

## **U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan**

*This document outlines the key decisions and challenges surrounding the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.*

When he came into office, President Biden believed the right thing for the country was to end the longest war in American history and bring American troops home. As he laid out to the American people, after twenty years, the United States had accomplished its mission in Afghanistan: to remove from the battlefield the terrorists who attacked the United States on 9/11, including Osama bin Laden, and degrade the terrorist threat to the United States. Over two decades, the United States had also—along with our NATO allies and partners—spent hundreds of billions of dollars training and equipping the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and supporting successive Afghan governments. At the outset, America’s goal was never to nation-build. But, over time, this is what America drifted into doing. Two decades after the war had started, America had become bogged down in a war in Afghanistan with unclear objectives and no end in sight and was underinvesting in today’s and tomorrow’s national security challenges.

President Biden’s choices for how to execute a withdrawal from Afghanistan were severely constrained by conditions created by his predecessor. When President Trump took office in 2017, there were more than 10,000 troops in Afghanistan. Eighteen months later, after introducing more than 3,000 additional troops just to maintain the stalemate, President Trump ordered direct talks with the Taliban without consulting with our allies and partners or allowing the Afghan government at the negotiating table. In September 2019, President Trump emboldened the Taliban by publicly considering inviting them to Camp David on the anniversary of 9/11. In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban reached a deal, known as the Doha Agreement, under which the United States agreed to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by May 2021. In return, the Taliban agreed to participate in a peace process and refrain from attacking U.S. troops and threatening Afghanistan’s major cities—but only as long as the United States remained committed to withdraw by the agreement’s deadline. As part of the deal, President Trump also pressured the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban fighters from prison, including senior war commanders, without securing the release of the only American hostage known to be held by the Taliban.

Over his last 11 months in office, President Trump ordered a series of drawdowns of U.S. troops. By June 2020, President Trump reduced U.S. troops in Afghanistan to 8,600. In September 2020, he directed a further draw down to 4,500. A month later, President Trump tweeted, to the surprise of military advisors, that the remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan should be “home by Christmas!” On September 28, 2021, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Milley testified that, on November 11, he had received an unclassified signed order directing the U.S. military to withdraw all forces from Afghanistan no later than January 15, 2021. One week later, that order was rescinded and replaced with one to draw down to 2,500 troops by the same date. During the transition from the Trump Administration to the Biden Administration, the

outgoing Administration provided no plans for how to conduct the final withdrawal or to evacuate Americans and Afghan allies. Indeed, there were no such plans in place when President Biden came into office, even with the agreed upon full withdrawal just over three months away.

As a result, when President Biden took office on January 20, 2021, the Taliban were in the strongest military position that they had been in since 2001, controlling or contesting nearly half of the country. At the same time, the United States had only 2,500 troops on the ground—the lowest number of troops in Afghanistan since 2001—and President Biden was facing President Trump’s near-term deadline to withdraw *all* U.S. forces from Afghanistan by May 2021, or the Taliban would resume its attacks on U.S. and allied troops. Secretary of Defense Austin testified on September 28, 2021, “the intelligence was clear that if we did not leave in accordance with that agreement, the Taliban would recommence attacks on our forces.”

This experience underscores the critical importance of detailed and effective transition coordination, especially when it comes to complex military operations for which decisions and execution pass from one administration to the next, and consequential deals struck late in the outgoing administration whose implementation will fall largely to the incoming administration.

### **Decision to Leave**

President Biden had committed to ending the war in Afghanistan, but when he came into office he was confronted with difficult realities left to him by the Trump Administration. President Biden asked his military leaders about the options he faced, including the ramifications of further delaying the deadline of May 1. He pressed his intelligence professionals on whether it was feasible to keep 2,500 troops in Afghanistan and both defend them against a renewed Taliban onslaught and maintain a degree of stability in the country. The assessment from those intelligence professionals was that the United States would need to send *more* American troops into harm’s way to ensure our troops could defend themselves and to stop the stalemate from getting worse. As Secretary Austin testified on September 28, 2021, “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.” Chairman Milley testified on September 29, 2021, “There’s a reasonable prospect we would have to increase forces past 2,500, given the Taliban very likely was going to start attacking us.” There were no signs that more time, more funds, or more Americans at risk in Afghanistan would have yielded a fundamentally different trajectory. Indeed, the speed with which the Taliban took over the country showed why maintaining 2,500 troops would not have sustained a stable and peaceful Afghanistan.

