



Background: Derek Chollet serves as the Counselor of the U.S. Department of State, where he serves at the rank of Under Secretary. In this position he serves as a senior policy advisor to the Secretary of State on a range of issues. Chollet was nominated by President Biden to serve as the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in September 2023 and renominated in January 2024.

Chollet has held positions in the Department of State, Department of Defense, and White House. Prior to serving as Counselor, Chollet served on the 2020 Biden-Harris State Department transition team.

Lack of Candor with the Committee:

In his transcribed interview, Chollet asserted approximately 100 times that he did not remember or recall, in response to substantive questions posed by the Committee related to President Biden’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, including, but not limited to the below issues. This is notable given Chollet’s role as a key policymaker on Afghanistan and one of Secretary Blinken’s senior most advisors. Further, multiple officials in the State Department have pointed to Chollet as playing a key role on issues pertaining to Afghanistan.

1. Briefings he received on Afghanistan throughout 2021 (Page 61, Lines 14-18; Page 85, Lines 18-19; Page 142, Lines 5-25);
2. Countries he worked with during the non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) (Page 34, Lines 8-25);
3. Attendance by senior State Department officials such as former Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in Afghanistan-related meetings (Page 21, Lines 18-21);
4. Engagement with the Department of Defense on Afghanistan (Page 22, Lines 10-11);
5. The decision to retain Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation (Page 25, Lines 18-22);
6. Considerations by the Biden administration to nominate a permanent ambassador to Afghanistan for Senate confirmation (Page 26, Lines 17-19);
7. His perspective on the Doha Agreement (Page 27, Lines 13-15);
8. Direction provided to him on Afghanistan by then-Secretary-designate Antony Blinken (Page 27, Lines 17-19);
9. Why negotiations with the Taliban had flatlined early in the Biden Administration (Page 28, Lines 1-2);
10. Advice he provided to Secretary Blinken regarding Afghanistan policy (Page 19, Lines 9-17);
11. Policy options Secretary Blinken supported regarding Afghanistan (Page 29, Lines 13-14);
12. The length and timespan of the Biden administration’s interagency review on Afghanistan (Page 30, Lines 4-8);
13. Which State Department officials led the interagency meetings on Afghanistan (Page 31, Lines 6-10);

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14. Recommendations he provided during the interagency process (including his recommendations on the Taliban's compliance with the Doha Agreement) (Page 31, Lines 15-21);
15. How often Afghanistan was discussed in meetings (Page 32, Lines 23-25);
16. What the Afghan government was urging the Biden Administration to do regarding Afghanistan (Page 35, Lines 14-19);
17. Secretary Blinken's view was on whether the Taliban had cut ties with terrorist groups (Page 40, Lines 17-21);
18. Risks associated with maintaining U.S. Embassy in Kabul in 2021 (Page 99, Lines 19-22);
19. Pakistan's role in the Taliban takeover (Page 127, Lines 12-16);
20. The existence of the planned Istanbul Conference which the Taliban refused to attend after Biden's go-to-zero order (Page 120, Lines 13-15);
21. Concerns regarding the Afghan military's ability to hold the country (Page 87, Lines 16-19);
22. His engagement with Ambassador Ross Wilson during the withdrawal (Page 137, Lines 15-25; Page 138, Lines 1-3);
23. Whether the U.S. pushed the Afghan government to accept a power-sharing agreement with the Taliban (Page 142, Lines 6-9);
24. The existence and details of the Afghan Peace Government plan (Page 142, Lines 14-20);
25. Worst-case scenarios contemplated by the State Department regarding Afghanistan (including a NEO in a Taliban-run Kabul) (Page 147, Lines 15-17);
26. Triggers for a NEO (Page 148, Lines 3-4);
27. Who Secretary Blinken stated was in charge of the NEO (Page 155, Lines 13-15);
28. Whether the White House ever defined which groups qualified for evacuation from Afghanistan (Page 157, Lines 11-12);
29. Whether the State Department pushed to extend the military withdrawal deadline beyond August 31, 2021 (Page 164, Lines 18-22);
30. What direction Secretary Blinken received following President Biden's go-to-zero order (Page 96, Lines 13-20);
31. How the State Department responded to Pakistani Prime Minister Khan's comments celebrating the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan (Page 129, Lines 17-25);
32. Recommendations he provided on maintaining a U.S. Embassy presence in Kabul (Page 31, Lines 22-25);
33. Recommendations he provided on the conditionality of the Doha Agreement (Page 32, Lines 1-3);
34. Recommendations on adherence to the Doha Agreement (Page 32, Lines 4-6);
35. Briefings on the Taliban's continued ties to terrorist groups (Page 76, Lines 10-12)

