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COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

INTERVIEW OF: DEREK CHOLLET

Tuesday, December 19, 2023

Washington, D.C.

The interview in the above matter was held in room 2255, Rayburn House Office Building, commencing at 10:00 a.m.

1 Appearances:

2

3

4

5 For the COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS:

6

7 [REDACTED]

8 [REDACTED]

9 [REDACTED]

10 SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

11 [REDACTED]

12 [REDACTED]

13 AND [REDACTED]

14 [REDACTED]

15 [REDACTED]

16 [REDACTED]

17 [REDACTED]

18

19

20 For the U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE:

21

22 [REDACTED],

23 BUREAU OF LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

24 [REDACTED],

25 OFFICE OF THE LEGAL ADVISOR

1 [REDACTED]. We'll go on the record.

2 This is a transcribed interview of Counselor to the State Department Mr. Derek  
3 Chollet. Chairman McCaul has requested this interview as part of the committee's  
4 investigation of the Afghanistan withdrawal.

5 Would the witness please state his name for the record?

6 Counselor Chollet. Derek Chollet.

7 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

8 On behalf of the committee, I want to thank you for appearing here today to  
9 answer our questions. The chairman also appreciates your willingness to appear  
10 voluntarily.

11 My name is [REDACTED], and I'm [REDACTED] on Chairman McCaul's  
12 staff on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and I'm leading the investigation into the  
13 Afghanistan withdrawal.

14 I will now ask committee staff present from the majority and minority to introduce  
15 themselves as well.

16 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED] for the Subcommittee on  
17 Oversight and Accountability.

18 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED]. I'm [REDACTED] for the majority.

19 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED], [REDACTED] for the Oversight  
20 Subcommittee.

21 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] for the minority.

22 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED]  
23 the minority.

24 [REDACTED]: [REDACTED] on the minority.

25 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] for Mr. Meeks.

1           ██████████. Thank you.

2           I would like to now go over the ground rules and guidelines that we will follow  
3 during today's interview.

4           Our questioning will proceed in rounds. The majority will ask questions first for 1  
5 hour, then the minority will have an opportunity to ask questions for an equal period of  
6 time if they choose. We will alternate back and forth until there are no more questions  
7 and the interview is over.

8           Typically, we take a short break at the end of each hour, but if you would like to  
9 take a break apart from that, please just let us know, and we'd be happy to  
10 accommodate.

11           As you can see, there's an official court reporter taking down everything you say  
12 to make a written record, so we ask that you give verbal responses to all questions.

13           Does that make sense?

14           Counselor Chollet. Yes.

15           ██████████. So the court reporter can take down a clear record, we will do  
16 our best to limit the number of people directing questions at you during a given hour to  
17 just those people on the staff whose turn it is.

18           Please try and speak clearly so the court reporter can understand and so everyone  
19 can hear you.

20           It is important that we don't talk over one another or interrupt each other, and  
21 that goes for everybody present at today's interview.

22           Witnesses who appear before the committee have the opportunity to freely  
23 consult with counsel if they choose.

24           It's my understanding that you're appearing today with agency counsel. Is that  
25 correct?

1 Counselor Chollet. Correct.

2 [REDACTED]. Counselor Chollet, you understand that agency counsel  
3 represents the State Department and not you personally, correct?

4 Counselor Chollet. Yes.

5 [REDACTED]. Could agency counsel and the note taker please identify  
6 yourselves and state your names for the record?

7 [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] from the Office of the Legal Advisor.

8 [REDACTED] [REDACTED] from the Bureau of Legislative Affairs.

9 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

10 We want you to answer our questions in the most complete and truthful manner  
11 as possible, so we'll take our time. If you have any questions, or if you do not  
12 understand one of our questions, please let us know.

13 Our questions will cover a wide range of topics, so if you need clarification at any  
14 point, just say so.

15 If you do not know the answer to a question or do not remember, it's best not to  
16 guess. Please give us your best recollection. If there are things you don't know or  
17 can't remember, just say so, and please inform us who, to the best of your knowledge,  
18 might be able to provide a more complete answer to the question.

19 Counselor Chollet, this interview is unclassified, at least this portion is. So if a  
20 question calls for any information that you know to be classified, please state that for the  
21 record, as well as the basis for the classification and the original classification authority.

22 If you are uncertain of the classification, please consult with your counsel. We'd  
23 be happy to go off the record to afford you the opportunity to do so.

24 In the interest of transparency and open access to the Federal Government, we  
25 ask that your asserted basis for classification adhere to the uniform system prescribed by

1 Executive Order 13526.

2 Once you've identified the requisite classification, please respond with as much  
3 unclassified information as possible.

4 Do you understand?

5 Counselor Chollet. Yes.

6 [REDACTED]. You should also understand that although this interview is not  
7 under oath, that by law you are required to answer questions from Congress truthfully.

8 Do you understand?

9 Counselor Chollet. Yes.

10 [REDACTED]. This also applies to questions posed by congressional staff in an  
11 interview.

12 Do you understand?

13 Counselor Chollet. Yes.

14 [REDACTED]. Witnesses that knowingly provide false testimony could be  
15 subject to criminal prosecution for perjury or for making false statements under 18 U.S.C.,  
16 Section 1001.

17 Do you understand?

18 Counselor Chollet. Yes.

19 [REDACTED]. Is there any reason you are unable to provide truthful answers  
20 to today's questions?

21 Counselor Chollet. No.

22 [REDACTED]. Finally, I'd like to make note that the content of what we discuss  
23 here today is confidential as per Chairman McCaul's terms. We ask that you not speak  
24 about what we discuss in this interview to any outside individuals to preserve the  
25 integrity of our investigation.

1 For the same reason, the marked exhibits that we'll use today will remain with the  
2 court reporter so that they can go in the official transcript, and any copies of those  
3 exhibits will be returned to us when we wrap up.

4 Okay. That is the end of the majority's preamble. Is there any anything that my  
5 colleagues from the minority would like to add?

6 [REDACTED]. Yes. We note that notwithstanding any agreement made  
7 between the majority, the witness, and/or the State Department for this transcribed  
8 interview, there is no provision governing or mandating confidentiality of investigations  
9 and/or transcribed interviews in the House or committee's rules for the 118th Congress.

10 Thank you.

11 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

12 The clock now reads 10:04 a.m. We will start the first hour of questioning.

13 EXAMINATION

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q Counselor Chollet, before proceeding, we want to define a couple of key  
16 terms in the interest of clarity.

17 First, when referencing the term "withdrawal," the majority's referencing the U.S.  
18 military retrograde, i.e., the Go-to-Zero order, which was officially announced by  
19 President Biden on April 14th, 2021. This includes related planning by the  
20 State Department and other agencies in the decisionmaking processes.

21 Does that make sense?

22 A Yes.

23 Q Second, when referencing the term "evacuation" or "emergency  
24 evacuation," the majority is referencing the evacuation of U.S. citizens and nationals,  
25 civilian personnel, and designated persons in August 2021, resulting in the noncombatant

1 evacuation operation initiated on August 16th, 2021. This includes related planning by  
2 the State Department and other agencies in the decisionmaking processes.

3 Does that make sense?

4 A Yes.

5 Q Thank you.

6 Counselor Chollet, can you please give us a brief overview of your career in public  
7 service?

8 A I have worked in and out of government for 30 years, starting when I was an  
9 intern on the State Department Policy Planning Staff in the summer of 1992.

10 I've assisted two Secretaries of State -- former Secretaries of State -- with the  
11 research and writing of their memoirs, James A. Baker III, Warren Christopher.

12 I served in the Clinton, Obama, and now the Biden administrations in the  
13 executive branch, served in the U.S. Senate up here on the Hill for a few years, and served  
14 in the executive branch at the White House, the State Department, and the Pentagon.

15 Q Thank you.

16 And, Counselor, did you serve on the transition team for the incoming Biden  
17 administration prior to assuming the role of Counselor to the Department?

18 A Yes.

19 Q At whose request did you assume that role?

20 A I was called by Avril Haines, who was then one of the leaders of the  
21 transition, in September of 2020.

22 Q And what was your role on the transition team?

23 A I was part of the State Department transition team, the so-called landing  
24 team at the State Department.

25 My initial role was as the deputy team lead for policy, but then as Linda

1 Thomas-Greenfield, who was the lead of the State Department transition, was named to  
2 be the U.S. U.N. Ambassador nominee, I was ascended to the lead of the  
3 State Department transition.

4 Q And what does the deputy lead for policy do? What was your role?

5 A The team was roughly 14 or so people, and I helped manage a bunch of  
6 policy subject matter experts who were on the team.

7 Q And as your subsequent role as the State Department lead, what did that  
8 position entail?

9 A That would be managing the entire team because there was a policy side  
10 and a management side of the transition team.

11 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

12 And what is your current position at the Department?

13 A Currently, I'm the Counselor of the Department.

14 Q Am I correct in understanding that you served as Counselor to the  
15 Department throughout 2021, including the withdrawal and emergency evacuation?

16 A Correct.

17 Q And when did you first discuss the position of Counselor to the  
18 State Department?

19 A With the Secretary?

20 Q With the Secretary or whomever, correct.

21 A Or whomever? Yeah, December of 2020.

22 Q And that leads me to my next question.

23 With whom did you discuss --

24 A The Secretary -- the then -- the Secretary-designate.

25 Q Thank you.

1 And do you recall who recommended you for the position?

2 A I do not.

3 Q And on which date did you assume the position of Counselor?

4 A On January 21st, 2021.

5 Q Thank you.

6 How many people report to you as Counselor?

7 A Seven?

8 Q And who are your direct reports, namely, their positions and roles?

9 A So I have a chief of staff, two OMS's, office management specialists, and four  
10 special assistants who divide their portfolios based on the State Department bureau  
11 subjects that they cover for me.

12 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

13 And to whom do you report to at the State Department?

14 A I report to the Secretary.

15 Q What does your position as Counselor to the State Department entail?

16 A So the Counselor is a position at the rank of Under Secretary. And the best  
17 way I can describe it is, it's sort of minister without portfolio, where I serve as a senior  
18 adviser of the Secretary, I'm part of the senior leadership team of the State Department.  
19 But the issues I work on can vary depending on what's going on in the world and what the  
20 Secretary or others demand of my time.

21 Q Can you speak to what your major duties and responsibilities are?

22 A Currently?

23 Q Correct.

24 A I've spent probably 90 percent of my time recently on Israel/Gaza.

25 Q So, as you noted, your role fluctuates depending on what's happening in the

1 world.

2 A Exactly.

3 Q Can you please speak to your working relationship with the Secretary?

4 A Could you clarify what --

5 Q I'm happy to ask a couple follow-up questions which may be helpful in  
6 refining that.

7 A Yeah.

8 Q How often do you engage with the Secretary?

9 A Daily. Multiple times, daily usually.

10 Q And do you have regularly scheduled meetings with him?

11 A Yes.

12 Q Can you speak to those?

13 A So we tend to, when he's in town, we will tend to have morning meetings if  
14 his schedule allows. Often he's got other things he's got to do. Also, evening meetings  
15 where we'll discuss just the day, the agenda, what's going on.

16 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

17 And you noted that your role as Counselor primarily, or a big focus of it, is serving  
18 as an adviser to the Secretary.

19 A Uh-huh.

20 Q How do you provide that guidance and advice in terms of your office? Do  
21 you produce memos, anything in written format, reports, et cetera, to the Secretary?

22 A It's, in terms of my advice to the Secretary, it's mainly verbal.

23 Q And how do you work with other members of the Department's senior  
24 leadership?

25 A Could you clarify?

1 Q Of course. In terms of, for example, the Deputy Secretary of State, the  
2 Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, the Under Secretary for  
3 Management, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, the P.

4 How do you engage with other members of the leadership from the 7th Floor?

5 A I'm in constant contact with them. Our offices are near one another. In  
6 meetings all day every day with them.

7 Q And, Counselor Chollet, you were recently nominated to serve as the Under  
8 Secretary for Policy at the Department of Defense, correct?

9 A Yes.

10 Q And do you recall when you were nominated specifically?

11 A July of 2023.

12 Q Now going to pivot a bit specifically to Afghanistan.

13 A Okay.

14 Q Can you please speak to your involvement with respect to the Department's  
15 equities in the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan?

16 A So during the transition -- of course this was one of the main issues we  
17 discussed during the transition as we were preparing to take office, so I received several  
18 briefings during the transition.

19 And then, given that it was several months until senior officials -- the Deputy  
20 Secretary for -- the Deputy Secretary, the Deputy for Management and Resources, the  
21 Under Secretary for Political Affairs -- basically the entire 7th Floor was not in their jobs  
22 for several months because of their confirmation processes -- I spent the first several  
23 months of the administration doing multiple jobs, covering down on meetings and  
24 helping to get the Secretary of State launched in his new role.