In early 2021, as these discussions were taking place, the intelligence and military consensus was that the ANDSF would be able to effectively fight to defend their country and their capital, Kabul. The ANDSF had significant advantages. Compared to the Taliban, they had vastly superior numbers and equipment: 300,000 troops compared to 80,000 Taliban fighters, an air force, and two decades of training and support. The Intelligence Community's assessment in early 2021 was that Taliban advances would accelerate across large portions of Afghanistan *after* a complete U.S. military withdrawal and potentially lead to the Taliban's capturing Kabul within a year or two. As late as May 2021, the assessment was still that Kabul would probably not come under serious pressure until late 2021 *after* U.S. troops departed.

Faced with these circumstances, President Biden undertook a deliberate, intensive, rigorous, and inclusive decision-making process. His thinking was informed by extensive consultations with his national security team, including military leaders, as well as outside experts, Members of Congress, allies and partners. The President asked for and received candid advice from a wide array of experts inside of and outside of government. As Secretary Austin testified on September 28, 2021, "I am very much satisfied that we had a thorough policy review, and I believe that all of the parties had an opportunity to provide input. And that input was received." Chairman Milley also testified on September 28, 2021, that the commanders on the ground "were listened to" and had an opportunity to share their advice.

The Administration engaged in intensive consultation at senior levels with allies, and the President factored in their feedback and their differences of opinion. Secretary of State Blinken testified on September 13, 2021, "I heard a lot of gratitude from allies and partners about the work that our folks did in making sure that we could deliver on that commitment [to consult] to them." NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg also rejected the characterization the President did not consult allies in a September 10, 2021, interview: "You see different voices in Europe, and some are talking about the lack of consultation, but I was present in those meetings. Of course, the United States consulted with European allies, but at the end of the day, every nation has to make their own decision on deploying forces."

Ultimately, President Biden refused to send another generation of Americans to fight a war that should have ended for the United States long ago.

### **Planning for the Withdrawal**

While recognizing the strategic necessity of withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan, President Biden and his team were well aware of the challenges posed by withdrawing from a warzone after twenty years—especially under the circumstances that they inherited. The departing Trump Administration had left the Biden Administration with a date for withdrawal, but no plan for executing it. And after four years of neglect—and in some cases deliberate degradation—crucial systems, offices, and agency functions that would be necessary for a safe and orderly departure were in disrepair.

When President Biden took office, the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program for Afghans who had worked with our soldiers and diplomats required a 14-step process based on a statutory framework enacted by Congress and involved multiple government agencies. The Trump Administration's disregard and even hostility toward our commitment to Afghan allies led to a massive backlog of over 18,000 SIV applicants. Despite drawing down troops and committing to a full withdrawal, the departing Trump Administration had all but stopped SIV interviews. Refugee support services had been gutted and personnel dramatically reduced, lowering admissions to historic lows and forcing more than 100 refugee resettlement facilities in the United States to close. And the Federal career workforce had been hollowed out. In November 2020, as President Biden was preparing to take office, the Department of State employed 12 percent fewer employees than it had four years earlier, leaving critical gaps.

Immediately after taking office—and even before he had made a final decision to leave Afghanistan—President Biden instructed departments and agencies to begin doing the necessary work to increase capacity, in part to facilitate a withdrawal on the timeline required. During his first two weeks in office, President Biden signed Executive Order 14013 requiring departments and agencies to surge resources and streamline the application process for SIV applicants. On February 2, the Department of State resumed SIV interviews in Kabul. State doubled the number of SIV adjudicators at Embassy Kabul and quintupled the number of staff processing SIV applications—from 10 to 50—in Washington, D.C. As a result of this surge, the United States went from issuing 100 SIVs a week in March to more than 1000 a week in July, and, working with Congress to streamline the process, reduced the average SIV processing time by more than one year. In July, the United States issued a record number of SIVs to our Afghan allies and began running the first ever SIV relocation flights.

From the beginning, President Biden directed that preparations for a potential U.S. withdrawal include planning for *all* contingencies—including a rapid deterioration of the security situation—even though intelligence at the time deemed this situation unlikely. In March, before he had made his final decision, the President directed his top national security officials—including the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Advisor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Director for National Intelligence—to begin withdrawal planning and account for a full range of contingencies. Once the President made his final decision, national security teams accelerated the planning that was already underway. Throughout the spring and summer, the National Security Council (NSC) staff hosted dozens of high-level planning meetings, formal rehearsals of the withdrawal, and tabletop exercises to explore scenarios for an evacuation as part of responsible planning for a range of contingencies, even those that were actually worse than the worst-case predictions.

