

DOD Witness Statement SASC Hearing on the Transition of All United States and Coalition Forces from Afghanistan and Its Implications

Thursday, May 20, 2021

Good morning Chairman Reed, Ranking Member Inhofe, and members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity to provide you with more details on the President's April 14 decision to withdraw the remaining U.S. forces from Afghanistan. After a rigorous review of the way forward in Afghanistan, President Biden determined that the best path forward to advance American interests is by ending the U.S. military involvement there. As announced by the Administration on April 14, we began an orderly withdrawal on May 1 and plan to have all U.S. forces out of the country by September, if not sooner. In planning this withdrawal, we have prioritized bringing home our military forces safely, and withdrawing, transferring, or disposing equipment and other property responsibly.

As a part of the interagency review of U.S.-Afghanistan policy, the Administration has assessed that the threat from violent extremist organizations against the U.S. homeland from Afghanistan can be addressed without a persistent presence in the country. Accordingly, following consultations with his Cabinet, Members of Congress, the Afghan Government, and NATO Allies and partners, President Biden directed Secretary Austin to conduct a mission analysis and to make all necessary preparations to advance our interests in Afghanistan without a U.S. military presence.

In coordination with our Afghan and international partners, we are working to reposition our counterterrorism capabilities, retaining assets in the region, to prevent the re-emergence of a terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland from Afghanistan in the event the Taliban are unable or choose not to uphold their commitments to ensure al-Qaeda does not once again gain a foothold. We will

refine our counterterrorism strategy to monitor and disrupt terrorist threats to our homeland and our interests in a way that contends with the dispersed terrorism threat we face today.

We will also work closely with the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, or ANDSF, and with our allies and partners to maintain counterterrorism capabilities in the region sufficient to ensure Afghanistan cannot become a safe-haven for terrorists to threaten our security.

I would like to thank this Committee specifically for its continued support for the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund, or ASFF, through which the United States provides the majority of funding necessary to sustain the ANDSF, supports combat operations while developing the ANDSF into an effective and independent force capable of securing Afghanistan, continues to protect the Afghan people, and contributes to regional security. As Secretary Austin mentioned in his April 14 NATO Joint Press Statement, we will continue funding key capabilities such as the Afghan Air Force and Special Mission Wing; and we will continue paying salaries for Afghan Security Forces and continue delivering certain military supplies. We are developing mechanisms to provide appropriate oversight for use of these funds, most of which will continue to be executed through DoD contracts, and have discussed with your staff how best to do so with efficiency, and also with accountability.

Although we are withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan, we are standing squarely with our Afghan partners and redoubling our diplomatic efforts to achieve a lasting peace, which the Afghan people so richly deserve. The Department wholeheartedly supports the ongoing diplomatic efforts to achieve a negotiated political settlement that the Afghan people themselves endorse. This includes continued support to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and continued commitment to the Afghan people, who have made extraordinary sacrifices throughout

this 20-year conflict. The Department of Defense will continue working with the Department of State and across U.S. Government departments and agencies to ensure that we take care of Afghans and their families who have helped us over the last two decades, most notably Afghan employees of the Department.

We will provide sufficient support to the Department of State to maintain the important diplomatic mission that they will continue after DoD's departure. As they continue performing normal diplomatic functions, we also have contingency planning underway for a range of scenarios.

In closing, I want to thank the members of this committee for your continued support to all those who served in Afghanistan.

I thank you for the opportunity to brief you and look forward to taking your questions.