25 [REDACTED]. And if I could just clarify if this was your intent, [REDACTED].

1 She specifically asked about the withdrawal, which is defined as the military  
2 retrograde.

3 Counselor Chollet. Ah. Well --

4 [REDACTED]. Correct. So the Go-to-Zero order and its broad implications,  
5 including the planning that underlied that. So at the time, potential withdrawal.

6 [REDACTED]. For the military retrograde --

7 Counselor Chollet. For the military --

8 [REDACTED]. -- as she defined it.

9 Counselor Chollet. I see. I mean, obviously the State Department isn't involved  
10 in military planning. So I participated in interagency meetings on Afghanistan.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q Thank you.

13 And just to clarify, [REDACTED] correct in how we define the term "withdrawal," i.e.,  
14 the Go-to-Zero order.

15 A Yeah.

16 Q It's our understanding obviously that that implicated certain of the  
17 Department's equities as well.

18 A Absolutely, yes.

19 Q So when addressing that, we're focusing on that aspect.

20 A Understood. Okay.

21 Q And you noted briefings that you received during the transition on issues  
22 pertaining to the Afghanistan withdrawal. From whom did you receive those briefings?

23 A I recall having at least one briefing with Ross Wilson -- virtually of course,  
24 because he was in Kabul -- and I believe there were others from Embassy Kabul who  
25 participated in that, but I don't recall who that was and whether that was actually the

1 case. But might've been. And at least one, maybe two briefings with Zal Khalilzad.  
2 And perhaps a briefing with Molly Phee, who was then Zal's deputy. And that's all that I  
3 can recall.

4 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

5 And we'll start with Ambassador Wilson, who was serving as the chief of mission  
6 to Embassy Kabul at the time, from our understanding.

7 A Uh-huh.

8 Q What was that briefing about?

9 A It was a very, to the best of my recollection, a very general briefing about the  
10 situation in Afghanistan. Obviously, Afghanistan was then our largest or second-largest  
11 diplomatic mission in the world, so it was critical for us, as an incoming team, to  
12 understand what was going on there.

13 So it was mainly informational about the situation. It was unclassified because it  
14 was done over Zoom.

15 Q And how about with Ambassador Khalilzad, who from our understanding  
16 was serving as the Special Representative at the time?

17 A Correct. And it was mainly an update on -- he was, to my recollection,  
18 trying at the time, in the waning days of the previous administration, to restart  
19 negotiations with the Taliban that had been -- of course, he had been conducting in his  
20 role under the previous administration.

21 So he was updating us on the status of those talks because of course those of us  
22 who had been outside of government had no clue really what had been happening  
23 leading up to the Doha Agreement, which he had negotiated, and the aftermath of that.

24 Q And at the time of those briefings, neither Ambassador Wilson nor  
25 Ambassador Khalilzad had been formally retained by the new administration, i.e., the

1 Biden administration, correct?

2 A The Biden administration wasn't in office.

3 Q Thank you.

4 Can you speak to the Counselor office's role in the Afghanistan withdrawal more  
5 broadly?

6 A The office itself had no formal role. To the extent of my personal role as  
7 Counselor, was sitting in the chair, when necessary, in interagency meetings that were  
8 discussing the broader policy. That's it.

9 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

10 And you noted that you occupied sort of multiple roles as the confirmation  
11 processes proceeded for the other nominees, 7th Floor leadership.

12 At what point did you -- for how long did you sort of maintain that dual-hatted or  
13 multiple-hatted role in the Department?

14 A Well, as people got confirmed, then they took on their duties, and then  
15 it -- my role would shift accordingly.

16 Q But you stayed involved on issues pertaining to Afghanistan throughout  
17 2021, correct?

18 A Correct, although I would say the intensity of my involvement waned as  
19 other people got confirmed in their jobs.

20 Q Thank you.

21 And can you speak to your relationship as Counselor with U.S. Embassy Kabul?

22 A In those early months when there were very few confirmed officials, I had -- I  
23 recall I had more engagement, but I would define that by once every couple weeks. And  
24 that's to the best of my recollection what it would be.

25 And then, as other people got confirmed, it was less frequent, for sure.

1 Q And who were your main points of contact at Embassy Kabul?

2 A The charge, Ross Wilson.

3 Q And what was your relationship as Counselor with Special Representative  
4 Khalilzad and his team?

5 A I interacted with them regularly as they were off negotiating on the road in  
6 Doha, checking in with them. Either I would be doing it on my own or I would be part of  
7 a group checking in with them.

8 Q And how about your relationship as Counselor with the Office of -- the  
9 Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs?

10 A It was, in those early couple months before other colleagues were  
11 confirmed, it was more frequent. But it was -- I would describe it as routine.

12 Q And at the time there was an Acting Assistant Secretary for the SCA Bureau,  
13 correct?

14 A Correct.

15 Q And was that Ambassador Dean Thompson?

16 A Correct.

17 Q And what was your relationship with him like?

18 A I interacted with him fairly regularly, mainly doing preparation for meetings  
19 that I'd be participating in.

20 Q And did you view him as the regional expert on issues pertaining to  
21 Afghanistan?

22 A Yes. Well, and the broader portfolio as well, yes.

23 Q Of course.

24 And did you have any professional experience involving Afghanistan prior to the  
25 withdrawal?

1           A    I worked -- well, I was in the Obama administration during the 2009 policy  
2 review and assisted with the so-called Riedel review -- that was in the early days of the  
3 Obama administration -- and worked closely with Richard Holbrooke -- well, in many  
4 guises of his life, but particularly at the end when he was the Special Representative for  
5 Afghanistan and Pakistan.

6           Q    Thank you.

7           Now transitioning to the emergency evacuation as was previously defined.

8           What was your role in the August 2021 evacuation from Afghanistan?

9           A    Yeah. I had no operational responsibility. As you know, that was an  
10 all-hands-on-deck situation.

11           So, to the best of my recollection, I occasionally would do an odd job. But it was  
12 mainly interacting, I would say, with foreign counterparts, because of course the  
13 evacuation was a multinational coalition effort.

14           So either working with foreign counterparts on troubleshooting particular aspects  
15 of the evacuation or being available to ask questions -- or answer questions -- what I  
16 would describe my principal role then.

17           Q    And who were the foreign counterparts that you engaged with?

18           A    I don't recall specifically. We had many sort of configurations of  
19 multinational discussions with our foreign counterparts, almost all virtually, but I don't  
20 recall a specific one.

21           Q    Would some of those foreign counterparts include our NATO allies?

22           A    Yes.

23           Q    And were you involved in planning for the possibility of an emergency  
24 evacuation from Afghanistan throughout 2021?

25           A    No, I would say.

1 Q So you had no role in planning for the evacuation?

2 A Not planning itself. I definitely participated in meetings where the planning  
3 was discussed, but I was not one of the planners.

4 Q Did you oversee any of the planning in your capacity as Counselor?

5 A No.

6 Q Did you receive briefings or updates on the planning processes within the  
7 Department?

8 A Yes.

9 Q And do you recall when that planning began?

10 A I recall that the planning began in earnest after the April decision to adhere  
11 to the Doha Agreement by a slide in the deadline from May 1st to September. And  
12 that's when the intensity of the planning really grew because we knew that the U.S.  
13 military would no longer be in Afghanistan after a certain point.

14 Q And was that planning more broadly for the withdrawal or for planning for a  
15 potential emergency evacuation?

16 A It would've been both. I mean, just if I could clarify, every embassy on the  
17 planet has to have a NEO plan. So there was already a NEO plan in place under -- that  
18 we inherited, that the embassy had, but of course that would be predicated on the U.S.  
19 military footprint that existed at the time.

20 Q And when saying -- referencing "inherited," do you mean inherited from the  
21 prior administration?

22 A Correct.

23 Q In the course of our interviews, you've been characterized by some  
24 witnesses as the senior official when it came to decisionmaking on Afghanistan issues.  
25 Would you agree with this characterization?

1           A    I would say that the Secretary of State is the senior official responsible for  
2 decisionmaking on Afghanistan issues.

3           Q    Of course.  Of course.  But in addition to sort of the Secretary or --

4           A    No, I would not describe myself that way.

5           Q    Okay.  How would you describe yourself?

6           A    I certainly had a role, particularly in those early months.  But, I mean, the  
7 people doing Afghanistan on a daily basis, Zal Khalilzad and his team, our bureau, SCA,  
8 were the principal decisionmakers on Afghanistan.

9           Q    And you continued interfacing with those individuals following those initial  
10 months that you --

11          A    Absolutely.

12          Q    Correct?

13          A    Yes.  Yes.

14          Q    And you continued providing guidance and advice to the Secretary as  
15 Counselor, correct?

16          A    Correct.  Although I would say the -- as more people got on their jobs,  
17 my -- I ended up doing other things than Afghanistan.

18          Q    Of course.

19          A    So.

20          Q    And you noted the timeline for the planning that ensued following the April  
21 announcement.

22                Can you please describe the State Department's process for planning relating to  
23 the Afghanistan withdrawal?

24          A    How do you -- could you be a little more specific in the question?

25          Q    Of course.  It would be helpful to us to sort of better understand how the

1 statement -- State Department's planning sort of proceeded once the Biden  
2 administration took office in January 2021.

3 A Well, we were -- I should say we inherited basically very little planning, or a  
4 seriously atrophied plan, which, I should say, was a bit shocking given that it was a  
5 hundred days from May 1st, which was the stated deadline for withdrawal by the  
6 Doha Agreement, and the fact that we knew that there had been a reduction of forces  
7 during the transition down to 2,500.

8 So it was making sure that we were fit for purpose and that the actual -- the  
9 planning that I would've assumed had been underway actually would get underway.

10 And then of course the big data point that we didn't know was what the President  
11 would decide in terms of on the future U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. And once  
12 that decision was taken in April, then it reshaped the planning, because we knew that we  
13 would -- the State Department would have to plan for a future in Afghanistan without a  
14 significant or any U.S. military presence.

15 Q Can you speak to how the Department's planning was structured? You  
16 noted that in the -- prior to the President's announcement, there was an assessment of  
17 what the decision point would be, what would happen essentially, and once the decision  
18 had been made, then planning as to the withdrawal ensued.

19 Which offices and individuals were responsible for which components of the  
20 planning?

21 A So I don't remember in detail the offices, but the individuals involved  
22 would've been Carol Perez, who was the Acting Under Secretary for Management,  
23 Brian McKeon, who was the Deputy for Management Resources, obviously the Bureau of  
24 South and Central Asian Affairs, the Bureau of Diplomatic Security would've been  
25 involved, Consular Affairs would've been involved. But of course those two offices fell

1 under the Under Secretary for Management position which Carol was filling.

2 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

3 Was there a senior leader at the Department exercising overall responsibility for  
4 the Department's equities in planning for the withdrawal and a potential emergency  
5 evacuation?

6 A Well, again, the Secretary of State was very engaged and wanted to make  
7 sure that we were -- and the planning was in place, not just for a NEO but to try to sustain  
8 a U.S. diplomatic presence beyond the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan.

9 But I would say that Brian and Carol would've been the principal leads on that to  
10 the best of my recollection.

11 Q And that Brian would be DMR Brian McKeon.

12 A Brian McKeon, I'm sorry, yeah, yes.

13 Q DMR McKeon.

14 And then the Secretary --

15 A And Carol Perez, yeah.

16 Q And you noted other senior leaders at the Department who were involved in  
17 matters pertaining to the withdrawal.

18 Was Deputy Secretary Sherman involved in any of the planning for the  
19 withdrawal -- potential withdrawal -- and emergency evacuation?

20 A She probably was, given that there would've been Deputies Committee  
21 meetings that she would've attended on those, but I don't recall specifically.

22 Q Did you engage with her at all on issues pertaining to Afghanistan  
23 throughout 2021?

24 A Yes.

25 Q On what issues in particular?

1           A    I do remember during the evacuation she helped organize an effort to  
2 consult with the countries that were part of the coalition, and I participated in some  
3 meetings with her on that.

4           Q    That's helpful. Thank you.

5           A    And who were the key military figures working with the State Department on  
6 matters pertaining to the Afghanistan withdrawal?

7           A    I had no direct interaction with military leaders, but, obviously, would hear  
8 about the commander in Afghanistan, as well as of course the Washington-based  
9 Afghanistan players, particularly on the Joint Staff.

10          Q    Did you have indirect contact with the Department of Defense?

11          A    I -- on Afghanistan, I don't recall.

12          Q    Do you recall who did have direct contact with military leaders in  
13 Afghanistan?

14          A    Certainly Zal Khalilzad did, Molly Phee, Tom West, his -- the SRAR team, the  
15 so-called SRAR team.

16          Q    That's helpful. Thank you.

17          A    And did Ambassador Wilson have any contact?

18          A    Oh, most certainly. I mean, he was with them every day, probably every  
19 hour of every day.

20          Q    What were the White House and National Security Council's role in the  
21 Afghanistan withdrawal and ultimate evacuation?