36. Recommendations on the Taliban's continued ties to terrorist groups (Page 32, Lines 10-12);
37. Recommendations on Afghanistan by NATO allies to the U.S. (Page 35, Line 25, Page 36, Lines 1-2);
38. Recommendations by Secretary Blinken to the President at the conclusion the interagency review on Afghanistan (Page 88, Lines 2-13);
39. The outcome of Secretary Blinken's April 2021 visit to Afghanistan (Page 101, Lines 17-22);
40. State Department assessments of China's support for or opposition to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan (Page 124, Lines 12-17);
41. Secretary Blinken's response to the Taliban walking away from the Istanbul Conference in 2021 (Page 130, Lines 21-23);
42. The Taliban's continued ties with al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups in 2021 and whether those violated the Doha Agreement (Page 40, Lines 18-22); and
43. Whether Secretary Blinken communicated his views on the Taliban's continued terrorism ties (Page 17, Lines 13-15).

The Transition: The transition team initially focused on understanding the situation the Biden Administration was inheriting, not the withdrawal. (Page 24, Lines 17-25; Page 25, Line 1).

Interagency Review:

1. Chollet described the State Department's role during the interagency review as follows:
 - a. "If there was a meeting, clearly Ambassador Khalilzad and members of his team would be there to brief on their negotiations that were underway towards a durable and just political settlement and a permanent cease fire, which was what they were working towards. When it came to the appropriate time, then the State Department would also brief on its planning for how to sustain an embassy given a potential decision to go to zero in terms of the U.S. military presence." (Page 30, Lines 21-25; Page 31, Lines 1-3).
2. In response to who led the State Department's participation during the review Chollet stated, "Well, in those early months I would've attended those meetings. Dean Thompson would've attended the meetings. Zal or members of his team would've attended the meetings. But then, as senior officials got confirmed, then they would either attend -- I would no longer attend or they would attend with me. I just don't recall." (Page 31, Lines 6-10).

Planning for the Afghanistan Withdrawal: Contrary to testimony and information acquired from other witnesses, Chollet testified that did not engage in or oversee any planning for the Afghanistan withdrawal in his capacity as Counselor. (Page 18, Lines 1-8).

Working with Foreign Governments: Chollet claimed that U.S. allies' [UK and Germany] disappointment with the decisions surrounding Afghanistan did not have any impact on bilateral relations with those allies today or at the time. (Page 113, Lines 4-10).

Doha Agreement:

1. When asked about whether the Taliban met its obligations under the Doha Agreement, Chollet stated, “I knew that -- my assessment was they were meeting the most important condition, which was they were not shooting at U.S. military forces in Afghanistan.” (Page 37, Lines 4-5).
2. Chollet testified that the decision in 2020 to drawdown troops from 4,500 to 2,500 did not align with the Doha Agreement given reports by the U.S. Department of Treasury that the Taliban maintained ties with al-Qaeda. (Page 70, Lines 9-17).
3. When asked if the U.S. should have adhered to the conditionality of the Doha Agreement, Chollet responded, “My opinion is that not a single challenge the United States faces today in the world, from a rising China to an acute threat from Russia to the war in the Middle East today, looks easier with U.S. Forces still on the ground in Afghanistan engaged in a fight with the Taliban.” (Page 79, Lines 19-22).