Throughout this period, a Non-Combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) was treated as a distinct possibility and the national security team started planning for it. In March, departments and agencies were tasked with outlining plans for multiple scenarios, including a security environment that would require the departure of *all* U.S. personnel from Afghanistan. In April, departments and agencies were specifically tasked with

updating the NEO planning documents. In May, NSC staff held a senior interagency meeting that included a discussion of several specific complex issues related to a NEO, including timing, evacuee destination sites, processing, vetting, and transport logistics. It was agreed that—because of the extreme complexity and careful planning required—a dedicated group of interagency experts would regularly convene to conduct NEO planning. In a meeting of national security leadership that same month, departments and agencies were tasked with ensuring relocation plans were ready in the event of a significant deterioration in the security situation.

In line with that planning, in early summer, President Biden directed military assets to be prepositioned in the region to be able to help with an evacuation on short notice. It was this decision that later enabled the United States to respond and deploy quickly enough to facilitate the successful evacuation of over 124,000 American citizens, permanent residents, Afghan partners, and allies.

President Biden took the advice of his military commanders on the tactical decisions regarding the operational retrograde of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, including the dates they closed facilities, and he regularly asked them if there was anything else they needed.

As planning intensified throughout the late spring and early summer, intelligence reports continued to suggest that—even if the Taliban made gains in some Afghan provinces—the capital, Kabul, would be more difficult for the Taliban to take and the ANDSF would defend it. In addition, President Biden urged the Afghan government to take steps to harden the resolve of the Afghan forces, including by empowering Acting Defense Minister Bismillah Khan Mohammadi—who U.S. commanders had assessed to be a capable combat leader—and pressed current and former Afghan officials to project a united front of support for the Afghan forces.

As this experience underscored, when conducting contingency planning, it is necessary to plan early and extensively for low probability, high-risk scenarios. In addition, in light of the challenges of assessing psychological factors like “willingness to fight,” it is especially important to incorporate creative analytic exercises in planning. Some of the most accurate insights that surfaced in the months of planning on Afghanistan came from conducting simulation exercises. Our experience in Afghanistan directly informed the Administration’s decision to set up a small group of experts (“tiger team”) for worst-case scenario planning on Ukraine—including simulation exercises—months ahead of Russia’s invasion. We were ultimately relieved that, due to the bravery of the Ukrainian people, the leadership of President Zelenskyy, and the rallying of support from allies and partners with U.S. leadership, Russia’s invasion has failed to achieve its objectives. But we were ready for a range of contingencies, and we remain ready.

## **Warning about Potential Evacuation**

As the security situation in Afghanistan worsened over the summer, the Administration grappled with the tension between highlighting growing warning signs of potential collapse and undermining confidence in the Government of Afghanistan and Afghan forces' will to fight. Whenever a government is threatened by the prospect of collapse—whether in Afghanistan or elsewhere—there is an obvious tension between signaling confidence in the capabilities of the current government and providing warning of the risks that it might fail.

Ultimately, the Administration made a decision to engage in unprecedentedly extensive targeted outreach to Americans and Afghan partners about the risk of collapse, including numerous security alerts and tens of thousands of direct phone calls and messages to U.S. citizens in particular to leave Afghanistan, but to not broadcast loudly and publicly about a potential worst-case scenario unfolding in order to avoid signaling a lack of confidence in the ANDSF or the Afghan government's position. This calculus was made based on the prevailing intelligence and military view throughout the early weeks of August that Kabul would hold beyond the end of the withdrawal. As Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated on August 18, 2021, “[the collapse] unfolded more quickly than [the Intelligence Community] anticipated.” In fact, the collapse was more rapid than either the Taliban or the Afghan government expected.

In a destabilizing security environment, we now err on the side of aggressive communication about risks. We did this in advance of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Months before the invasion, we proactively released intelligence with trusted partners. That engagement broadened—and grew louder and more public—in the weeks leading up to Russia's invasion. This approach met strong objections from senior officials in the Ukrainian government who were concerned such warnings would spark panic and precipitate capital flight, damaging the Ukrainian economy. However, our clear and unvarnished warnings enabled the United States to take advantage of a critical window before the invasion to organize with our allies, plan the swift execution of our response, and enable Americans in Ukraine to depart safely.