22          A    Well, obviously, they -- the fundamental job of the National Security Council  
23 is to coordinate the interagency and staff the President. So in both of those capacities  
24 they played a central role.

25          Q    And did the State Department receive direction from and/or report to the

1 White House and the NSC on issues pertaining to Afghanistan throughout 2021?

2 A State Department, obviously, reports to the President. But certainly  
3 attended many meetings where it's convened by the National Security Council.

4 Q And who were the key people at the White House and the NSC involved on  
5 issues pertaining to Afghanistan?

6 A Obviously, the senior leadership, Jake Sullivan, Jon Finer, Sumona Guha, who  
7 was the senior director for Afghanistan and Pakistan, probably Liz Sherwood-Randall, who  
8 was the President's Homeland Security Counterterrorism Advisor.

9 That's, to the best of my recollection, the key interlocutors.

10 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

11 And of those individuals, who were your main points of contact?

12 A I would say particularly in those early months, January or -- yeah, January,  
13 February, half of March, probably Jon Finer, but then Sumona, who was -- Sumona Guha,  
14 who was the senior director at the NSC.

15 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

16 So I want to go back to the transition period. We'll sort of proceed temporally  
17 from here. And I apologize if some of these questions appear redundant, but for clarity  
18 of the record.

19 A Okay.

20 Q So you noted your role in the Presidential transition and namely that you  
21 were involved in some capacity on issues pertaining to Afghanistan during that period.

22 Can you speak to how the potential military withdrawal was approached during  
23 the Presidential transition from former President Trump to President Biden?

24 [REDACTED]. I just want to note, I think the record will show he said he was on  
25 the Department of State landing team.

1 Counselor Chollet. Correct.

2 [REDACTED]: So your question is, how were those issues treated by the  
3 Department of State landing team?

4 [REDACTED]: Correct. It would be issues that you specific -- you were privy  
5 to based on your role on the transition team. So if it was --

6 [REDACTED]: On the State Department transition team. Your question could  
7 be addressed to how the overall White House transition team treated it, which I believe  
8 his testimony is he was not running that.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q So I'd like to first just, again, so going back to my earlier point as some of  
11 these may be -- appear redundant, but there is sort of rhyme and reason to it.

12 Let's focus on more broadly the White House, and then I'll focus specifically on the  
13 State Department.

14 So is it your testimony that during the transition on issues pertaining to the  
15 broader White House strategy you were not involved in that, or were you privy to any  
16 briefings or meetings on how the potential withdrawal was approached?

17 A Well, I should clarify, at this point there wasn't -- during the transition, it  
18 wasn't necessarily about the withdrawal. It was mainly about what was being inherited.

19 And given that the policy was still in motion by the previous administration,  
20 including major decisions about troop presence -- which, of course, I learned much later  
21 through the press was far more dramatic than even occurred, with the potential even  
22 going to zero by the end of 2020.

23 We were getting updated on all of that as best we could, but of course we  
24 didn't -- the people we were talking to weren't privy to all of those details.

25 And then just trying to understand what was going to -- we were going to be

1 inheriting and we needed to start getting done on day one.

2 Q Now transitioning to specifically the State Department landing team.

3 Did then-Designate Secretary Blinken have any requests or get-backs on issues  
4 pertaining to Afghanistan?

5 A Not that I can recall.

6 Q And we've learned in the course of our investigation that Diplomatic Security  
7 prepared a memorandum on the transition that outlined, in grave and stark words, the  
8 implications of withdrawing the U.S. military and the challenges that it would present to  
9 the State Department should it attempt to continue its diplomatic mission.

10 It's our understanding that this memorandum was provided to the transition  
11 team. Do you recall this memo, and have you seen it?

12 A I don't specifically recall it, no.

13 Q Were you ever briefed on it?

14 A I don't believe so.

15 Q Are you aware of whether this memo was provided to then-Designate  
16 Secretary Blinken?

17 A I don't.

18 Q Can you please speak to why Ambassador Khalilzad was retained as the  
19 Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation by the new administration, i.e., the  
20 Biden administration?

21 A So I can't speak to who decided it because I don't recall, so I don't know the  
22 full rationale.

23 I can tell you what my view was, which was that, given that he was so deeply  
24 involved in the negotiations, the negotiations around the Doha Agreement, as well as the  
25 implementation of that, and the fact that we only had a hundred days until a May 1st

1 deadline, it made good sense to keep him in the job.

2 We did augment his team by adding Tom West, who was one of the experts on  
3 Afghanistan who, I believe, was on the transition. He wasn't on the State Department  
4 transition. He might've been on another transition team, I don't recall. But he was an  
5 added staff member and joined as one of his deputies, I believe, on that team.

6 Q And during that period, the transition period, did Ambassador Khalilzad's  
7 roles and responsibilities change by the administration?

8 A No. Although I, to be honest, I don't know what the full range of roles was  
9 in the previous administration. I just know we didn't -- I don't recall a decision about  
10 changing anything.

11 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

12 And what was your impression of why Ambassador Ross Wilson was retained by  
13 the administration?

14 A So to the best of my recollection, he was considered a career member of the  
15 Foreign Service. My recollection is he had been recalled to service, and so he was  
16 treated as a career diplomat, and we retained all career diplomats in their positions.

17 Q Was there any consideration of nominating an ambassador to the position, a  
18 Senate-confirmed ambassador?

19 A I don't recall any consideration of that.

20 Q What was your perspective on former President Trump's policy and  
21 approach to Afghanistan?

22 A Which part of it?

23 Q Let's start with the planning.

24 You noted that you had inherited little planning on this issue, which was -- and I  
25 don't want to speak for you -- but appeared as a surprise given sort of the May 2020

1 deadline?

2 A Yeah. I was struck that a hundred days from the inauguration -- was  
3 roughly a hundred days, I guess, it was May 1st -- and there did not seem to be a great  
4 deal of planning underway to prepare for that, what was the plan of record, the policy of  
5 record, which was negotiated by that administration with the Doha Agreement.

6 Q And let's step back a bit and more broadly ask, what was your perspective on  
7 President Trump's policy as relating to the Doha Agreement?

8 [REDACTED]: So I just want to be clear. Is this a request for his personal  
9 perspective or his perspective in his capacity as the Counselor at the time?

10 [REDACTED]: His perspective in his capacity as Counselor at the time.

11 [REDACTED]: Thank you.

12 [REDACTED]: Thank you.

13 Counselor Chollet. I don't recall having a view, I mean, other than we had the  
14 Doha Agreement that was already nearly a year into its implementation by the time we  
15 took office.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q And during that period, what did then-Designate Secretary Blinken  
18 communicate to you regarding the Department's approach toward Afghanistan?

19 A I don't recall any specific guidance on this.

20 Q And what was the status of negotiations with the Afghan Government and  
21 the Taliban at the time?

22 A To the best of my recollection, they had more or less flatlined, and there had  
23 not been much engagement. And during the transition period Ambassador Khalilzad  
24 had been trying to restart negotiations, to find some negotiated outcome before the May  
25 1st deadline, but had not been having much success.

1 Q Do you recall why it had flatlined?

2 A I do not. I don't recall.

3 Q And what was the State Department's position on whether the U.S. should  
4 maintain or could maintain its embassy in Afghanistan following the military withdrawal?

5 A Well, certainly there was a desire to maintain the embassy in Afghanistan  
6 and a belief that it could be done, although the recognition that it would be quite difficult.

7 Q And understanding that we are in an unclassified setting, can you please  
8 describe, to the best of your ability, the, quote, "prudent planning process" for the  
9 Afghanistan withdrawal?

10 A So I don't recall any, under the formal rubric "prudent planning." I know  
11 we said that. And basically it was initially, to the best of my recollection, there was  
12 planning done prior to the Presidential decision, which is trying to be prudent and  
13 ensuring that we were thinking about all the various contingencies and options.

14 And then, obviously, once there was a clear way forward in terms of what the U.S.  
15 military presence would be, then we knew what to plan against in terms of whether or  
16 not there would be a U.S. military footprint there that the State Department could rely  
17 upon, because of course for the previous 20 years there had been that U.S. military  
18 backbone which the State Department could use to exist in Afghanistan.

19 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

20 I'm going to walk through some of the options. As the majority understands  
21 them, and to the extent you recall what these entailed, it would be helpful for you to  
22 provide some additional information.

23 I'll start with the alpha option. Do you recall this option as part of the prudent  
24 planning process?

25 A I do not.

1 Q How about the beta option?

2 A I do not.

3 Q The gamma option?

4 A No recollection.

5 Q The omega option?

6 A No recollection.

7 Q Did you counsel Secretary Blinken on any particular option, acknowledging  
8 that you don't recall the specific names?

9 A I don't recall advising him on any particular option.

10 Q Did any of the options that were formulated contemplate the possibility of  
11 the Taliban controlling Afghanistan?

12 A I don't recall.

13 Q Do you recall which option the Secretary was in support of?

14 A I don't recall.

15 Q Counselor Chollet, I'd like to now enter exhibit 1 into the record.

16 [Chollet Exhibit No. 1

17 was marked for identification.]

18 BY ██████████ :

19 Q This is a statement by NSC spokesperson Emily Horne on National Security  
20 Advisor Jake Sullivan's call with National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib of  
21 Afghanistan.

22 According to the statement, dated January 22nd, 2021, National Security Advisor  
23 Jake Sullivan informed his Afghan counterpart, Hamdullah Mohib, that the U.S. would  
24 review the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement, i.e., the Doha Agreement, including to  
25 assess whether the Taliban was living up to its commitments.

1           Is it correct that an interagency policy review commenced around or during this  
2 period?

3           A    Yes.

4           Q    And roughly how long did this policy review last?

5           A    I don't know specifically other than it concluded in April, obviously, when the  
6 President made the decision.   But there was -- I should say, just for background, there  
7 was policy reviews on almost any issue you could think of -- major issue -- Russia, China,  
8 Middle East -- during this time.   So this is one of those reviews.

9           Q    So would it be fair to say that the policy review lasted roughly around 3  
10 months, from January to April?

11          A    I don't recall specifically, so I don't want to -- I mean, I just know there was a  
12 Presidential decision that there's a date for.   I just -- it might've wrapped up earlier than  
13 that.   I just don't remember.

14          Q    Fair enough.   And how was this review conducted?

15          A    To the best of my recollection, there were a series of interagency meetings  
16 that the White House would chair, and the different -- each agency would handle its piece  
17 of it.   But I don't have any specific recollection from any of those meetings or this  
18 review.

19          Q    And do you recall, what was the State Department's role in that interagency  
20 review?

21          A    Well, again, speaking just very generally, because I don't have specific  
22 recollections, if there was a meeting, clearly Ambassador Khalilzad and members of his  
23 team would be there to brief on their negotiations that were underway towards a durable  
24 and just political settlement and a permanent cease-fire, which was what they were  
25 working towards.

1           When it came to the appropriate time, then the State Department would also  
2           brief on its planning for how to sustain an embassy given a potential decision to go to  
3           zero in terms of the U.S. military presence.

4           Q     Which officials led the State Department's participation in that interagency  
5           review?

6           A     Well, in those early months I would've attended those meetings.   Dean  
7           Thompson would've attended the meetings.   Zal or members of his team would've  
8           attended the meetings.

9           But then, as senior officials got confirmed, then they would either attend -- I  
10          would no longer attend or they would attend with me.   I just don't recall.

11          Q     Can you please walk us through your involvement in the review in your  
12          capacity as Counselor, starting from those early months onward?

13          A     To the best of my recollection, it was those early months participating in  
14          these meetings along with other colleagues from the State Department.

15          Q     And to what extent were you consulted throughout the review by the other  
16          individuals that you've mentioned as well as others in the interagency?

17          A     I would say regularly.

18          Q     And what recommendations and inputs, if any, did you provide?

19          A     I don't recall specifically.   I mean, you'd have to ask about if there's  
20          anything I can recall from a specific issue.   But I don't have a recollection of a general  
21          recommendation I would have.

22          Q     Let's walk through just a couple of issues as we've already mentioned them.  
23          Let's start with the presence of the diplomatic mission in Afghanistan.   Did you provide  
24          any inputs or recommendations on that?

25          A     I don't have a specific recollection of that.

1 Q Did you provide any recommendations and inputs on the conditionality of  
2 the Doha Agreement?

3 A I do not have a recollection of that.

4 Q Did you provide any recommendations and inputs on adherence to the  
5 Doha Agreement?

6 A Do not have a recollection of that.

7 Q Did you provide any recommendations and inputs on the Taliban's intentions  
8 and motives during that review?

9 A I don't recall a recommendation specific to that.

10 Q How about the Taliban's continued relationship with terrorist groups in  
11 Afghanistan?

12 A Don't recall a specific recommendation.

13 Q Do you recall any general recommendations and inputs you may have  
14 provided?

15 A The only general thing was we wanted to ensure that whatever was decided  
16 in terms of the U.S. military presence, that we would be able to sustain a diplomatic  
17 presence to perform the critical missions there, which included of course  
18 counterterrorism. But I don't have a specific recollection sitting here today.

