterrorism, it is not going to be by isolating them.

It can only be through some engagement and through some relaxation of U.S. willingness to provide development aid that is not directly to the Taliban government but that could have the effect of helping them to reinforce their grip on power. We have to recognize that.

The Taliban are resilient. They resisted enormous military pressure by the United States over 20 years. They are perfectly capable of resisting some financial pressure and efforts to use aid as leverage.

So I come to the difficult conclusion that some degree of engagement with the Taliban, avoiding particular individuals in particular ministries, and some degree of aid to be able to continue programs—for instance, to support women and girls in Afghanistan—is what is in the greatest interest of the United States as well as the Afghan people.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Thank you.

Senator JOHNSON. Thank you, Ms. Miller. If I just may, just quickly, Mr. Chairman.

I just want to make a comment because, I mean, in both cases the answers to my questions indicate that as many as mistakes were made in the past, we have to look at the reality on the ground now and we need to do everything we can to move positively forward.

That may be some pretty hard pills to swallow, but it is extremely important for us to look at the reality of the situation now and how can we make that reality better.

Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you to both of our witnesses for being here.

Ms. Miller, I think I understood when you were giving your fifth lesson learned from Afghanistan, I think I understood you to say something like Afghanistan has not been critical enough to U.S. security at this point for us to continue to stay. Is that paraphrasing, basically, what you said?

Ms. MILLER. I think one of the reasons why it has been hard to have the strategic patience that Ambassador Crocker talked about is because, at the end of the day, Afghanistan is not central to U.S. national security interests, and I think President Biden would not have made the decision to withdraw if he had judged it to be essential to U.S. national security interests.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. I appreciate that. That is what I thought you said.

Ambassador Crocker, as I understand, what you have said about Afghanistan is that you think it is long term critical to U.S. national security. Do I misunderstand?

Ambassador CROCKER. You do not misunderstand, Senator. We actively track threats around the world to our national security. There are many groups out there that would like to execute such attacks, but there is only one group that actually did it, and that

was al-Qaeda, sheltered under the Taliban. It happened. These are the actors who brought it about.

We have already seen a return of at least one senior Bin Laden assistant or aide into his hometown of Jalalabad. The band is coming back together again, and there is absolutely no reason to think that the Taliban now covering Afghanistan are somehow kinder and gentler after two decades in the wilderness.

They will not give up their ideology. They will not give up their al-Qaeda ally, and the Islamic State actions against civilians, mainly, in Afghanistan now will virtually guarantee that.

Islamic State may be an existential threat to the Taliban. What they will not do in response is bargain away their ideology. They will cling to it even tighter now, I think, with the Islamic State threat.

Yes, I do believe that there is a threat to American national security. Our defenses are far more robust than they were in 2001, but you do not win a game relying exclusively on defense, and I think that the decision made to pull our forces out completely at a time when they were already minimal and during which the Taliban controlled not a single provincial capital, I think that has put our security at risk.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. I share that view, and I would argue that the strategic patience that you are talking about is really dependent upon the extent to which we believe we have a critical stake for our country and our national security in continuing to support our military posture in a place, as you pointed out with Senator Risch, like South Korea, like Japan, like Germany after World War II and where we still have significant troops.

I want to go back to the tragedy that a number of us have mentioned around women and girls because, Ambassador Crocker, I share your view that this is one of the most tragic aspects of our time in Afghanistan.

A huge success story in that so many women were empowered, were able to go to school, but a tragic outcome when we look at the potential now for the Taliban to totally take away those freedoms for women.

I wonder if either of you can speak to—and I share, Ms. Miller, your view that we have got to continue to find a way to get humanitarian aid to help the Afghan people even if that means that, to some extent, we have to work with the Taliban, but what leverage do we have at this point on the Taliban to try and support freedoms for women in the country or at least a better station in life for women in the country?

Ms. MILLER. I think we have very little leverage over them. I mean, it is not zero, and you see that in what the Taliban are saying, if not entirely doing, so far.

They are trying to put a good face on their policies. They are saying things unlike what they said in the 1990s about the protections for women and girls, the role of women and girls, girls' education, et cetera.

There are some women in the workplace still, particularly in areas where they need to interact with other women, and in other areas they are being excluded.

I by no means consider this to be something that should be taken at face value and trusted, but there is the fact that there is some distinction in the public narrative they are trying to put out shows that they are aware of the interests of foreign countries whose support they are trying to attract, and that is at least a little bit to work with.