Taliban Assessments: In April 2021, Chollet thought the Afghan Government could hold against the Taliban. Chollet testified, “the prospects for a peace deal were very difficult, would remain low, that the Taliban was certainly taking the fight to the Afghan Government, and that a withdrawal of U.S. Forces would be a challenge for the Afghan Government but that I believed at the time the Afghan Government could hold firm.” (Page 84, Lines 9-14).

Ramifications of the Go-to-Zero Announcement:

1. Chollet testified to the general reaction of NATO allies to the U.S. withdrawal, stating, “My understanding, the -- gestalt understanding that I recall was, you know, general understanding of our position, I mean, and everybody knew the threat that we were facing and were appreciative of our consultation because, again, some of previous announcements of U.S. withdrawals were done with no consultation.” (Page 93, Line 25, Page 94, Lines 1-5).
2. Chollet stated the State Department’s planning guidance following the go-to-zero order was aimed at maintaining U.S. Embassy Kabul. (Page 99, Lines 4-6).

Taliban Territorial Gains: Chollet acknowledged the Taliban’s territorial gains prior to August 2021, but did not see those as an indication of Afghanistan’s deteriorating security situation, testifying, “my recollection is that there were territorial gains happening, but the -- and, therefore, preparations were accelerating as we were getting closer to -- to the deadline for withdrawal. But I don't -- what I recall is that it was in the week or so, give or take a few days, leading up to the -- what ended up being the fall of the government that it became very dire.” (Page 133, Lines 13-17).

Assessments of the Afghan Government:

1. Chollet believed the brittleness of the Afghanistan government came from President Ghani, testifying, “Not to the degree it proved so brittle, although I think some of that comes down the leader himself. If Ashraf Ghani had one tenth of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in him, we'd have a different story in Afghanistan.” (Page 102, Lines 18-20).

2. Chollet claimed that no one in government saw the rapid collapse of the Afghan government: “the intelligence community didn't see it, the U.S. military didn't see it, and our diplomats didn't see it.” (Page 159, Lines 10-12)

Role During NEO Planning and the NEO:

1. According to Chollet, the Embassy’s chief of mission – in this case Ross Wilson -- is responsible for the Department’s equities in the NEO plan. (Page 147, lines 21-25).
2. Chollet believes NEO planning and preparation was accurate “as shown by results.” (Page 148, lines 24-25).
3. When Chollet was told other interviewees had described him as the senior official responsible for decision making on Afghanistan issues, he responded with the following:
 - a. “I would say that the Secretary of State is the senior official responsible for decision making on Afghanistan issues.” (Page 19, Lines 1-2).
4. Chollet believed that Ambassador Wilson was fit for the job as chief of mission during the Afghanistan evacuation. (Page 163, Lines 23-25).
5. There was a division of responsibility between Ambassador Wilson and Under Secretary Bass. Wilson worked with the Afghan Government while Bass worked with the U.S. military. (Page 164, Lines 7-12).

SIVs: Chollet stated the State Department had responsibility for defining the population for at-risk Afghans, but there was a broader White House decision on a group, testifying “The State Department had a responsibility, but I don't know if it was solely responsible. I confess, I think in some of these groups, there might've been a broader White House decision on a group.” (Page 157, Lines 4-10).

Interactions with State Department Officials:

Secretary Blinken:

1. Counselor Chollet speaks with Secretary Blinken daily. When Blinken is in Washington they have morning or evening meetings depending on Blinken’s schedule. (Page 11, Lines 3-15).
2. According to Chollet, McKeon and Perez were Blinken’s go to people on the planning and security for the Embassy and SIVs (Page 145, Lines 17-19).
3. According to Chollet, Khalilzad was the go to person for Blinken on the Taliban negotiations (Page 145, Lines 20-21).

D-MR McKeon: Chollet engaged regularly with McKeon during the withdrawal. (Page 139, Lines 5-10).

Ambassador Wilson: Chollet interacted with Wilson early in his tenure as Counselor, and during the NEO they interacted during group meetings. (Page 137, Lines 15-25; Page 138, Lines 1-3).

Ambassador Bass: Chollet did not recall individual interactions with Bass, but likely interacted in a group setting. (Page 138, Lines 18-22).