## **Triggering the Evacuation**

Beginning in March, NSC staff led a rigorous process of reviewing conditions at the U.S. Embassy to ensure the safety of all official U.S. personnel in Kabul, consistent with our approach to all U.S. diplomatic posts around the world. A drawdown of U.S. personnel on the ground was undertaken consistent with the threat environment, but core personnel remained. Even as many Embassy personnel returned to the United States, we sent more consular officers to Kabul to process SIV applications. The Administration also made a decision to operate regular flights of SIVs starting in July, rather than initiate a massive airlift evacuation at that time, in the expectation of continuing embassy operations and SIV departures after the military withdrawal was complete.

Intelligence indicated that the ANDSF would likely defend Kabul, and an order to begin the NEO unnecessarily could have triggered a collapse by undermining confidence in the ANDSF. Chairman Milley testified on September 28, 2021, that “[even during that time, there was] no intel assessment that says the government’s going to collapse and the military’s going to collapse in 11 days... [At that time, the assessments] are still talking weeks, perhaps months.”

On August 6, the first provincial capital fell. As the Taliban gained control of territory, President Biden asked his top national security leaders to assess whether to formally begin the NEO. NSC convened a senior interagency meeting on August 8, which unanimously recommended against beginning the NEO based on conditions on the ground. National security leaders met on August 9 and concluded conditions on the ground did not support triggering a NEO. On August 11, at the recommendation of his senior military advisors, the President authorized the deployment of pre-planned assets and personnel for a range of contingencies. The President stayed in close contact with his team, confirming daily they had what they needed. On August 13 and 14, Kabul came under direct threat. On August 14, President Biden announced that, at the recommendation of his diplomatic, military, and intelligence teams, he had formally initiated the NEO and ordered the deployment of additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan to support the evacuation.

We now prioritize earlier evacuations when faced with a degrading security situation. We did so in both Ethiopia and Ukraine. When the capitals of both countries were threatened, the President directed adjustments in the posture of the embassies by drawing down or evacuating embassy personnel. In Ethiopia, we drew down all non-emergency personnel at the Embassy well in advance of any potential threat. We did this despite the vigorous objections of the Ethiopian government. In Ukraine, we decided to evacuate personnel nearly two weeks before Russia’s invasion, despite concerns by some close allies, partners, and the Ukrainians themselves that doing so would undermine confidence in Ukraine. This decision resulted in an orderly departure and enabled our teams to safely carry out critical functions remotely for nearly three months.

### **The Evacuation and the Attack at Abbey Gate**

As a result of several months of contingency planning, troops had already been prepositioned near Afghanistan in case they were needed, and the additional forces that President Biden deployed on August 14 were on the ground in Kabul within 48 hours. Within 72 hours they had secured Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) so that flights could resume.

Once the evacuation had been initiated, President Biden repeatedly gave clear direction to prioritize force protection, relying on the advice of his senior military officials on how best to proceed on operational decisions. As Secretary Blinken testified on September 14, 2021, “Because of that [earlier] planning [for a wide range of contingencies], we were able to draw down our Embassy and move our remaining personnel to the airport

within 48 hours.” The U.S. Government facilitated the safe departure of remaining personnel and their families, roughly 2,500 people during the evacuation. To manage the potential threat of a terrorist attack, the President repeatedly asked whether the military required additional support to carry out their mission at HKIA. Senior military officials confirmed that they had sufficient resources and authorities to mitigate threats, including those posed by ISIS-K.

On August 25, the President was advised by senior military officials that continuing evacuations for 48 more hours presented manageable risk to the force and the highest possibility of success in evacuating American citizens and Afghan partners. The entire national security team, including senior military officials, supported this commitment to continuing operations, despite known risks, and the President accepted the recommendation to extend evacuation operations for this period.

During the NEO, specific decisions about which gates would be used to access the airport were made by commanders on the ground. On the afternoon of August 25, the commanders decided to keep Abbey Gate open to facilitate the evacuation of U.K. forces and Afghan partners. According to the 2021 U.S. Central Command report, “If the JTF-CR [Joint Task-Force-Crisis Response] Commander decide to close Abbey Gate while U.K. Forces were still processing evacuees, it would have isolated them at Baron Hotel.” On the evening of August 26, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive outside of Abbey Gate, killing 13 service members and 170 Afghans, while injuring 45 other service members, a tragic human toll. We continue to mourn the loss of the 13 heroes and vow to continue to support their families and the injured who survived. After the horrific attack at Abbey Gate, the President consulted senior military officials on whether to end the NEO immediately. He was advised the threat to U.S. forces was manageable and to continue until August 31 to maximize the evacuations of Americans, allied forces, and Afghan partners.