I would not want to exaggerate it by any means. I think there is also a role for the United States through its diplomacy to collaborate with other countries that have influence over the Taliban, particularly Islamic countries, in trying to influence their policies and press upon them the fact that there are many Islamic countries around the world that allow girls education and that have policies that are more open than the Taliban's.

It will take a collective effort and some quite vigorous diplomacy on the part of the United States to marshal that collective effort.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. In order to do that, it would be helpful for us to have our diplomats in capitals around the world, however, and not having them be on hold here in the Senate because there are objections from our colleagues.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Romney.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Miller, Ambassador Crocker, thank you very, very much for your service for our country.

I want to talk about the very beginning of our decision to go into Afghanistan and what we might have learned or done differently.

I cannot move on to that without acknowledging the fact that we have, in many respects, been showered with shame in the way we left—one, I think, a disastrous decision by the prior Administration to surrender through the talks and agreement they entered into and the continuation of that decision by the current Administration, and then, of course, its fateful execution of the withdrawal.

We have left behind thousands, we have broken promises to friends and allies, we have abandoned women and girls there and, of course, we put America and our friends and our national interests at much greater risk, as has been pointed out by Senator Johnson and by others today.

By the way, I just note that when there is a poll that says that most Americans want to leave Afghanistan, I wish that political people would say, let us point out to the American people do you really want to leave if there is going to be abandonment of our principles, abandonment of girls, and a degradation of our national security?

That, I think, might lead to a different poll answer, but that is, obviously, a different point.

I want to turn to the question of what we could have done at the beginning. Given the fact that we were attacked on 9/11, that the Taliban was responsible for al-Qaeda having a base of operations in their country, looking back, what should we have done instead? What could we have done instead?

I mean, I remember I was in Afghanistan, actually, as Ambassador Crocker was there and my wife said, are you getting used to the, I do not know, 10 and a half hour time change difference? I

said, no, it is the 1,000 years' time change difference that I am finding hard to get used to.

It struck me that our mission went from one of securing America from potential future attack to trying to build a democratic-styled country and that that was just a bridge far too far.

Ms. Miller, perhaps you could begin with just what might we have done differently? Was it the expansion of mission that was the greatest error? Likewise, Ambassador Crocker, I would very much value your opinion on that topic.

Ms. MILLER. In the alternative history, I think what you could imagine is that instead of deciding, as the Bush administration did, that it had to make an example of the Taliban to other would-be harborers of terrorist groups around the world, that instead it made the decision to violate Afghan sovereignty, chase the al-Qaeda perpetrators and punish the al-Qaeda perpetrators and, essentially, ignore the Taliban or perhaps inflict some punishment on them, but not to the point of overthrowing them.

This was an approach that the Bush administration derided as the old law enforcement approach to counterterrorism that had been practiced during prior administrations—go after the perpetrators—and it was a very explicit decision and not without some, at least, small degree of controversy within the Bush administration to take that approach.

I say small degree because there was, I think, in the State Department some awareness that, in the words of Colin Powell, you break it, you own it.

So if you are going to engage in regime change you had better have the strategic patience that Ambassador Crocker talked about if you are going to see it through because the expansion of the mission all flowed from that initial decision to engage in regime change.

Would it have worked just as well to go after the perpetrators without overthrowing the Taliban? I mean, it is hard to engage in these hypotheticals, but I think what we have seen is that elsewhere around the world since that time that is the approach that has been taken.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you.

Ambassador.

Ambassador CROCKER. Senator, I do not think there was an alternative. We gave the Taliban an out. We told them, hand over al-Qaeda leadership to us and we will leave you alone. They refused to do that, and I think that refusal left us with no choice except to execute the mission as we did.

It would be pretty hard to justify at home or abroad that the Taliban, having refused to give up the murderers of 9/11, that we could somehow go after al-Qaeda and leave them alone and when we are done doing that just say, thanks for your hospitality, and to go home ourselves.

I do not think that was a viable approach either in national security terms or in political terms.

Senator ROMNEY. Help me understand. Did we make an error in going from taking out the Taliban and removing al-Qaeda to a decision to, if you will, create a democratic nation of sorts? Was there

a change in mission that suggested a doomed mission from the outset?

Ambassador CROCKER. I do not think so, Senator. Let us recall that in the wake of 9/11 and the absolutely universal support for the United States at that difficult time led to the Bonn Conference in Germany in early December 2001 where the international community came together under U.N. auspices to set the stage for a new Afghanistan.