19 Q And are we correct in understanding that you represented the Department  
20 in Deputies meetings before the Deputy Secretary and Under Secretary, i.e., the 7th Floor  
21 leadership for the Department?

22 A Correct. Correct.

23 Q And how often was Afghanistan discussed in those meetings?

24 A Well, there would've been a meeting on Afghanistan. So I can't -- I don't  
25 recall specifically how often there were those meetings. I recall they were regular early

1 on, but I, you know, whether it's once a week, once every 2 weeks.

2 Q And what was discussed with respect to Afghanistan?

3 A It would really depend. Obviously, some meetings may focus in on a  
4 particular issue. There may be a meeting that was mainly focused on the negotiations  
5 that Ambassador Khalilzad was conducting, so that would be the meeting. Maybe the  
6 meeting was about Defense Department planning. So it really would just depend on the  
7 agenda that was usually always set by the White House.

8 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

9 And we noted the efforts that Ambassador Khalilzad engaged in during the  
10 transition period.

11 Looking now to the policy review, what diplomatic efforts was SRAR engaged in  
12 with the Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan during the interagency policy  
13 review?

14 A So I recall that soon after the inauguration, but I don't recall how soon, that  
15 he began with his team to reengage in the negotiations with the Taliban to try to find a  
16 just and lasting settlement of the conflict.

17 And I recall that they were quite busy on the road conducting those. That was  
18 sort of in parallel to the process to lead up to what ultimately became the President's  
19 decision to withdraw.

20 Q And do you recall what outcomes those efforts -- those efforts being  
21 Ambassador Khalilzad's efforts -- yielded?

22 A Well, we know the negotiations didn't work.

23 Q And what, to the best of your understanding, were the goals of the  
24 interagency policy review?

25 A Well, it was to fully understand the Doha Agreement and what had

1       transpired since the Doha Agreement.

2               Also, to try to understand how the U.S. can pursue its interests in Afghanistan with  
3 various configurations of the U.S. military presence, trying to find if there was a way that  
4 a military presence could be negotiated with the Taliban that would prevent them from  
5 not going back to shooting at us, which they had not been shooting at us since February  
6 of 2020.

7               That was the main thing I can remember.

8               Q     To what extent did you engage with and coordinate with foreign  
9 governments regarding the Afghanistan withdrawal?

10              A     So I'm quite sure, although I have no specific recollection of engagements  
11 prior, in those early months, as we were coming into office, to basically introduce  
12 ourselves to our foreign counterparts.   And Afghanistan was of course one of many  
13 issues that key allies had a stake in.

14              But then also I recall specifically in the -- before, prior to the President's  
15 announcement in April, calling probably several dozen foreign counterparts to let them  
16 know in advance of the President's decision, so they would hear it from someone here in  
17 Washington, not just in the news, and to consult with them about then, therefore, the  
18 way forward.

19              Q     And do you recall who those foreign counterparts were?

20              A     I do not.

21              Q     Did they include the United Kingdom as part of those foreign counterparts?

22              A     I don't recall that, but I can't rule it out.

23              Q     And how about Germany?

24              A     Do not recall that, but I cannot rule it out.   I really don't remember.   There  
25 was a lot of calls.   I don't remember.

1 Q No problem.

2 A Yeah.

3 Q We can move on.

4 A Yeah.

5 Q Did you coordinate with the Government of Afghanistan?

6 A I do not believe I had an engagement with anyone in the Government of  
7 Afghanistan, but I might be -- if I did, it was fleeting.

8 Q Did you have a main point of contact at the Government of Afghanistan?

9 A No.

10 Q What course of action did the Afghan Government urge the U.S. to take  
11 during the interagency policy review?

12 A I don't recall specifically what they were urging us to take. I can only  
13 speculate.

14 Q Did anyone within the interagency provide any inputs on any interest or  
15 communications that the Government of Afghanistan provided on this issue?

16 A Well, certainly there would've been inputs from Embassy Kabul and the  
17 team there.

18 Q And what inputs did they provide?

19 A I don't recall specifically.

20 Q What course of action did NATO and other allied countries urge the U.S. to  
21 take during the interagency policy review?

22 [REDACTED]. So if you have a specific answer. Because it is foreign  
23 government information, I would prefer that be in a classified setting.

24 But there would be no objection to answering it if he has a recollection.

25 Counselor Chollet. I don't have a specific recollection. NATO itself didn't take a

1 position, I can say that. It was NATO allies perhaps, but I don't have a specific  
2 recollection.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q And to what extent did you engage and coordinate with the United Nations?

5 A I don't recall having any interaction with the U.N. on this issue.

6 Q Did you coordinate with other governments in Central Asia and the  
7 Middle East, e.g., Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Qatar?

8 A I -- is there a particular time frame you're interested in or is it --

9 Q This is during the interagency, so before the April 14th, 2021,  
10 announcement.

11 A I don't believe I had interaction with any of those countries prior to the April  
12 announcement.

13 [REDACTED]: I just want to note, your answer there was appropriate to the  
14 direct question as to you.

15 Some of these other questions could be interpreted as, what was the entire  
16 engagement of the U.S. Government?

17 I want the record to show that each question is just directed to what was  
18 Derek Chollet's individual interactions.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q These are with respect to in your capacity as Counselor to the Department  
21 and not more broadly the entire U.S. Government.

22 And to what extent did you engage and/or coordinate with the Taliban?

23 A None.

24 Q Roughly when did the Department's interagency review of the  
25 Doha Agreement conclude?

1 A I don't recall specifically.

2 Q What was your assessment of whether the Taliban was meeting the  
3 conditions of the Doha Agreement?

4 A I knew that -- my assessment was they were meeting the most important  
5 condition, which was they were not shooting at U.S. military forces in Afghanistan.

6 Q What other provision of the Doha Agreement did you believe the Taliban  
7 was adhering to?

8 A I don't recall, myself, doing an assessment of that. It was -- the most  
9 important thing on our minds was we did not want the Afghan war to resume -- against  
10 us. Because, obviously, there was fighting in Afghanistan.

11 Q What was your assessment of whether the Taliban was living up to its  
12 commitments to cut ties with terrorist groups?

13 A I did not have an independent assessment of that.

14 Q Did you provide any inputs, guidance, advice to the Secretary on this issue?

15 A Not to my recollection.

16 Q Were you briefed on this issue by anyone within the Department?

17 A I can only speculate that I was. I don't recall a briefing on it.

18 Q So I'd like to introduce exhibit 2 into the record next.

19 [Chollet Exhibit No. 2

20 was marked for identification.]

1

2

BY [REDACTED]:

3

Q This is an excerpt from a report by a U.N. sanctions monitoring team dated

4

May 27th, 2020.

5

Did you ever read this report?

6

A Nope.

7

Q I'd like to direct you to what is marked page 3 in the bottom right-hand

8

corner, specifically the fifth paragraph in the summary box. I'll give you an opportunity

9

to take a look. I will read the relevant language into the record.

10

Quote: "The senior leadership of Al-Qaida remains present in Afghanistan, as

11

well as hundreds of armed operatives, Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, and groups of

12

foreign terrorist fighters aligned with the Taliban. A number of significant Al-Qaida

13

figures were killed in Afghanistan during the reporting period.

14

"Relations between the Taliban, especially the Haqqani Network, and Al-Qaida

15

remain close, based on friendship, a history of shared struggle, ideological sympathy and

16

intermarriage. The Taliban regularly consulted with Al-Qaida during negotiations with

17

the United States and offered guarantees that it would honour their historical ties.

18

"Al-Qaida has reacted positively to the agreement, with statements from its

19

acolytes celebrating it a victory for the Taliban's cause and thus for global militancy."

20

Does this comport with your understanding of the Taliban's ties with terrorist

21

groups such as al-Qaeda?

22

A Generally speaking.

23

Q I'd like to now introduce exhibit 3 into the record.

24

[Chollet Exhibit No. 3

25

was marked for identification.]

1

2 [10:56 a.m.]

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q This is a report by the Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Treasury  
5 dated January 4, 2021. It states at the top of this: Memorandum for Department of  
6 Defense Lead Inspector General.

7 Did you ever read this memorandum?

8 A No.

9 Q I'd like to direct your attention to what is marked as page 4, the second  
10 bolded line. After the second bolded line, correction. Quote, "Treasury told us, as of  
11 2020, al-Qaeda is gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the  
12 Taliban under the Taliban's protection. Al-Qaeda broadly still depends on donations  
13 from like-minded supporters and from individuals who believe that their money is  
14 supporting humanitarian or charitable causes.

15 "Treasury told us al-Qaeda capitalizes on its relationship with the Taliban through  
16 its network of mentors and advisers who are embedded with the Taliban providing  
17 advice, guidance, and financial support. Senior Haqqani Network figures have discussed  
18 forming a new joint unit of armed fighters in cooperation with and funded by al-Qaeda."

19 Counselor Chollet, do you have reason to refute the findings of the Treasury  
20 Inspector General?

21 A I do not.

22 Q What is the relationship between the Taliban and the Haqqani Network?

23 A I don't have a view on that right now, I mean, other than I have no reason to  
24 doubt what's in this report from January 2021.

25 Q And are we correct in understanding that Haqqani leadership comprises

1 Taliban leadership?

2 A I am not an expert on these terrorist groups, so I can't opine on that.

3 Q Are you aware if they are separate entities?

4 A I am generally aware, but I'm not an expert on this.

5 Q Are you aware of claims of the State Department in August 2021, which said  
6 they were separate?

7 A I don't have a recollection of that.

8 Q I'd like to direct your attention back to exhibit 2, the page marked 19. Is  
9 that in your packet, 19? It looks like it's not in that packet.

10 A Yeah.

11 Q Which is fine. We can go back to the follow-up question.

12 So, I asked you initially about the Taliban's ties or cutting ties, more specifically,  
13 with terrorist groups. I want to go back to that.

14 Did you consider the Taliban's continued ties with al-Qaeda and ISIS-K to be a  
15 violation of the Doha agreement?

16 A I don't remember considering that. I knew that they had ties with  
17 terrorists. I did not compare that to their obligations in the Doha agreement.

18 Q How about Secretary Blinken? Did he consider those ties to be a violation  
19 of the Doha agreement?

20 A I can't speak to his views on this.

21 Q Did he ever communicate his views --

22 A Not to my recollection.

23 Q What was your assessment of whether the Taliban was reducing violence?

24 A We knew that the Civil War was still raging. So there was not a reduction in  
25 violence that we were seeing.

1 Q And by Civil War, are you referencing attacks by the Taliban --

2 A The Taliban against forces of the Afghan armed forces.

3 Q So against the Afghan government?

4 A Yes. Not against the United States.

5 Q And what did you base your assessment on?

6 A Sorry. The assessment of? That they weren't attacking the United  
7 States?

8 Q Correct.

9 A I can only speculate because I don't have a specific recollection. Reports  
10 from the U.S. military.

11 Q Were you aware that the Taliban carried out indirect fire attacks against the  
12 U.S. and coalition bases multiple times throughout 2021?

13 A No.

14 Q No one at the Department briefed you on this issue?

15 A I have no recollection of that.

16 Q Okay.

17 And what was your assessment of the Taliban's commitment to an engagement in  
18 and negotiations with the Afghan Government?

19 A I didn't have an independent assessment because I was not involved in those  
20 negotiations. So what I knew was what I would have been hearing from Ambassador  
21 Khalilzad and his team.

22 Q Okay.

23 [REDACTED]. And it looks like we're running out of time. To make sure we  
24 don't go over, I'm going to stop the time now and go off the record.

25 [Discussion off the record.]

1 [REDACTED]. We will begin questioning from the minority. Thank you very  
2 much.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Before we get started, we'd like to introduce a bit of a variation on the terms  
5 "withdrawal" and "evacuation" for your consideration.

6 We define the term "withdrawal" to describe the retrograde of troops,  
7 equipment, and personnel from Afghanistan. As such, the withdrawal of U.S. military  
8 personnel was initiated in the February 2020 Doha deal, involved partial troop  
9 drawdowns prior to 2021, and was completed by August 31, 2021.

10 Do you take issue with this definition?

11 A Not at all.

12 Q It also ultimately included the drawdown of all U.S. embassy personnel in  
13 Afghanistan, in addition to a military withdrawal.

14 Would you agree with the sentiment that U.S. troops and equipment are primarily  
15 the domain of DoD and military leadership?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Not the domain of State?