U.S. forces remained vigilant to protect against further attacks while the evacuation proceeded. The day after the attack, August 27, the U.S. military launched a drone strike in Nangarhar Province, killing two high profile ISIS-K individuals. On August 29, as the evacuation neared completion—and in the aftermath of the horrific Abbey Gate attack—reports emerged of movements of vehicles and individuals linked to the attack on Abbey Gate, indicating that a further terrorist attack on U.S. personnel at HKIA could be imminent. To counter the perceived immediate threat, the U.S. military launched a drone strike in Kabul that mistakenly killed ten civilians. Among the causes of this tragic error was that the high-risk and dynamic threat environment led the team to inaccurately assess that the target posed an imminent threat to those on the ground.

The President received and accepted the unanimous advice of his top national security officials to end the evacuation on August 31, given the high potential for escalating attacks on U.S. troops should they stay any longer. From the beginning of the evacuation on August 14 to its completion on August 31, U.S. military and civilian personnel engaged in an around the clock effort to execute the largest airlift of non-combatants in U.S. history. As Secretary Austin explained on September 28, 2021, “On military aircraft alone, we flew more than 387 sorties, averaging nearly 23 per day. At



the height of this operation an aircraft was taking off every 45 minutes. And not a single sortie was missed for maintenance, fuel, or logistical problems. It was the largest airlift conducted in U.S. history, and it was executed in 17 days.”

The Department of Defense conducted detailed after-action reviews of the tragic attack that took American and other lives at Abbey Gate and of the drone strike that tragically killed ten civilians, and implemented their lessons learned. After the Kabul strike, the Secretary of Defense ordered a 90-day review of how the Department of Defense could better avoid civilian casualties in its activities, and has implemented new policies to do so.

### **Keeping Our Promise to American Citizens and Afghan Partners**

When President Biden made his decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan, he made a commitment to provide every American who wanted to leave the opportunity to leave. This was an unprecedented commitment—one that the United States has not made in previous situations like Libya, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen, and Somalia when we shut down U.S. embassies. In addition, because Americans are not required to register with our embassies whenever they travel to, leave, or reside in a foreign country, it is impossible to know with precision how many Americans are in a given country at a given time. The U.S. Government went to extraordinary lengths to make good on this promise. As Secretary Blinken testified on September 13, 2021, “We were intensely focused on the safety of Americans in Afghanistan. In March, we began urging them to leave the country. In total, between March and August, we sent 19 specific messages with that warning, as well as offers of help, including financial assistance to pay for plane tickets.” From August 14 through August 31, the Department reached out directly to every American known to the U.S. Government, repeatedly and through multiple channels—making 55,000 phone calls and sending 33,000 e-mails during those 17 days alone—to help facilitate evacuations for those who wished to leave. Many were dual citizens whose families had lived in Afghanistan for generations and chose to stay, and some have chosen to reenter Afghanistan after the military withdrawal. Ultimately, the U.S. Government evacuated over 6,000 American citizens from the country. We are continuing to facilitate the departures of American citizens who chose to stay or returned to Afghanistan despite our grave warnings. Since August 31, 2021 we have facilitated the departure of more than 950 American citizens who sought assistance to leave. Many doubted whether President Biden would be able to keep his promise—but he did.

From the beginning, the President also made clear that the United States was committed to assisting our Afghan partners. At the President’s direction, the entire interagency pushed to accelerate the SIV program—and did so, surging resources to this vital program, restarting SIV interviews paused by the previous administration, increasing the number of staff processing SIV applications by more than fifteen-fold, and reviewing every stage of the cumbersome application process. As a result of these efforts, the U.S. government issued more SIVs in the months leading up to the fall of Kabul than in any other period in the history of the program.

During the evacuation, approximately 70,000 vulnerable Afghans were evacuated by the U.S. Government to overseas Defense Department facilities for security screening, vetting, and the administration of public health vaccinations. The Department of State began seeking transit agreements for Afghans with third countries in June, secured agreements with Qatar and Kuwait in July, and negotiated arrangements with other countries including Germany, Italy, Spain, UAE, Bahrain, Kosovo, and Albania. Setting up this network of transit sites—“lily pads”—would not have been possible without the support of international partners across the Middle East and Europe. Afghan evacuees were then transported by air to eight Department of Defense domestic “safe havens.” Those in need of special medical care were moved to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and nearby hotels. More than 10,000 State, Defense, and Homeland Security personnel supported this unprecedented humanitarian effort. Veterans groups, non-profits, state and local governments, companies, and other organizations worked around the clock to assist the evacuation effort. From assisting SIV applicants with paperwork, to donating resources to help resettle families, these partners were and remain critical to our efforts.