The Afghan interim authority was formed there with later President Karzai as its chairman. I do not think it would have been possible or conceivable for us to say we do not want to do that. We are just going to go after the bad guys. Forget all the rest of this stuff.

To me, that exists in some realm of science fiction, frankly.

Senator ROMNEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Murphy.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Crocker, I have an immense degree of respect for the dedication of your life to the security of this country.

I remember being a first-term, 33-year-old member of Congress and going to Iraq for my first time meeting you and being absolutely mesmerized by your complete control of the set of facts on the ground there.

So that makes it pretty shocking to me to sort of listen to what seems to be from you a complete lack of critical assessment of our 20-year adventure in Afghanistan and your answers to Senator Romney's question, an open-ended one, as to what we would do differently. You seem to suggest we would not have done anything differently, in retrospect.

Your writing on this, both for this committee and in public, is about the theme of strategic patience, just doing more of what we were doing for longer. I maybe want to just ask the question one more time because that is the whole intent of this hearing, to understand what went wrong.

Was there a design flaw in what we did in Afghanistan or were the mistakes just around the margin? Because it is hard to see what happened a few months ago—the complete overnight disintegration of the Government and military all at once—and read that we did not do anything wrong for 20 years.

I mean, let me just put that question to you again. Is your testimony that, at its essence, our policy was right and we just needed to do it for longer? Or do you find any central flaws in our strategy and policy in Afghanistan over the course of 20 years?

Ambassador CROCKER. I thought I had been pretty clear on that point, Senator, in saying that the process that President Trump launched of negotiating with the Taliban and without the Afghan Government and its subsequent embrace by President Biden, who even kept the same Afghanistan envoy, was a horrific mistake.

Does that mean that the status quo should just be continued? Of course, it does not. Look, when I was ambassador there 2011–2012, it was the height of the surge. We had over 100,000 American troops on the ground, and the Taliban was active, but it did not control a single provincial capital.

Under the Obama administration and subsequently, we reduced those numbers by 90 percent. At the time President Obama left office, I think we had 14,000 troops on the ground and the Taliban held no provincial capitals. Those numbers dropped from there.

Indeed, looking at the reporting I have seen, in that period between the end of the Obama administration and the beginning of the Trump administration, the Taliban was on its back foot with a hugely reduced number of troops.

I guess I just do not understand the point, Senator. We were drawing down very, very significantly and yet still able to support the Afghan National Security Forces in their effort to ensure that the Taliban could not take and hold any urban ground.

Senator MURPHY. Your primary criticism comes in year 19 so I am asking whether there was a flaw in design for years 1 through 18, and your focus on provincial capitals ignores the fact that by 2017 the Taliban controlled 73 different districts.

So you are right that they had chosen not to move on provincial capitals, but they had control of sizable amounts of territory.

Let me ask you the question this way. What does strategic patience look like, moving forward? Had we decided to stay, how much longer? If President Biden had said to the American people, listen, we are going to stick around for longer, what estimates should he have given as to how long would be long enough?

Ambassador CROCKER. That question, I think, Senator, is one of the enduring problems we suffer from. Give us a date. Mark the calendar. Tell us when we are done here. President Obama, of course, when he announced the surge also announced the withdrawal timetable.

I think that was a huge mistake. We cannot—

Senator MURPHY. I hear you. I hear you. I hear you in that. I hear you. Then let me give you the chance to answer differently.

Then if the timeline is impossible, what are the benchmarks? Why would we think that those benchmarks could be achieved in another 5 years or 10 years if we were so far away from those benchmarks being achieved in 20? What are the benchmarks and why believe that another 10 would allow us to achieve them?

Ambassador CROCKER. Again, the critical mission throughout those 20 years was ensuring that Afghan soil did not harbor elements who could make another attack on the U.S. homeland. Again, our ability to keep the Taliban off balance and on the defensive with an ever reducing number of forces, well, that is your answer.

You are not going to get total victory in an Afghan context or anywhere else. We do not do total war. We do not get total victories. We were managing a security challenge with a minimal number of U.S. forces and a much reduced budget impact. That is what I would have hoped we could continue.

For the President, either President, to say to the American people, this is about conditions and not calendar, the irony is, of course, that President Trump said exactly that. Had he stuck with it we might be in a very different place today.

Senator MURPHY. Mr. Chairman, ceding back, I think one of the outstanding questions is whether you could have continued with 2,500 troops, whether or not that was a sufficient number, knowing

that the Taliban was on the precipice of taking these provincial capitals, especially had we violated the agreement that President Trump had signed.