18 A Correct.

19 Q In terms of evacuation, we understand this term to describe the removal of  
20 American citizens and their eligible family members, lawful permanent residents and their  
21 eligible family members, SIVs, and their eligible family members and certain other Afghan  
22 allies. As such, this encompassed the civilian-led operation allies refuge that began in  
23 July 2021, and the subsequent NEO that occurred from August 16 to 31, 2021.

24 Do you take issue with this terminology?

25 A No.

1 Q Okay.

2 We'd like to discuss in a bit further detail your background. Are there any  
3 experiences, specifically that related to your role as counselor, in terms of foreign policy  
4 or national security?

5 A Sorry. Could you restate the question?

6 Q Prior to your role as counselor, were you in any roles that specifically  
7 touched upon foreign policy or national security?

8 A Yes.

9 Q Could you detail those for the record?

10 A So every job I've had since college?

11 Q [Nonverbal response.]

12 A As I mentioned previously, I worked for former Secretary of State James A.  
13 Baker, III, for 2 years helping him with the research and writing of his memoirs from 1993  
14 to 1995.

15 In 1996, I was brought in to work to help the State Department do a classified  
16 history of the Dayton peace agreement, which I researched and wrote from 1996 to 1997.

17 In 1997, former Secretary of State Warren Christopher hired me to help with the  
18 research and writing of his memoirs. And at the same time, then former Assistant  
19 Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke hired me to help with the research and writing of  
20 his memoirs.

21 Do you want me to go on like this?

22 Q [Nonverbal response.]

23 A Okay.

24 Then in 1999, I was brought in to work at the State Department on the Office of  
25 Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott as a special adviser, helping with speech writing

1 and various policy jobs.

2 When Richard Holbrooke was then confirmed as the U.S. Ambassador to the  
3 United Nations, I worked then as his speechwriter in addition until the end of 2001.

4 Then I went to work at the George Washington University as a research associate  
5 on, well, U.S. foreign policy generally.

6 And then in 2002, I spent 6 months as a fellow at the American Academy in Berlin.

7 In the summer of 2002, I went to work on the U.S. Senate for then-North Carolina  
8 Senator John Edwards. I took some breaks from that formal government service to  
9 work on the Presidential campaign in 2004, including on the Kerry-Edwards general  
10 election campaign in 2004 where I was the national security adviser to the then-vice  
11 presidential nominee, John Edwards.

12 Then after that failed campaign, I left to the Hill and went to work for the Center  
13 for Strategic and International Studies International Security Program. Then I, after 2  
14 years there, I went with several of my colleagues from CSIS to help start the Center for a  
15 New American Security, which is another think tank.

16 I also was a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution during that time.

17 Then in 2008, I was on the Obama-Biden transition team, on the National Security  
18 Council transition team.

19 In 2009, I started on day one after the inauguration on the State Department's  
20 Policy Planning Staff where I was the Principal Deputy Director of the Policy Planning Staff  
21 for 2 years.

22 And then in January or February, I guess, of 2011, I went to the White House  
23 where I was the Special Assistant to the President, Senior Director for the National  
24 Security Council. I was there until May of 2012, when I was confirmed to be the  
25 Assistant Secretary of Defense for National Security Affairs until February of 2015, when I

1 went to work at the German Marshall Fund, a think tank and research institution where I  
2 originally was there as counselor.

3 And then after a year, I became the executive vice president where I served  
4 until -- well, technically, until January 2021, although I was on the Obama -- sorry -- the  
5 Biden-Harris transition team, as we previously discussed, and then joined the State  
6 Department as counselor.

7 Intermittent in there, various adjunct professorships and academic affiliations.  
8 But off the top of my head, that's how I've touched foreign policy over my life.

9 Q So two things to note. Number one, you have a remarkable memory.  
10 And number two, fair to say, your 30-plus years of experience have, in fact, completely  
11 focused on foreign affairs and national security work?

12 A Correct.

13 Q Okay.

14 And to also point out you've served in two Presidential transitions. Is that  
15 correct?

16 A Correct.

17 Q Have you received any awards for your contributions related to foreign  
18 policy or national security?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Can you enumerate those for the record?

21 A I don't remember the exact titles. Several medals from the Department of  
22 Defense. It's a distinguished service medal I think and public service medal. I forget.  
23 Anyway, two awards from the Department of Defense; several State Department awards,  
24 and some awards from foreign governments.

25 Q Okay. Thank you.

1           Have your insights on foreign affairs and/or national security been published or  
2 included in public reporting?

3           A     Yes.

4           Q     And have you authored any books?

5           A     Yes.

6           Q     How many?

7           A     Well, eight.   Four of which were co-editor and then coauthor of one and an  
8 author of three, sole author of three.

9           Q     And you testified that you've taught on foreign affairs and national security  
10 at universities --

11          A     Correct.

12          Q     -- is that correct?

13          A     Correct.

14          Q     Which universities?

15          A     George Washington University, Georgetown University, and University of  
16 Pennsylvania.

17          Q     And have you been a fellow as related to foreign policy?

18          A     Yes.

19          Q     At which fellowships, specifically?

20          A     Well, at think tanks I was a fellow.   So CSIS, CNAS -- those are  
21 acronyms -- Brookings, German Marshall Fund -- well, I guess technically I wasn't a fellow  
22 there but -- American Academy in Berlin.   I think that's it.

23          Q     Fair to say you're an expert in foreign policy and national security?

24          A     It's fair.

25          Q     Fair to say you're a distinguished State Department official?

1 A I'll take the compliment.

2 Q Fair to say you're a distinguished Federal Government official generally?

3 A I'll take the compliment.

4 Q You previously testified that you had some experience related to  
5 Afghanistan. Is that correct?

6 A Correct.

7 Q Under Obama and Holbrooke. Is that correct?

8 A Correct.

9 Q Could you detail that further?

10 A It was -- as I said earlier, in the early Obama administration, I was part of a  
11 small team that assisted with Bruce Riedel and his early review of Afghanistan policy for  
12 the Obama administration. And then, given my long affiliation with Holbrooke, I, even  
13 though I was not working directly with him when I was on the Policy Planning Staff at the  
14 State Department, I had a lot of interaction with Holbrooke and was involved in the 2009  
15 review of the Afghan policy that the Obama administration conducted.

16 Q Okay.

17 Fair to say you have experience and understanding of the conflict as it spanned for  
18 20 years?

19 A Broadly speaking, yes.

20 Q Okay.

21 Do you have any experience related to conflict settings?

22 A Could you just define that a little further?

23 Q Sure.

24 Do you have experience either studying or being involved in areas which are  
25 experiencing conflict or crisis?

1           A    Certainly studying, but I've never been deployed.  I've never worked in a  
2 conflict environment.

3           Q    What about in an advisory capacity within Washington, advising --

4           A    Yes.

5           Q    -- on conflict settings?

6           A    Yes.

7           Q    Crises as well?

8           A    Sure, yes.

9           Q    Okay.

10           Have you ever participated in or worked with a crisis-related task force in the  
11 Federal Government?

12           A    I don't believe so.

13           Q    Okay.

14           Have you ever worked in a complex evacuation situation, such as the NEO we're  
15 discussing here today?

16           A    "Worked in" meaning been on the ground participating in it or --

17           Q    On the ground or participating from Washington in an advisory capacity.

18           A    I mean, I guess the August 2021 evacuation I, in an advisory capacity, I guess,  
19 participated in.

20           Q    What about outside of the Afghanistan NEO?

21           A    No.

22           Q    Is that, in part, because NEOs are rare?

23           A    Yes, thankfully.

24           Q    But as you had said, post prepare with NEO plans regardless of whether a  
25 NEO was imminent.  Is that correct?

1 A Correct, yes.

2 Q Have you ever contributed to an after-action review or post-crisis review?

3 A As I said, I wrote a classified history of the Dayton peace process, which was  
4 a diplomatic history of an intensive negotiation to end a war. And that's the only  
5 experience there.

6 Q Okay.

7 [REDACTED]: This would include anything you've done in your current job?

8 Counselor Chollet. So, you mean in terms of the AAR?

9 [REDACTED]: Right. Just to be fully --

10 Counselor Chollet. Yeah, I mean, I guess -- okay, so I didn't participate in that in  
11 the Afghan after-action report in the sense of I was not part of the team writing it or  
12 researching it but --

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q You're aware of what the AAR is?

15 A Absolutely. And I had a role in the sense that the lead of that team, Dan  
16 Smith, would come to me for any assistance he needed in terms of anything he needed to  
17 do his job. But otherwise, I had no role in that process.

18 Q Are you aware of any other State Department-led after-action reviews  
19 outside of the Afghanistan AAR?

20 A On Afghanistan?

21 Q Writ large.

22 A Oh. Sure, yeah.

23 Q And which would those be?

24 A Well, there would be -- I mean, they have -- I forget what ARB refers to.

25 [REDACTED]: Accountability review board.

1 Counselor Chollet. There is an ARB process, and I know that that has been  
2 conducted in the past on other issues.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q But to be clear for the record, the after-action review is a distinct process  
5 than the ARB.

6 A Correct.

7 Q So are you aware of any other after-action reviews, or is this the first such  
8 instance?

9 A I don't -- there have been similar efforts over the years. I mean, there  
10 was -- my effort on Dayton. There was an effort on German reunification that Phil  
11 Zelikow did in '92, '93. I'm sure there have been others but...

12 Q Is it fair to say that --

13 A It's not common.

14 Q It's not common?

15 A It's not common.

16 Q And does it reflect an extraordinary step by the Department when you say --

17 A Yes. It's a unique --

18 Q Does it reflect an extraordinary step by the State Department when they  
19 conduct such an uncommon review?

20 A Yes. It's not routine.

21 BY [REDACTED]:

22 Q Thank you.

23 We would like to discuss your current role in a bit more detail as well. You  
24 described your role as a minister without a portfolio. Could you expand upon that a bit  
25 for the record?

1           A    I often find sports analogies and others to use.

2           So basically, I'm a senior adviser to the Secretary, a senior leader in the  
3 Department. I do not oversee vast parts of the bureaucracy. So I'm not encumbered  
4 by those management duties and responsibilities.

5           So, therefore, I have the bandwidth to be able to flex to whatever issue needs  
6 assistance on, whether that's something like in Afghanistan, which would be a major  
7 issue, to things that are, perhaps, you know, not on the front burner.

8           But there are circumstances that I and many senior officials are going to be doing  
9 work on. The current situation in Israel with Gaza is a recent example, which has been  
10 occupying most of my time in the last 2 months.

11          Q    Okay.

12          Fair to say that your position is dynamic?

13          A    It is very dynamic.

14          Q    It's flexible based on what's happening in the world and also on what the  
15 Secretary needs from you?

16          A    Exactly.

17          Q    Okay.

18          Fair to say you're a trusted adviser of the Secretary?

19          A    Yes.

20          Q    What informs that opinion?

21          A    That he continues to listen to me occasionally.

22          Q    And what is the Secretary's professional reputation?

23          A    It's impeccable. He's deeply experienced and well-respected here in the  
24 United States and around the world.

25          Q    How does that comport with your experiences with him in a professional

1 capacity?

2 A His reputation?

3 Q Yes. Have you found him in your experience to be impeccable?

4 A Absolutely.

5 Q Hard-working?

6 A Yes.

7 Q Smart?

8 A Yes.

9 Q Dedicated?

10 A Yes. Empathetic.

11 Q Sorry?

12 A Empathetic.

13 Q Empathetic. Thank you.

14 [Chollet Exhibit No. 4

15 was marked for identification.]

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q I'd like to introduce into the record exhibit No. 4. Exhibit No. 4 is an  
18 excerpt of a draft transcript of Brian McKeon. The interview occurred on November 29,  
19 2023, before this committee.

20 Before we turn to the exhibit, I'd like to recall prior testimony you gave about your  
21 role as related to Afghanistan. With that in mind, if you could please turn to page 13,  
22 line number 18.

23 A Yep.

24 Q "Q" stands for question. The question was asked of DMR McKeon, "When  
25 did you first become involved with work relating to the Afghanistan withdrawal?"

1           He answers, "I can't remember the first moment that I touched Afghanistan  
2 issues. Sometime in March or April, there was kind of a division of labor of issues in  
3 the -- following the decision of the President, between me and Derek Chollet in terms of  
4 interagency workstreams."

5           He continues: "I worked on how we could continue to provide foreign  
6 assistance. If the Taliban started to control areas within Afghanistan, you know, could  
7 we be able to continue" -- continuing on page 14 -- "to provide assistance to people in  
8 those districts?"

9           "I was the lead on the SIV issue and the anticipated flow of refugees out of  
10 Afghanistan if the Taliban started taking over parts of the country, and then how we were  
11 going to secure Embassy Kabul after the U.S. military withdrawal and thinking about the  
12 possible need to evacuate the embassy and ultimately evacuate the country."

13           "And Derek was working on a couple other issues."