Despite predictions to the contrary, we have and will continue to facilitate the departure and resettlement of our Afghan partners through Enduring Welcome, our multi-year effort to relocate those who worked with and for us to the United States through a variety of legal immigration pathways. We have been proud to welcome approximately 100,000 Afghans as part of Operation Allies Welcome and now with Enduring Welcome. We are also continuing to harness the resources and expertise we saw emerge during the evacuations to help new Afghan arrivals and assist those who arrived last year with integration. With the help of nine domestic refugee resettlement agencies and a network of about 200 local affiliate organizations, each and every Afghan family has been resettled into American communities. We also need Congress to act on legislation, such as the Afghan Adjustment Act, to support those joining new communities to become well settled and integrated.

We are now deliberate and clear about the support the U.S. government is able to provide to Americans abroad in challenging country conditions, as well as the limits of that support. We did this in Ukraine and Ethiopia. We proactively messaged about risks and explained clearly and repeatedly that those who chose to remain could not expect the U.S. Government to evacuate them. We also distinguished in our public messaging between the populations that the U.S. Government could directly evacuate if needed—primarily our own U.S. Government staff—and others who should heed our warnings and plan for their own evacuations, such as private American citizens.

## **Rebuilding Long-Term Capacity**

The withdrawal is over, but we need to continue to work to rebuild the systems that we need to be able to respond to a future crisis. The Trump Administration had hollowed out much of the career workforce, including at senior levels, at a moment when more resources were needed. The capacity needed in a crisis is not something that can simply be “turned on.” The steady state work of developing our workforce, building our internal processes and forging partnerships is necessary to being able to manage an unfolding crisis.

We are investing heavily in creating additional capacity: attracting, retaining, and enhancing talent within the Federal workforce, which we regard as a fundamental source of strength for our national security. We are also building new kinds of partnerships. During the withdrawal, the resources and expertise of non-profits, veterans service groups, companies, and other organizations were critical to our efforts. Today, we are building on these partnerships to help new Afghan arrivals and assist those who have already arrived with integration.

### **Putting the United States on Stronger Footing**

When President Biden announced his decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan, some voices doubted that America would be on a safer and stronger footing as a result. President Biden promised Americans that we would maintain an enduring capacity to address terrorist threats in Afghanistan without thousands of boots on the ground. In July 2022, he demonstrated that capability in the successful operation that killed the emir of al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. In addition, when the President Biden made his decision in 2021, he rightly recognized that the terrorist threat of today is more diverse and diffuse than it was in 2001. His decision to leave Afghanistan freed up critical military, intelligence, and other resources to counter terrorist threats around the world, including in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen. The Administration has done so successfully, including by eliminating ISIS leader Hajji Abdullah and a number of top ISIS leaders in Syria and Somalia through continued U.S. counterterrorism efforts. We also remain committed to supporting significant humanitarian assistance and standing up for the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, and we will continue to condemn and isolate the Taliban for its appalling human rights record.

More broadly, when the President made the decision to leave Afghanistan, some worried that doing so could weaken our alliances or put the United States at a disadvantage on the global stage. The opposite has happened. Our standing around the world is significantly greater, as evidenced by multiple opinion surveys. Our alliances are stronger than ever. Finland has been admitted into NATO, and Sweden will soon be admitted as well. We are strengthening our existing partnerships and building new ones with nations around the world. On the global stage, America is leading. We have rallied our allies and partners to support Ukraine and hold Russia accountable for its aggression—and to rise to compete with China. It is hard to imagine the United States would have been able to lead the response to these challenges as successfully—especially in the resource-intensive way that it has—if U.S. forces remained in Afghanistan today.

Ultimately, after more than twenty years, more than \$2 trillion dollars, and standing up an Afghan army of 300,000 soldiers, the speed and ease with which the Taliban took control of Afghanistan suggests that there was no scenario—except a permanent and significantly expanded U.S. military presence—that would have changed the trajectory.

As President Biden said on August 31, 2021, “When I hear that we could’ve, should’ve continued the so-called low-grade effort in Afghanistan, at low risk to our service members, at low cost, I don’t think enough people understand how much we have asked of the 1 percent of this country who put that uniform on, who are willing to put their lives on the line in defense of our nation... There is nothing low-grade or low-risk or low-cost about any war.”