I think most observers would suggest that that number was not going to be sufficient, but that is a topic for another set of questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Paul.

Senator PAUL. Ambassador Crocker, your contention that the policy never changed, that the original policy to go after the people who attacked us on 9/11 and prevent them from attacking us again, that it has never morphed into nation building, I think, is accepted by virtually no one.

I think it is important to state that at the outset. The al-Qaeda threat had dwindled to a handful of fighters. There was absolutely no one giving us intelligence saying we were an imminent threat from anyone in Afghanistan. It had definitely morphed into nation building.

The lesson of the two-decade debacle in Afghanistan is not that we did not stay long enough. It is that we stayed too long. The lesson of nation building in Afghanistan is not that it works but that in Afghanistan it conspicuously failed.

Billions of dollars were spent on nation building in Afghanistan. In the end, hundreds of thousands of uniforms, automatic weapons, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, and planes were unceremoniously surrendered.

The 300,000-strong Afghan military and police laid down their weapons with barely a whimper. The President absconded and all the while maintained, hey, I did not steal that much, as he fled.

You sit before us telling us that the lesson of America's longest war is that we did not stay long enough? After 20 years that we did not practice strategic patience?

In the Afghan Papers, your candid opinion was less supportive of the Afghan nation-building experiment. You complained that the Afghan police force was utterly incompetent.

Others have commented on the graft of the Karzai family, on the drug dealing and outright theft by his brothers. Others have complained of provincial overlords so caught up in fleecing their subjects that the people actually willingly invited the Taliban in.

You think the lesson is that we should have stayed longer? The Inspector General for Afghanistan has documented the abundant waste of taxpayer dollars from a \$45 million natural gas station to a \$60 million hotel that was never built, as the contractor ran off with the money.

Even in the end, 20 years later, in this experiment that you wish to strategically be patient with, we were sending \$249 million in boxes of \$100 bills every 3 months to Afghanistan.

It has been admitted by experts, even today by members of this panel, that guess what, the aid does not fix corruption. You think sending \$249 billion in \$100 bills to Afghanistan every 3 months was somehow aiding and getting rid of corruption and you want us to be patient?

The lesson of Afghanistan is not that nation building works but that it is a colossal failure. Afghanistan never was South Korea and the parallels are scant at best. The lesson of Afghanistan is the same as it was for the British and for the Soviets. Stone-age clan-ish cultures are quite resistant to colonization and imposition of Western ways.

Biden's exit from Afghanistan was a military catastrophe. No one can dispute that. It was an unmitigated disaster, but it does not change the lesson that nation building is a fool's errand.

The lesson of the two-decade debacle in Afghanistan is not that we did not stay long enough; we stayed too long. You have counseled that the U.S. should have more strategic patience. I hope that does not mean you also advocate for sending troops back into Afghanistan.

Do you suggest that we should return to Afghanistan?

Ambassador CROCKER. Senator, I do not advocate nation building. I said, rather, the opposite. The construction projects were a bad idea, badly executed. The Afghans build their own nation. We cannot do it for them. I never suggested anything to the contrary.

I did say that our most successful programs did not involve bricks and mortars and it did not involve widespread corruption—the assistance we gave directly to the Afghan people in terms of improved educational opportunities, especially for women and girls, and for much better health care.

Now, look, I am not going to say and would never say no, we made a mistake. We should not have educated Afghans. We should not have stepped up for Afghan girls and women and ensured that they have the educational opportunities to be a full member of their society. That is not nation building. That is national security, Senator, and—

Senator PAUL. You still argued in the very end and up to this day that our mission was that it was a national security mission to defend the country from al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Almost no one argues that.

People readily admit it morphed into another mission. That is part of the problem. It morphed into nation building. Sending over \$249 million in cash every 3 months in \$100 bills is not exactly defending our national security.

I think your unwillingness to accept that the mission was not about preventing from al-Qaeda and was nation building in the end, really, I hope people will discount your opinion that we should have stayed forever in Afghanistan.

Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Kaine.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Risch, and thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

A point and then a set of questions. One point is this. Hearing about lessons learned from Afghanistan has kind of a past tense tone to it and I think we have to acknowledge that there—we are not talking purely in the past tense. There is an ongoing chapter that is a very important chapter.

The United States military helped bring 70,000 Afghan families—Afghans to the United States during this evacuation. The last chapter is not people trying to get on planes. No, there is an ongo-

ing chapter about 70,000 Afghans who were thrilled to have an opportunity for a life in the United States and the ongoing need that we have as members of Congress to make sure that their resettlement is as successful as possible.