14           He was then asked: "What were Mr. Chollet's workstreams?"

15           McKeon answers: "I think it was primarily the work on -- I don't know if we've  
16 discussed this publicly. I think we have. I mean, some of it is probably classified."

17           He continues on line 12. "How we could continue to maintain a posture and  
18 ability to assess the terrorism threat and continue to take counterterrorism action from  
19 outside the country."

20           He was then asked: "Were there other workstreams he was focused on?" To  
21 which McKeon responds: "I don't remember. You'll have to ask him."

22           Does this comport with your memory at the time as to what you were working on  
23 related to Afghanistan?"

24           A At this point in the story, so after the President's decision, yes.

25           Q Okay. After the President's decision as to what?

1 A Decision in April of 2021.

2 Q Okay.

3 Is there any additional color you can provide here as related to your efforts on  
4 counterterrorism?

5 A It was -- understanding that we're in an unclassified setting, basically to help  
6 work on the effort along with other colleagues to ensure that the United States would  
7 have the ability to continue to execute its counterterror missions absent a U.S. military  
8 presence in Afghanistan.

9 Q Okay.

10 And was this a mandate given to you by the Secretary himself?

11 A I don't believe so, no.

12 Q Was the effort related to counterterrorism at the time a robust effort?

13 A Yes.

14 Q Was there forged consensus?

15 A What forged --

16 Q As to efforts related to counterterrorism to maintaining a military presence,  
17 maintaining a counterterrorism capacity.

18 A Counterterrorism was going to be a central goal of the United States, and it  
19 still remains today despite the fact we don't have any presence in Afghanistan. So, yes.

20 Q Okay.

21 And how is this separate from what DMR McKeon was handling?

22 A Well, as he stated in his testimony, he was handling the issues related to  
23 inside Afghanistan, the operation embassy, refugees, SIVs, all of that.

24 This effort was focused on how we ensure that we have the access and basing  
25 required to do counterterrorism outside -- from outside Afghanistan. And I don't want

1 to go -- I shouldn't go into any further detail about that in an unclassified setting.

2 Q Okay.

3 And you previously testified that a fairly large percentage of your time in the initial  
4 days of your role was centered on Afghanistan. Is that correct?

5 A Correct -- well, I can't -- I don't want to -- there was the world we were  
6 focused on. So Afghanistan was one piece of it, but it was more substantial in those  
7 early months and certainly towards -- as we got closer to August.

8 Q Outside of counterterrorism, what other issues were you focusing on related  
9 to Afghanistan in the initial days that you came into this role?

10 A So to be clear, this counterterrorism piece was something that only took  
11 shape after the President had made the decision.

12 Q In April, right?

13 A In April, exactly. Because then we knew what we were working toward,  
14 which was going to be a withdrawal of U.S. forces over time.

15 Prior to that, there wasn't -- I don't have a recollection of a clearly defined role  
16 with regard to any counterterrorism.

17 I'm sorry. I forgot the question.

18 Q That's okay. We want to better understand. You said a significant portion  
19 of your time was related to Afghanistan?

20 A Well, again, it's -- I mean, there was -- given the review of the policy and the  
21 decision timeline that the President had in order to decide whether or not to adhere to  
22 the agreement that had been forged by the previous administration to stick with the May  
23 1st deadline, there was a lot of interagency meetings that I would have been attending.

24 And at the same time, you had an accelerated effort on negotiations that Zal  
25 Khalilzad was leading. And so, there was, you know, a decent amount of check-ins with

1 him from the field or when he and the team would return to Washington to talk about  
2 the status of the negotiations and the way forward there that I would have been  
3 participating in those meetings.

4 Q Okay.

5 So is it fair to say you were working on issues related to Afghanistan in January  
6 when you assumed the role on the 21st?

7 A I don't know when the first interagency meeting was, but I can tell you I was  
8 doing everything. So it was Afghanistan and Russia and China and the Middle East and  
9 COVID response and everything.

10 Q And in April, is it fair to say that you began working on Afghanistan-specific  
11 issues more often? It was a larger --

12 A No.

13 Q -- percentage of time?

14 A I would say it actually went the opposite way.

15 Q It decreased?

16 A Yes.

17 Q Could you explain why?

18 A Because more people were confirmed into their roles. So as Brian  
19 mentioned, he was confirmed in March. My recollection is that, roughly, Wendy  
20 Sherman was confirmed around that time. I can't remember when Victoria Nuland  
21 came on the job, but more of the senior team started to get filled out.

22 BY [REDACTED]

23 Q And that was the point at which you adopted a more narrow focus --

24 A Exactly.

25 Q -- on counterterrorism issues?

1 A Yes.

2 Q You had previously testified that the debate inside the Department and  
3 interagency around counterterrorism and maintaining a capacity post withdrawal was  
4 robust. Noting that you can't go into the substance of those discussions in an  
5 unclassified setting, can you, nevertheless, characterize did those discussions result in  
6 concrete plans for a counterterrorism capacity post withdrawal?

7 A That was underway. Some of that, of course, was overtaken by events by  
8 the fact that we no longer had an embassy in Kabul. But most of what I was focused on  
9 was not what was happening inside Kabul. That was other people and other agencies.

10 It was thinking through how we could work with partner countries, you know,  
11 with a reduced U.S. presence on the ground. How we could work with partner countries  
12 to help execute some of those counterterrorism missions.

13 Q Okay.

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q And to be clear, those conversations were happening in April?

16 A Well, that's when the effort started. I don't recall exactly when all the  
17 conversations started happening.

18 Q Which would, in fact, have predated the NEO?

19 A Yes. Oh, yes, yes. The actual execution of the NEO, not --

20 Q Correct?

21 A -- not the NEO plan.

22 Q Yes.

23 A Yes.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q Last thing on this topic. Are you aware that al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri

1 was killed in summer of 2022?

2 A Yes.

3 Q And to what extent do you believe that the plans and processes and steps  
4 that you took beginning in April of 2021 informed such an action?

5 A I don't want to personally take any credit for any of that. I can just say  
6 that, you know, my efforts were part of a larger effort by the U.S. Government to ensure  
7 that we could continue to execute critical counterterror missions in Afghanistan.

8 The part that I was most intentionally involved in was prior to the evacuation. So  
9 there were certain assumptions built in that there would be U.S. -- significant U.S.  
10 diplomatic presence on the ground. Of course, that had to change once we no longer  
11 had that diplomatic presence on the ground.

12 [REDACTED]. Would you agree that the killing of al-Zawahiri demonstrated that  
13 there was a post-presence capability to address counterterrorism?

14 Counselor Chollet. Unquestionable.

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q Would you care to expand on that at all?

17 A We've shown the ability to find and finish targets wherever they may exist.

18 Q Thank you.

19 Speaking to the transition with a bit further detail, you previously testified that  
20 you have served in two transitions. Is that correct?

21 A Correct.

22 Q And which would those be?

23 A Obama-Biden transition, 2008, and Biden-Harris transition, 2020.

24 Q What do these transition processes generally include?

25 A Could you be a little more specific?

1 Q Is there a considerable, generally speaking, a considerable amount of written  
2 papers, past engagement between new and old teams, et cetera?

3 A Yes.

4 Q What is the purpose of a transition?

5 A To prepare the incoming team as best as possible to be able to succeed on  
6 day one.

7 Q Okay. Was that your experience during the Obama transition?

8 A Absolutely.

9 Q Okay.

10 A I should say for the word, that the George W. Bush administration had a gold  
11 standard transition. They set the standard for the transition.

12 BY [REDACTED]:

13 Q Can you elaborate on what made it the gold standard in your opinion?

14 A Just the level of cooperation, the level of transparency, the willingness to  
15 engage with us, the incoming team, the view that even though there might be honest  
16 policy disagreements, that their job was to ensure that we had every piece of information  
17 required to be able to succeed no matter what decision the President would make.

18 Of course, that transition in 2008 was also quite perilous, given the wars in Iraq  
19 and Afghanistan at the time, neither of which were going particularly well. And I can say  
20 across the board, both in terms of personal engagement and written product, it was -- it  
21 set the bar for presidential transitions.

22 Q So is it fair to say that as an incoming member of the Obama team, you felt  
23 sufficiently prepared by the outgoing Bush team regarding any crises or decision points  
24 that you would face early in your tenure?

25 A As prepared as one can feel before taking office, yes.

1 Q Fair enough.

2 A Yeah.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q And why did you volunteer for the Biden transition?

5 A I had, you know, the call to service, and I felt like I could contribute.

6 Q Okay.

7 And I believe you testified that you were the deputy team lead for policy during  
8 the Biden transition.

9 A I started as that and then as people got moved on to bigger and better  
10 things, I took on additional responsibilities.

11 Q Okay. How would you describe the transition from the Trump  
12 administration to the Biden administration generally?

13 A It was, generally speaking, shambolic, but I was fortunate in the sense that  
14 the State Department -- and credit would go here to the outgoing Deputy Secretary of  
15 State, Steve Biegun -- was relative, relatively smooth as the transition goes, once the  
16 transition started.

17 But let's remember for the record, there were several weeks in which there was  
18 a -- you know, the previous administration would not concede the election. And so,  
19 therefore, the formal transition was delayed by 3 weeks or more is my recollection.

20 And then, of course, unfortunately, some agencies, including the Defense  
21 Department and the White House in particular had very, very difficult transitions where  
22 not much information was shared and it was quite contentious.

23 [Chollet Exhibit No. 5

24 was marked for identification.]

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q Okay.

2 I'd like to introduce into the record exhibit No. 5. Exhibit No. 5 is a letter to  
3 Chairman McCaul from the State Department dated February 10, 2023. It includes  
4 unclassified opening statements to a State Department classified briefing.

5 And I'd like to draw your attention to page number 12. Before we dig into this,  
6 do you recall the State Department's June 15, 2022, classified briefing on Afghanistan?

7 A I do.

8 Q Were you present during that?

9 A Yes.

10 Q And on this page, where it says, "Counselor Derek Chollet," do you recall  
11 having provided this opening statement?

12 A Uh-huh. I do.

13 Q Okay.

14 I'd like to draw your attention to paragraph number 3 and read into the record.  
15 "I helped lead the Biden-Harris State Department transition team, and was among the  
16 first officials to arrive at the Department in January 2021. I recall receiving only a few  
17 briefings related to Afghanistan prior to the start of the new administration. Mostly  
18 about the state of the negotiations with the Taliban."

19 "Here's what we knew: The previous administration had negotiated an  
20 agreement calling for the withdrawal of all American forces by May 1. In other words,  
21 within the first 100 days after President Biden's inauguration.

22 "Despite this tight timeline, during the transition we were not presented with a  
23 comprehensive plan for the completion of the withdrawal by May 1."

24 Turning to page 13. "In fact, just weeks after the election in November 2020, the  
25 outgoing administration had suddenly announced the reduction of U.S. forces to 2,500,

1 leaving us at the lowest number of troops in Afghanistan since 9/11."

2 "And we only learned after the fact from press reports that at the time, there  
3 were serious discussions by the outgoing administration about removing all troops from  
4 Afghanistan by the end of the year or inauguration.

5 "Nevertheless, our team received no contingency plans for withdrawal or a  
6 roadmap for maintaining the embassy or a plan to coordinate with allies and partners on  
7 evacuating our citizens or local partners if necessary, or found any evidence of an effort  
8 to restart the SIV process, which had been completely stalled for nearly a year and had a  
9 backlog of more than 17,000 applicants."

10 Is there any further color you could provide on your opening statement here?

11 A No. That accurately captures my recollection.

12 Q Okay. And I believe you had previously testified about a plan being  
13 seriously atrophied. Could you talk a little bit more about what you meant by seriously  
14 atrophied?

15 A Could you -- I'm just trying to remember the context.

16 Q You also testified that it was shocking, the lack of plans that were available  
17 to you.

18 A Uh-huh.

19 Q -- when you entered the office.

20 A Uh-huh.

21 Q Could you describe why you were shocked by that?

22 A Well, because if we thought of the counterfactual, which is the previous  
23 administration wins re-election, they, too, would be on a deadline to withdraw from  
24 Afghanistan by May 1st.

25 So one would have assumed there was robust planning underway to achieve that,

1 particularly given that force reductions were still taking place after the election,  
2 significant force reduction down to 2,500.

3 So I was surprised that such plans didn't seem to be underway.

4 Q Okay.

5 And you also testified about a, quote, "plan of record." What was the plan of  
6 record at that time?

7 A To withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan by May 1st.

8 Q Right. So which record would that refer to? Is that the Doha deal?

9 A The Doha agreement, right.

10 Q Okay. Thank you.

11 BY [REDACTED]:

12 Q Just to follow up on this issue a little bit more, you spoke of a counterfactual,  
13 that had the outgoing administration, in fact, won the election and stayed in power, they,  
14 too, would have ostensibly faced a May 1 deadline. But then you referred to troop  
15 drawdowns without a plan that were happening at the election up until --

16 A Which, as far as I know, we read about in the press.

17 Q -- up until the very end of their administration's tenure, correct?

18 A Correct.

19 Q What did that suggest to you about the degree to which troop drawdowns  
20 under the prior administration were connected to or the result of any planning process?

