

TO: Interested Parties

FROM: National Security Council Spokesperson Adrienne Watson

RE: Recently Released Partisan Report on the Afghanistan Withdrawal

- This partisan report is riddled with inaccurate characterizations, cherry-picked information, and false claims. It advocates for endless war and for sending even more American troops to Afghanistan. And it ignores the impacts of the flawed deal that former President Trump struck with the Taliban.
- When President Biden took office, he was faced with a choice: ramp up the war and put even more American troops at risk, or finally end the United States' longest war after two decades of American presidents sending U.S. troops to fight and die in Afghanistan and \$2 trillion spent. The President refused to send another generation of Americans to fight a war that should have ended long ago – and we fundamentally disagree with those who advocated for miring the United States' fighting men and women in an indefinite war with no exit strategy.
- Bringing our troops home strengthened our national security by better positioning us to confront the challenges of the future and put the United States in a stronger place to lead the world. It freed up critical military, intelligence, and other resources to ensure we are better poised to respond to today's threats to international peace and stability – whether that be Russia's brutal and unprovoked assault on Ukraine, China's increasingly assertive moves in the Indo-Pacific and around the world, or a persistent terrorist threat that's gone global and not constrained to Afghanistan.
- The United States does not need a permanent troop presence on the ground in harm's way to remain vigilant against terrorism threats or to remove the world's most wanted terrorist from the battlefield. We just demonstrated unequivocally in the recent Zawahiri strike to take out the leader of Al Qaeda.

What We Inherited:

- Former President Trump's 2020 agreement with the Taliban empowered the Taliban, weakened our partners in the Afghan government, and committed to withdrawing our troops a few months after President Biden's inauguration – with no clear plan for what should come next.
- As CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie – who served under both Presidents Trump and Biden – [testified](#): “The signing of the Doha agreement had a really pernicious effect on the government of Afghanistan and on its military — psychological more than anything else, but we set a date-certain for when we were going to leave and when they could expect all assistance to end.”
- When we took office, the Taliban was in its strongest military position since 2001, former President Trump had released thousands of Taliban fighters from prison, and we had the smallest number of U.S. troops on the ground. Yet the Trump Administration had

dismantled our nation's refugee programs and SIV interviews had been halted for nearly a year by the previous administration, allowing a massive backlog of SIV applications to build. No preparations had been made to begin evacuating our Afghan allies.

False Choice: Maintaining Status Quo Wasn't an Option

- Our top intelligence professionals assessed – and recent history had shown – that we'd ultimately need to send *more* American troops into harm's way just to keep the stalemate in a 20-year war from degrading. The President rejected the impossible notion that a so-called low-grade effort could have maintained a stalemate. There's nothing low-grade, low-risk, or low-cost about any war – and there were no signs that even more time, funds, or even more importantly Americans at risk in Afghanistan, would have yielded different results.

Fact Check:

Claim: We could have kept 2,500 troops in Afghanistan and that would have been sufficient

Reality: As Secretary Austin and Chairman Milley said in congressional testimony last fall, the tough decision the President faced when taking office ultimately wasn't to stay or go: it was go or risk having to send even more U.S. troops to fight in a newly intensified 20-year civil war. They testified we would have had to deploy more forces in order to protect ourselves and accomplish any missions they would have been assigned.

Chairman Milley 9/29/21: “**There's a reasonable prospect we would have to increase forces past 2500, given the Taliban very likely was going to start attacking us.**”

Secretary Austin 9/28/21: “**If you stayed [in Afghanistan] at a force posture of 2,500, certainly you'd be in a fight with the Taliban, and you'd have to reinforce yourself.**”

- Remember, when the Trump administration came into office, there were 8,400 troops in Afghanistan and he had to *add* thousands more just to keep the situation from deteriorating further, bringing the total U.S. forces to more than 14,500. During the final year of his presidency, after signing a deal with the Taliban that committed us to leave Afghanistan, former President Trump withdrew 10,000 U.S. troops from Afghanistan and released 5,000 Taliban prisoners. When President Biden took office, we had the fewest U.S. troops in two decades in Afghanistan and the Taliban was at their strongest position in nearly 20 years. The speed with which the Taliban took over the country shows why maintaining 2,500 troops was not going to cut it and would not have sustained a stable, peaceful Afghanistan.

Claim: We are less safe today because of the withdrawal because Al Qaeda has reconstituted and Afghanistan has become a terrorist haven.

Reality: The Intelligence Community assesses that al-Qa'ida has not reconstituted its presence in Afghanistan since the U.S. departure in August 2021 – and that Ayman al-Zawahiri was the only

key al-Qa'ida figure who attempted to reestablish their presence in country. They also assess that:

- Al-Qa'ida does not have a capability to launch attacks against the U.S. or its interests abroad from Afghanistan;
- There are less than a dozen al-Qa'ida core members who remain in Afghanistan and they probably were located there prior to the fall of Kabul;
- Neither the few remaining al-Qa'ida core members nor its regional affiliate are plotting to attack the Homeland, and we have no indication that these individuals are involved in external attack plotting.

Claim: The Biden administration was not prepared for the speed of the Taliban retaking Kabul and an evacuation.

Reality: Former President Trump's 2020 agreement with the Taliban:

- Agreed to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan by May 1 2021, without conditions
- Released 5,000 Taliban fighters from prison
- Invited the Taliban to Camp David

This agreement empowered the Taliban and weakened our partners in the Afghan government. When we took office, the Taliban was in its strongest military position since 2001 – and we had the smallest number of U.S. troops on the ground. The Trump Administration had not conducted SIV interviews for nearly a year and made no preparations to evacuate our Afghan allies.

We surged resources into improving the SIV program and approved a record number of SIVs in the months leading up to the fall of Kabul. We did extensive contingency planning throughout the spring and summer of 2021 and pre-positioned troops in the region, which enabled us to facilitate the evacuation of more than 120,000 people – including more than 70,000 Afghans who we have welcomed to communities across our country through a whole-of-government effort called Operation Allies Welcome.

Claim: America has less credibility on the world stage because of the Afghanistan withdrawal and our adversaries are emboldened

Reality: President Biden has rebuilt our alliances and restored our credibility on the world stage after four years of former President Trump's presidency damaged America's reputation and left us increasingly isolated internationally and from our allies and partners. Look no further than our response to Russia's war on Ukraine and how President Biden has rallied the world and built a coalition of countries to support Ukraine and support measures to hold Russia accountable.