Three of the bases where the Afghans have been relocated during the resettlement process are in Virginia—Quantico, Fort Pickett, and Fort Lee. The last Afghan left Fort Lee this morning. They had around 2,000, and Fort Lee is now—there are no Afghans there. We have resettled about 25,000 Afghans, have 45,000 still to resettle. Most are being resettled under a 2-year DHS humanitarian parole.

Congress needs to figure out what is the next chapter for these brave families who have helped the United States beyond that 2-year period. We have work to do on that. We have work to do to support the resettlement process.

I visited Fort Pickett last Wednesday, the day before Veterans Day, and I visited with our troops and with our contractors and with our physicians, but I also visited with a lot of Afghan families.

I told them tomorrow is Veterans Day in the United States and I got to give two Veterans Day speeches. If you were giving the speeches instead of me, what would you say to American troops and veterans? What I heard was so emotional, so gratifying, so powerful.

One young man told me, the Americans saved my life three times. I said, well, tell me what you mean by that. First, the American troops saved my life by coming to Afghanistan and rescuing us from chaos.

Second, the American troops saved my life. I started to work for them, and when my life was in danger they talked me into applying for an SIV and helped me get it, and I came to the United States in 2017 and I am safe here.

I said, well, what about the third time? You came here in 2017. American troops saved my life a third time just 2 months ago because U.S. Marines went out and found my mother and father, and made sure that they got to the airport in Kabul and now they are here with me. I never thought I would see them again, and you saved my life a third time by reconnecting me with my family.

As we talk about Afghanistan, I would not want to suggest that the last chapter are those disturbing pictures of chaos at the airport. No, the last chapter is the chapter we have to write for 70,000 Afghans, about 45 percent of whom are children, who we have brought to the United States, who we have given a new opportunity for a life in a land of better opportunity. We have to make sure that that resettlement process works and I am going to do all I can to make sure that it does.

I am going to pick up a little bit on Senator Paul's questions about time, and there is many lessons learned.

One lesson that I hope we will explore is congressional oversight of war. We are going to have a vote sometime in the next day or so, I believe, about repeal of the Iraq War authorizations. The war ended 10 years ago, but the authorizations remain on the books, and we are going to have a vote about whether we should repeal authorizations and not have a pending war authorization against a country that we now work as a partner with.

I worry a little bit about the war authorization for Afghanistan. It was passed in the days after 9/11 and, clearly, we needed to undertake military action to respond to that, but the war authorization had no geographic limitation. It had no real definition of what the mission was. It had no time limit on it. I wonder if, in the future—and if either of the witnesses have an opinion about this—we will be tested again and we will probably have to pass war authorizations again because it is a dangerous world.

I am pretty inclined to believe if we do these now we should have review periods and sunset periods that force really in-depth analysis of what is the mission now. How are we defining success? What are the benchmarks? Should we continue to invest American lives and treasure in this military mission?

I worry that the open-ended war authorizations that just kind of allow the executive to carry out war on autopilot are sort of an abdication of a congressional oversight responsibility.

My time is almost up, Mr. Chair. If you would allow either witness to answer that maybe. I would love to hear what they have to say.

The CHAIRMAN. All right. The gentleman has adeptly used all his time asking the question and posing the issues, but we will let the witnesses answer.

Ms. MILLER. I could offer a quick comment. I think what you have pointed to is one part of a very worrisome phenomenon of the over militarization of American foreign policy, and I think there are a couple of respects beyond the one that you pointed to where this was evident in Afghanistan.

One was that when you are militarily engaged in a country there is no problem getting the resources and support for the military effort, but there is still a lot of problem getting the resources and support for the diplomatic effort.

There is just an enormous power imbalance not only in terms of congressional policies and practices, but in terms of what happens within the executive branch in the decision-making processes, whose voices are loudest and more numerous at the table in the National Security Council.

There is a reason why these people get so many stars on their shoulder and it is because they have a kind of can-do attitude that attracts support, and you want that in a general, but that does not mean that they should have such a determinative effect on U.S. foreign policy decisions.

The second way in which I saw it was that skepticism about the plausibility of diplomatic initiatives, particularly peace negotiation initiatives in earlier years, always got in the way of real robust support for those initiatives in a way that skepticism about the plausibility of winning the war never seemed to get in the way of putting the warfighting effort front and center in U.S. policy.

That is a problem beyond Congress, but I think one that you can probably influence through your oversight.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Barrasso.