21 A There was no evidence that I was aware of that there were, and we knew a  
22 little bit of this in real time given the announcement around the reduction to 2,500 in  
23 November. Of course, we found out much more since. So I've learned since.

24 And I can't remember -- I think I mentioned -- yes, I said that we learned, since  
25 then, that the intent had been from the highest level to go to zero by the end of 2020, or

1 by the time of the inauguration.

2 Q Let's elaborate on that. You said the intent at the highest level was to  
3 Go-to-Zero by 2020. Are you testifying that you understood from public reporting that  
4 then-President Trump wanted to remove all troops by the end of 2020?

5 A He was tweeting, is my recollection, things to that effect for all of us to see.

6 Q You mentioned previously what you knew about the drawdown of troops  
7 prior to your taking office from press reports. So I want to submit for the record exhibit  
8 number --

9 [REDACTED]: 7.

10 [REDACTED]: 7.

11 [REDACTED]: Oh, excuse me, exhibit 6.

12 [Chollet Exhibit No. 6

13 was marked for identification.]

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q Exhibit 6.

16 So you can see at the top of this exhibit -- I'll give you a minute if you need time to  
17 absorb it.

18 A Okay.

19 Q So at the top of the page, on the front of the exhibit, it reads: "Pentagon  
20 says U.S. has dropped to 2,500 troops in Afghanistan, AP News."

21 Further down the page, it refers to the line that says: "Published 10:16 A.M. EST,  
22 January 15, 2021."

23 So does this appear to you to be an article by AP News published January 15th --

24 A Yes.

25 Q -- without the drawdown to 2,500?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Let me read into the record the first two paragraphs. It begins: "The U.S.  
3 military has met its goal of reducing the number of troops in Afghanistan to about 2,500  
4 by Friday, a drawdown that may have violated a last-minute congressional prohibition.  
5 The reduction could complicate matters for the incoming Biden administration, which  
6 must determine how to handle a Trump administration commitment to the Taliban to  
7 remove all U.S. military, intelligence, and contractor personnel from Afghanistan by May  
8 as a move to spur peace negotiations. Those talks are in an early stage."

9 Does this comport with your understanding of the situation at the time?

10 A Yes.

11 Q And did the drawdown to 2,500 complicate matters for you and the  
12 incoming Biden administration?

13 A Well, I don't recall a broadly-reached conclusion, but I can tell you my  
14 personal view is yes.

15 Q How so?

16 A Well, it didn't seem to be connected in any way to any particular  
17 negotiation. I don't recall Zal Khalilzad, who was trying to engage with the Taliban at the  
18 time, to enhance his position at all in any way.

19 And obviously, we were at such a low level of force that had the Taliban restarted  
20 attacks against U.S. forces, we would have been in a difficult position to defend ourselves  
21 given the small number of troops that we had there.

22 So it made the prospect of returning to full-scale war much more harrowing, and it  
23 would have meant the reality that if the war restarted against the United States, that the  
24 President would be faced with a question of adding troops to Afghanistan. Not  
25 maintaining the presence, but adding to that presence.

1 Q Okay.

2 And further down in this exhibit, paragraph 5, I'm going to read that into the  
3 record. "President Donald Trump, who ordered the reduction in November when there  
4 were about 4,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, said Thursday that troop levels in  
5 Afghanistan had reached a 19-year low, although he did not mention a troop number.

6 "Last February, his administration struck a deal with the Taliban to reduce  
7 American troop levels in phases and to go to zero by May 2021. It is unclear how the  
8 incoming Biden administration will proceed."

9 Does that comport with your understanding at the time?

10 A Yes.

11 Q And turning to page 2 of this exhibit, about midway down, the paragraph  
12 begins as follows: "The Afghanistan decision was seen by some as unnecessarily  
13 complicating the decision-making of the incoming administration. Trump, at the time,  
14 had refused to acknowledge that he had lost the election and would be ceding to Biden  
15 on January 20th. Some in Congress, including fellow Republicans, opposed Trump's  
16 decision."

17 Does that comport with your understanding at the time?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Okay.

20 So the last question I want to ask on this is to go back to the exemplary transition  
21 you said you experienced from the Bush administration to the Obama administration.  
22 You testified previously that you felt prepared for any early crises that would face -- that  
23 the new Obama administration would face. Is that correct?

24 A Correct.

25 Q Can you -- did you infer that the Bush administration wanted to act in good

1 faith regardless of political differences with the incoming team?

2 A No question about it. In fact, I have a vivid memory of during the transition  
3 from Bush to Obama, there, in fact, had been a decision pending by the President,  
4 President George W. Bush, whether or not to add troops to Afghanistan. And they  
5 purposely held that decision for -- because they had been doing their own policy review  
6 of Afghanistan in 2008, and they purposely held the decision of whether to add troops to  
7 Afghanistan, even though they could have done it because there was only one President  
8 at a time.

9 But they knew, given the implications for the incoming administration, that they  
10 would, instead, share with us the results of their policy review but hold that decision for  
11 the new team to make on their own.

12 And that's why this Riedel report process was undertaken early in the Obama  
13 administration, to make a decision whether or not to add forces to Afghanistan.

14 Similarly, and this is not something I was directly involved in, I recall from the  
15 transition from Bush 41 to Clinton, in fact, there was a decision made by Bush 41 in  
16 December of 1992 to insert troops into Somalia. And that was a decision that was made  
17 transparently with the incoming team.

18 I wasn't part of that team, of course, but I have read about it. And the  
19 then-national security adviser was, you know, fully keeping everyone in the incoming  
20 Clinton team in the loop about that decision, given the implications for the next team  
21 when they would come in office.

22 Q So is it fair to say that your experience from Bush to Obama was that the  
23 outgoing administration acted in good faith, considered issues beyond their own political  
24 tenure, and afforded you the information you needed to make decisions early on?

25 A Yes. And I would go just one step further. They, in fact, held decisions

1 that they could have made and would have been fully within their right to make, but they  
2 held decisions because of their good faith and their interest in the success of our country,  
3 that they gave the next president the opportunity to make that decision.

4 Q But your testimony today was that your experience as part of the incoming  
5 Biden team was that decisions were taken by the outgoing administration that  
6 complicated --

7 A Well, I can say this decision, particular decision was certainly complicating,  
8 and I can't speak to how my colleagues who were on the Defense Department transition  
9 were informed of this decision. I can say from my perspective and the State  
10 Department's side, I learned of it in press reports.

11 Q I want to go back to the exhibit that you were shown previously that was  
12 Deputy Secretary McKeon's statement -- or, sorry, statements to the committee in  
13 June 2022.

14 So do you recall that Deputy Secretary McKeon also participated in that briefing in  
15 June of 2022?

16 A Yes.

17 Q And I would like you to turn to page 18 of that exhibit.

18 [REDACTED]. Exhibit No. 5.

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q Page 18.

21 So it says, about midway down the page, Deputy Secretary of State for  
22 Management Resources Brian McKeon. And then his statement proceeds.

23 I want to read starting at paragraph 3 of the statement. "From January into  
24 August 2021, the State Department worked closely with their DOD colleagues on plans to  
25 execute the President's directive for maintaining a diplomatic presence and to provide

1 security of our diplomats. The Department and interagency partners met regularly to  
2 plan for various possible scenarios and to adjust our preparations as the intelligence  
3 picture, and the situation on the ground evolved."

4 Next page 19, it reads: "The State concurrently prepared for a possible  
5 noncombatant evacuation, both through planning with and providing information to  
6 DoD/CENTCOM, and through coordinated planning within State. The planning took  
7 account of a wide range of possible scenarios, including plans for what became a historic  
8 airlift from Kabul in August 2021, during which the U.S. Government and our partners  
9 relocated more than 124,000 people."

10 Does Deputy Secretary McKeon's characterization in June 2022 of the steps the  
11 Department took under the Biden administration after it took office comport with your  
12 understanding of what occurred?

13 A Yes.

14 Q Is there anything else that -- any other color you can provide on this?

15 A No, he covers it well.

16 Q Okay.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q I want to jump in to clarify a couple of things.

19 The majority gave you exhibit No. 3, which is an Inspector General report dated  
20 January 4, 2021. Do you recall who was president at that time?

21 A President Trump.

22 Q And just citing paragraph one, page 4, halfway down in response to  
23 questions six, it says: "Treasury told us, as of 2020, al-Qaeda is gaining strength in  
24 Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under the Taliban's protection."

25 So this is a document dated January 4, 2021. And I believe you testified to my

1 colleague that you learned from press reporting on January 15, 2021, that the Trump  
2 administration further reduced troops from 4,000 to 2,500. Is that correct?

3 A I learned from press reporting. I can't speak to the exact date because I  
4 don't know.

5 Q The date of the press reporting is on or about January 15, 2021?

6 A Correct. My recollection actually, though, is that this press reporting is  
7 when they actually achieved the goal of 2,500. I believe the announcement was  
8 November, if memory serves. Anyway, but yes, during the transition.

9 Q And from both facts, despite the fact that the Treasury Department is saying  
10 that the Taliban and al-Qaeda are gaining strength, the Trump administration continued  
11 to withdraw troops?

12 A It appears that way.

13 Q And if you have a conditions-based agreement where you withdrawal troops  
14 based on comporting with the Taliban deal, does that seem to make sense in terms of the  
15 deal's alignment?

16 A No.

17 Q Thanks.

18 I wanted to also just introduce an exhibit. This is -- this will be 8 -- 7. Turn to  
19 page 10.

20 This is a --

21 [REDACTED]. Do you want to introduce it as an exhibit?

22 [REDACTED]. Yes.

23 [Chollet Exhibit No. 7

24 was marked for identification.]

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q It's exhibit 7. This is a partial transcript of an interview the committee  
2 conducted with Ambassador Ross Wilson dated October 24th, 2023.

3 This is an opening statement he provided to the committee. If you don't mind,  
4 could you read the underlined portion on page 10, please?

5 A You want me to read it?

6 Q Yes.

7 A "When I met with Secretary Pompeo" -- speaking in the words here of Ross  
8 Wilson -- "he told me that my top priority was to support the implementation of that  
9 agreement. The Afghan government, as you all know, had been excluded from the  
10 agreement, was deeply opposed to it, and opposed to what it aimed to achieve."

11 Q Thank you.

12 Would you agree with Ambassador Wilson's characterization that the Afghan  
13 Government was excluded from the agreement?

14 A That is my understanding, but I was not directly involved.

15 Q Okay.

16 And would you agree with his characterization, your understanding of it anyway,  
17 that the Afghan Government was deeply opposed to the agreement?

18 A That's my understanding.

19 Q And would you agree similarly, your understanding, that the Afghan  
20 Government opposed to what it aimed to achieve?

21 A That is my understanding.

22 Q Given your significant experience in foreign affairs and national security  
23 policy, when you have one party to an agreement feel that it is excluded from its  
24 formation, an agreement's formation, opposed to an agreement itself and opposed to  
25 what an agreement aimed to achieve, how likely is it that such a deal could be successful?

1           A    It's a high degree of difficulty for success in those circumstances.

2           Q    Okay, thanks.

3                   I wanted to talk a little bit about the implementation of the Doha deal, and sort of,  
4 was it your sense that the Trump administration was intent on withdrawing U.S. troops  
5 from the country regardless of the degree to which the Doha deal terms were being  
6 implemented?

7           A    It certainly was my impression given that the President was making very  
8 clear that he wanted to zero out the U.S. troops in Afghanistan and was following up on  
9 that publicly made commitment by withdrawing forces to 2,500. That's what I knew at  
10 the time.

11                   Of course, we've learned since that it went down to -- it was -- he wanted to go to  
12 zero. DoD worked it back to 2,500, so -- but I found that out after the fact.

13           Q    And you testified earlier that these precipitous reductions did not enhance  
14 Zal Khalilzad's position in terms of negotiating with the Taliban. Why did it influence or  
15 undermine Zal's position?

16           A    Well, again, I can only speculate. But if a negotiator is trying to use U.S.  
17 presence as leverage, and to try to get an adversary to agree to do certain things and, as a  
18 reward, could, perhaps, get U.S. forces to withdraw, it would enhance his position,  
19 so -- but you would have to ask him exactly why he thought it didn't enhance his position.

20           Q    Were you concerned that full withdrawal could be directed by  
21 then-President Trump unexpectedly, quickly, or precipitously regardless of the deal's  
22 implementation?