Senator BARRASSO. Thanks so much, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Crocker, first, I really appreciate your taking the time to join this discussion. I have great value for your experience

and service to our nation. You and I were together in Baghdad in 2007 during the surge on Thanksgiving Day.

In September of this year, you discussed the situation in Afghanistan stating this. You said, we have done grave damage to our friends and allies inside of Afghanistan, to our own national security interests, and to some of our most cherished values as Americans. I completely agree with your assessment.

In August, President Biden oversaw the tragic and failed withdrawal from Afghanistan. Due to this Administration's weakness, incompetence, and mismanagement, the Taliban took over Afghanistan in a matter of weeks.

Both General McKenzie and General Milley testified before Congress that they advised the President not to withdraw completely. They recommended keeping 2,500 troops in Afghanistan.

Yet, President Biden refused to take their advice. President Biden ordered a complete withdrawal and he abandoned Bagram Airbase. Just days before the withdrawal, terrorists killed 13 service members at the Kabul Airport.

One of those fallen heroes was Rylee McCollum of Wyoming. It was the deadliest day for the U.S. military in a decade. Media reports indicate the terrorist responsible had been released from prison at Bagram Airbase when it fell to the Taliban.

The consequences of President Biden's strategic failure have not ended. There are still Americans stranded behind enemy lines. The withdrawal was so rushed the Administration made serious vetting mistakes.

Our allies and our partners are furious. Our enemies are emboldened. It appears to many people that President Biden still believes that it was, "an extraordinary success." No one has been fired over the withdrawal from Afghanistan. No one has resigned. There has been no accountability.

I ask on behalf of so many veterans I saw in Wyoming the last week over Veterans Day this question: Who at the Department of State should be held accountable for the strategic failures and disorganized plans?

[No response.]

Senator BARRASSO. Ambassador Crocker, who should be held responsible for the strategic failures and the disorganized plans?

Ambassador CROCKER. Senator, that is a question that perhaps Congress could answer by holding other hearings, because I do think that answer is important. I will give you an historical parallel that I hope we do not pursue any further than we already have.

I was in Lebanon in the early 1980s as a political counselor. I was there when the embassy was bombed in 1983 April and I was there when the Marine barracks were bombed in October.

The blame reached no higher than the commander of the MOU, now a MEU—Marine Expeditionary Unit—Colonel Tim Geraghty. He was the only one to pay a significant price. No one above him in the chain of command, military or civilian, suffered any consequences for that horrible lapse.

Fast forward all these years later, it is the Marines, again, at an airport. It is the Marines, again, in a tactically totally disadvantageous position who paid the price.

Those Marines were not born in 1983. Their parents probably were not born in 1983, but I guarantee you every Marine out there then knew the story exactly and they did their duty anyway, and I hope that in assessing responsibility we will not stop at the MEU commander or the division commander there at the time.

Again, as I have said and as others have said, there is plenty of blame to go around here. President Biden was the sitting President who ordered the final withdrawal. He owns it, but it is equally true that President Trump set us all on a course that led to what we are dealing with now.

Senator BARRASSO. Ambassador Crocker, after President Biden's strategic failure in Afghanistan we have seen the consequences of this weakness all across the world.

China has aggressively flown dozens of military planes over Taiwan's air defense zones. China is also building up its military, testing hypersonic weapons. An emboldened Putin is amassing a large Russian military buildup with—they are doing this on the border with Ukraine right now including an estimated 100,000 troops.

Russia is threatening Europe's energy security, withholding gas supplies to Europe. North Korea is launching ballistic missiles from submarines and Iranian helicopters repeatedly buzzed a U.S. naval ship. Iranian-backed Houthis stormed the U.S. embassy in Yemen and held local U.S.-employed staff hostage.

What actions, Ambassador Crocker, must the United States take immediately to reestablish a deterrent and prevent the destabilizing actions of so many adversaries around the world?

Ambassador CROCKER. Senator, the United States needs to reassert its position as a global leader. We led the world from 1945 up until the last two presidencies. President Biden said that he would return us to the world stage in a leadership role.

This would be a great time for him to take the concrete steps toward that end to reassure our allies that America is not withdrawing from the world and to do that, where necessary, in concrete terms.

Look, everybody gets tired, I suppose, of leadership. We have led the world. Not always for the best, but overall, I think we have been a hugely positive force on the world stage for over 70 years since World War II.

My view is we need to keep playing that role because if we do not no one else will. It is not that the Chinese will replace us. They cannot, and would not even try. It is that no one will, and we then reenter a balance of power system, which is great until it gets unbalanced, as we saw in World War I and World War II.

It is this critical need for the U.S. to lead, for President Biden—who has, certainly, talked the talk on that and then did everything opposite in Afghanistan—for him to reassert his intention for both our allies and our adversaries that the United States is not withdrawing from the world.

Senator BARRASSO. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Van Hollen.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you both for your service and your testimony.

I will start with you, Ms. Miller. I have been listening carefully and we know the facts that President Biden inherited. I think he inherited an impossible hand.

The Trump administration, first, pressured the Pakistani Government to release top Taliban commanders who played a key role in the ultimate takeover of Kabul. They then, as you have testified, undercut entirely the Afghan Government by not including them within the negotiations, signaling to the Afghan people that we had no interest in the long run in supporting that government.

Then we, essentially, ordered that government, strong-armed that government, to releasing 5,000 prisoners that were in their custody. Then we said to the Taliban, do not attack U.S. forces, but continue to attack the Afghan forces with impunity.

Then we agreed to other measures that limited the scope of our own operations, and then President Trump said, we are going to have all U.S. forces out of Afghanistan in April and then criticized President Biden when that date passed.

It was an impossible hand the President was dealt, President Biden, by his predecessor, but let us look forward now because the time to try to use our influence to pressure the Taliban before the takeover of Kabul, obviously, has passed.

The question is now how do you assess the prospects and what do you think has to be our strategy in getting the Taliban to agree to the conditions that we put forward and where we are trying to rally the international community to continue to join us?

Things like an inclusive government, things like protecting the rights of women, girls, and minorities, and things like making sure that Afghanistan is not used as a platform for organizations to launch terrorist attacks against the United States and others?

How do you assess, given what you know of the Taliban, what the prospects are using the leverage of money and international pressure to achieve those goals?

Ms. MILLER. Thank you.

Senator, the Taliban are going to be Taliban. There is not going to be any leverage that can be used against them that will cause them to change their core ideology or their core policies and practices.

I do not expect we are going to see elections in Afghanistan. I think if there were any greater inclusivity in the Government in the sense of appointing a few more representatives of minority groups, those people would have no power in the Government, even if that was done. They are a small, secretive, cliquish group and they are going to govern Afghanistan that way.

That said, there is some prospect of engaging with them on a modest to-do list of items that could have some benefit for women and girls and others in the population.

There is some prospect that they would allow some programs and projects supporting women and girls to go ahead if there is engagement with them in what they regard as a more positive rather than punitive way.

I do not want to overstate it. I am not suggesting there is going to be a transformation of the Taliban, but I do think that there is some modest room for negotiation with them.

On the, I think—for the U.S. crucial question of counterterrorism, I think there is scope for private nonpublic engagement with them not to get them to expel al-Qaeda from the country, not to get them to declare that they are breaking ties, but to get them to do what they said they would do in the agreement signed with the U.S., which was fairly limited, which is keep a lid on them.

There is, I think, some prospect of that, but I do not think we will hear about it publicly and it will not be something you can use as a justification, therefore, for engaging with them.

It is important to work closely, at least to talk extensively with Pakistan and others about that, because other countries in the region of Afghanistan are worried about the terrorist threat, perhaps even more than the U.S., because it is more immediate for them.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you for that answer. I agree with your skepticism on the Taliban, but we need to continue to use the tools we have got.

Ambassador Crocker, I just have sort of a one-word question to you. You mentioned in your testimony Pakistan. It seems to me we should right now be engaging much more fully with the Government of Pakistan with respect to the way forward in Afghanistan and the region.

What is your assessment, as someone who has served as ambassador there and many other places in the region?

Ambassador CROCKER. Senator, I think it is critical for us to step forward with Pakistan. They have a lot to answer for, to say the least. We have to be very focused, though, on the consequences for Pakistan and for the rest of the region and, indeed, internationally if they are seriously weakened as a government.

We have nominated a superb individual as Ambassador Don Blome, who knows how to do this stuff. I served with him in Iraq. It would be really great if the Senate could confirm him and get him into position to lead those talks for the U.S. inside of Pakistan.

Again, it is a nuclear-armed nation. It faces a threat, of course, from the Pakistani Taliban as it does from the jihadi forces focused on Kashmir, forces that were created by Pakistan at the time of partition and now which they have lost control of.

At the same time, it is a perfect storm, if you will. The policies of Prime Minister Modi in India, in my personal view, have angered and disenfranchised, if you will, the Muslim population of Kashmir.

So here we are, a resurgent Taliban—everyone around is taking notes—in a complex environment where the lid could really blow off of this.

Yes, this is a moment for all-in diplomatic engagement, talking in the region and talking beyond with our traditional allies. We need to get on this. We are not going to be able to do very much unilaterally in Afghanistan. We have given up that leverage.

We need to work, again, with the United Nations, with neighboring states, with our established alliances like NATO to figure out how we are going to contain the forces that our withdrawal from Afghanistan has set in motion.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Hagerty.

Senator HAGERTY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Ms. Miller, thank you for being here in person today.

Ambassador Crocker, thank you for your service and I appreciate your participation. I want you to know that I wish the very best for your wife's speedy recovery. I have her in my prayers.

Ms. Miller, I would like to turn to you to, first, talk about frozen Afghan assets that are present here in America.

As you know, the Biden administration has frozen some \$10 billion worth of Afghan assets here. The Administration's hope seems to be that through financial leverage they can somehow control and moderate the way the Taliban governs and treats its citizens.

In my view, the only leverage we have left with the Taliban is the financial leverage that we have in place right now. Sadly, all other aspects of leverage have been taken off the table.

According to press reports, in October, Taliban negotiators have asked the United States to unfreeze these \$10 billion dollars' worth of financial assets. In October, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said that the sanctions would remain in place and, at the same time, allow for the legitimate flow of humanitarian assistance. This seemed to open a window.

I will come back to what the State Department said the month prior in September. The State Department indicated that they were going to send some \$64 million worth of aid and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan via U.N. agencies.

I am very concerned about how this might happen. You, in your own testimony, or you in your statements have said that the Biden administration has now a sum of each policy, I believe how you worded it. That is, some sort of effort toward engagement, some toward isolation, and in your testimony you noted that we are on a collision course between policies of engagement and isolation.

My question for you, from your perspective, does the Biden administration have a clear strategy with respect to Afghanistan, one that will keep pressure where it belongs and not enrich or bail out the Taliban at a time when its control over the Government of Afghanistan is, frankly, quite teetering?

I would be very interested in your analysis on what the Biden administration might hope to achieve here and whether they have a clear strategy to do that.

Ms. MILLER. My observation is that we are in a phase of, I would say, the Administration feeling its way toward a policy. I do not think there have been any clear public pronouncements yet that would make it evident what the policy is, though there have been some statements of what the limitations are at the moment of what the U.S. is prepared to do, such as the statement from the Deputy Treasury Secretary that you identified.

I think we are not seeing a lot of clarity publicly about what the policy is because, well, my interpretation is it is because the policy is still being formulated and that there is a desire to continue to help Afghanistan through humanitarian aid, and the United States has been generous with strictly humanitarian aid, provided directly to Afghans through U.N. and NGO agencies.

Beyond that, it is unclear how far they will go, recognizing that humanitarian aid alone cannot prevent the kind of humanitarian crisis and economic collapse that is already happening.

If you are only giving humanitarian aid then you are in a situation like this. You are pretty much guaranteeing a perpetual humanitarian emergency because it does not provide jobs. It does not get the economy started. It does not deal with the fact that there is just a lack of cash in the Afghan economy now.

There are a number of proposals that are under development by the U.N., the World Bank, and others to find some ways short of unfreezing the Central Bank assets of Afghanistan that could inject some support and some money into the Afghan economy, using the World Bank, using the U.N.

It is not a perfect solution, these ideas, and it cannot be guaranteed that this would have zero positive effects for the Taliban to consolidate their grip on power, but it could save a lot of Afghan lives.

Senator HAGERTY. I, certainly, appreciate the need to save Afghan lives. We have seen far too many lost, based on the failure of our execution there.

At the same time, we have an Afghan Government that is teetering. They are infighting. They do not have experience governing. The last thing I think we should do is provide any avenue to bail them out right now, and I think we need to be extraordinarily careful as we look at any step toward unfreezing these assets at this point. I do not see any appropriate way to do that.

Thank you very much for being here. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you. Thank you to both of our witnesses for some very important insights. There is a lot more ground to cover, but the pressing time of other commitments will not allow us to do so, but I think you have both provided some very important insights.

The record for this hearing will remain open until the close of business on Thursday, November 18, of 2021. I would ask members to ensure that questions for the record are submitted no later than Thursday.

We, certainly, would look forward to your answers as further helping us understand what has happened over the last 20 years and what lessons are to be learned. I think we have gleaned some today.

With the thanks of this committee, the hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:11 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]