23           A    I learned to expect just about anything during that time.

24           Q    Okay. Thank you.

25                   BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q Why is that the case?

2 A Well, I think we all remember the moment, you know, that moment of  
3 December, January of 2020 to January 2021, and we watched what happened here in this  
4 Capitol on January 6th. And we have seen the President, you know, do certain things  
5 publicly, but then also, of course, during the transition, we were able to see up close  
6 some of the maneuverings that were occurring during the transition, including a lot of  
7 personnel turnover and critical agencies to our national security.

8 And so, you know, I didn't rule anything out. We were just trying to make it to  
9 January 20th.

10 Q And you're referring to President Trump. Is that correct?

11 A Yes.

12 [REDACTED]. That concludes our round. Thank you.

13 [Recess.]

14 [REDACTED]. We can go back on the record.

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q And sir, just again, my name is [REDACTED]. If we may pick up, I'd like  
17 to go back to exhibit No. 4, the minority's exhibit, which is Brian McKeon's TI transcript.  
18 Page 14 where he -- when asked about your workstreams, you answered in the  
19 affirmative when asked about whether your workstreams and efforts were focused on  
20 counterterrorism. Is that correct?

21 A In that period, the kind of post April period, yes.

22 Q Post April?

23 A Yes.

24 Q But prior to April 2021, that was not part of your workstream or major  
25 efforts?

1 A Not to my recollection.

2 Q Okay.

3 How much of this work on counterterrorism was focused on counterterrorism in  
4 Afghanistan after April 2021?

5 A This, what he's referring to here, is only related to Afghanistan.

6 Q Okay.

7 So it's fair to say that the work that you are affirming you were doing on  
8 counterterrorism after April of 2021 was primarily focused on counterterrorism efforts in  
9 Afghanistan?

10 A As it related to Afghanistan. Obviously, during this period, I was focused on  
11 many, many other issues, and my focus on Afghanistan was reducing over time.

12 Q Okay.

13 Previously, during the majority's round of questioning, you had said that you did  
14 not know the specifics about the Taliban and their relationship with the Haqqani Network  
15 or al-Qaeda. Is this a fair representation of your answer?

16 A Correct.

17 Q Okay.

18 Do you believe, as somebody working on counterterrorism issues after April 2021,  
19 acknowledge that this relationship should have been a priority or focus to understand the  
20 Taliban and its potential relationship with terrorist groups?

21 A I want to clarify. So I was not -- doing counterterrorism -- and it's hard to  
22 do this in an unclassified way, but I was mainly focused on accessing basing issues, so the  
23 diplomatic piece of it, not actually how we get at the counterterror fight inside  
24 Afghanistan. That was the responsibility of other people.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1           Q    Is it fair to say, though, that in your capacity as counselor, working on  
2    counterterrorism issues, understanding the distinction between the Haqqani Network  
3    and the Taliban would be relevant to that responsibility?

4           A    Actually, what I was doing wasn't really germane to that because it was on  
5    issues related to outside of Afghanistan.

6           Q    Then who was working on those issues within the Department?

7           A    I imagine that the State Department, the counterterrorism coordinator  
8    office. Of course, he was an acting official at the time, and I cannot recall who that  
9    would have been, would have been working on that.

1 [12:12 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q And who would they have briefed on that issue within the Seventh Floor  
4 leadership?

5 A In terms of which issue?

6 Q In terms of the count terrorism issues in-country, in Afghanistan.

7 A Probably, I mean, any number of officials. Again, the State Department, as  
8 you probably know, are not -- is not in the lead when it comes to counterterrorism  
9 efforts, you know, inside Afghanistan or anywhere but obviously plays an important role.

10 Q So what briefings and/or guidance did the relevant individuals responsible  
11 for this issue provide on the Taliban's cutting ties with terrorist groups?

12 A I don't recall.

13 Q What was the Secretary's assessment of whether the Taliban cut ties with  
14 terrorist groups?

15 A I don't recall specifically his assessment.

16 Q What was the Department's assessment of whether the Taliban cut ties with  
17 terrorist groups?

18 A We know the Taliban still has ties with terrorist groups today. So I can only  
19 speculate the assessment at the time was that they had ties to terrorist groups.

20 Q Is it fair to say that condition of the Doha Agreement was not met by the  
21 Taliban?

22 A Fair to say that, sure.

23 Q So I want to go back to a question that I asked, and I believe our time was  
24 cut short. So we sort of left on -- left off the question of whether -- what your  
25 assessment was of the Taliban's commitment to and engagement in negotiations with the

1 Afghan Government. I don't want to restate your answer as I may misstate it.

2 So I want to give you an opportunity address that again if there's anything else you  
3 wanted to add.

4 A So what was the question?

5 Q What was your assessment of the Taliban's commitment to and engagement  
6 in negotiations with the Afghan Government?

7 A I had no direct involvement in that. So but my assessment based on my  
8 memory of what Zal would report from his engagements is they had a modest willingness  
9 to engage.

10 [REDACTED]. So I'd like to introduce -- I believe we're on exhibit 8 now,  
11 correct, into the record.

12 [Chollet Exhibit No. 8  
13 was marked for identification.]

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q This is an excerpt of an article from the Foundation for Defense of  
16 Democracy's Long War Journal, dated March 8th, 2020. Understanding that this  
17 predated the Biden administration, this was issued during the Trump administration,  
18 correct?

19 A Yes.

20 Q The article cites the Taliban's fatwa from the Voice of Jihad, dated January  
21 28th, 2016.

22 I'd like direct your attention to the box at the bottom of what is marked page 3.  
23 I'd read this into the record.

24 The Taliban fatwa stated, "The Islamic Emirate has not readily embraced this  
25 death and destruction for the sake of some silly ministerial posts or share of the power.

1 On the contrary, they epitomize the nation's hopes and aspirations for a just and peaceful  
2 government on the basis of Islamic law, social justice, and national interests. The  
3 people of Afghanistan readily sacrificed their sons to achieve this objectives. And the  
4 Emirate -- as a true representative of our people -- will not end its peaceful and armed  
5 endeavors until we have achieved this hope of Afghanistan."

6 Counselor, weren't the Taliban clear that they were not interested in a  
7 power-sharing agreement and their goal was to establish an Islamic Emirate?

8 A I can't speak to what their goals were.

9 Q What did they communicate their goals as being on January 2021 through  
10 August 2021?

11 A I did not have any interaction with them. So I can't speak to what they  
12 communicated as their goals to be.

13 Q What were you briefed on this issue?

14 A I do not recall specifically. I mean, obviously they wanted to take over  
15 Afghanistan, as we since learned in August of 2021.

16 Q And what did you believe they wanted to do prior to August of 2021?

17 A Well, we, of course, hoped that there could be a negotiated settlement,  
18 which was why Ambassador Khalilzad and his team were working so hard to try to  
19 achieve one.

20 Q Did you assess the Taliban to be a reliable and trustworthy partner?

21 A -- do not trust the Taliban.

22 Q Knowing all this, did you believe the U.S. should have adhered to the Doha  
23 Agreement?

24 A I believe it was in U.S. interests for Taliban not to be shooting at American  
25 soldiers and to restart the fight in Afghanistan, particularly when we only had 2,500

1 troops there. So that part of the Taliban agreement is very important to us.

2 Q Do you believe --

3 A Or the Doha Agreement. Sorry. I misspoke.

4 Q Do you believe the United States should reduce its military presence in  
5 Afghanistan?

6 A Personally?

7 Q I believe the two are intertwined, given sort of your professional capacity as  
8 Counselor.

9 [REDACTED]: No, no, no, no, a personal opinion and an official State Department  
10 position are not intertwined.

11 [REDACTED]: Let me reframe --

12 [REDACTED]: And you can state each or both at your discretion.

13 BY [REDACTED]:

14 Q Let me reframe.

15 Am I correct that your personal opinion is informed by your professional  
16 experiences throughout your career?

17 A Correct.

18 Q Okay. So let's start with the personal opinion then.

19 A My opinion is that not a single challenge the United States faces today in the  
20 world, from a rising China to an acute threat from Russia to the war in the Middle East  
21 today, looks easier with U.S. Forces still on the ground in Afghanistan engaged in a fight  
22 with the Taliban.

23 Q What did you assess the sustainability of the Afghan Government and  
24 military to be without a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan?

25 A Sorry. Without the U.S. --

1 Q Without a U.S. military presence.

2 A I believe, and this is, again, a personal opinion, that the Afghan Government  
3 would be able to endure, although it would be difficult.

4 Q And what did you assess the likely political consequences within Afghanistan  
5 to be if the U.S. military withdrew?

6 A I was more worried about the ability of the Afghan Government and ANSF to  
7 keep up the fight with the Taliban without sustained U.S. support.

8 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q Continuing on the line of the Doha Agreement, you had mentioned  
11 previously that the Doha policy had been in place prior to your arrival. The policy then  
12 was reviewed prior to April of 2021 and the President's decision.

13 In the course of that review, was it possible, in your professional capacity, did you  
14 believe that the policy could be altered or direction could be changed?

15 A The President hadn't made a decision. So he could decide anything he  
16 wanted.

17 Q Did the State Department or did you from your professional capacity make  
18 the recommendation that we -- that the State Department change its course or  
19 recommendation on the policy?

20 A Sorry. Its course being --

21 Q Rather -- I'll rephrase.

22 Did you in your -- professional capacity make a recommendation to the Secretary  
23 to not follow the Doha Agreement?

24 A I don't recall being asked my recommendation on that.

25 Q Were you aware of any aspect of the State Department's policy review

1 leading to a recommendation to the Secretary to not follow the policy of the Doha  
2 Agreement?

3 A Sorry. Rephrase the question.

4 Q Yes.

5 A Or restate the question. Maybe not rephrase it.

6 Q Were you aware of any instance where the State Department was making a  
7 recommendation to the President not to follow the Doha Agreement?

8 [REDACTED]: So you've switched from recommendation to S to a  
9 recommendation to the President. As to S, I defer to my witness.

10 But I'm going to register for the record a recommendation not to answer anything  
11 to do with, quote, recommendations directly to the President.

12 [REDACTED]: Acknowledged. And I apologize for that.

13 [REDACTED]: No, no, I'm proving I'm listening very carefully.

14 [REDACTED]: Proven.

15 Counselor Chollet. Again, my recollection is we were testing the proposition of  
16 whether there could be an agreement with the Taliban that would enable U.S. forces to  
17 stay in Afghanistan beyond the May 1st deadline and even beyond the deadline that  
18 President Biden decided to set as the new deadline which, in fact, was according to the  
19 Taliban a vials of the Doha Agreement itself, as we were not all out by May 1st.

20 Of course, we were unable to successfully get an agreement to do that which, you  
21 know, put us on a pathway to a full withdrawal by September.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q I had one followup question on that. You've noted on multiple occasions  
24 the Taliban's cessation of violence against U.S. Forces or against the U.S. more broadly.

25 We've gone through other conditions, e.g., the Taliban cutting ties with the -- with

1 other terrorist groups, the Taliban reducing violence, including violence against the  
2 Afghan population, amongst some other conditions.

3 Would you say, but for the Taliban ceasing attacks on the U.S. and U.S. Forces, the  
4 other conditions were immaterial?

5 A No, the other conditions were very important. And we remain to this day  
6 focused on the Taliban and counterterrorism, as well as the treatment of the Afghan  
7 people.

8 But, given the fact that the United States military was down to the lowest level of  
9 force in Afghanistan since 9/11 and given the threat that the Taliban posed, it was -- it  
10 was definitely in our interest to ensure that the war against the United States, the fighting  
11 did not restart.

12 Q Looking at the Doha Agreement now, Taliban would be in violation of its  
13 terms, correct?

14 A Sorry. The Doha Agreement as it stands today?

15 Q Today.

16 A I would think so, although I can only speculate because I can't -- I don't have  
17 a -- based on what I read in the press, it would seem that way.

18 Q Would that render the agreement void if its terms are not being upheld?

19 [REDACTED]. So I'm sorry. He can have an opinion, but you're asking an  
20 incredibly complicated international legal question.

21 And I'm going to, unfortunately, speak in your behalf --

22 Counselor Chollet. Yeah.

23 [REDACTED]. -- to say I'm not sure you're really qualified.

24 Counselor Chollet. Honestly, I don't even know if the Doha Agreement is still on  
25 the books. I don't know the status of it, I confess.



1 A Yes.

2 Q Do you agree that the Taliban was confident it could achieve a military  
3 victory?

4 A I can't speak to what I thought in April of '21 on whether the Taliban  
5 was confident. We obviously know they achieved a military victory. So I  
6 don't -- perhaps they had reason for confidence, but I don't know if I thought that in April  
7 of '21.

8 Q What did you think in April of 2021?

9 A That definitely that the prospects for a peace deal were very difficult, would  
10 remain low, that the Taliban was certainly taking the fight to the Afghan Government, and  
11 that a withdrawal of U.S. Forces would be a challenge for the Afghan Government but  
12 that I believed at the time the Afghan Government could hold firm.

13 But I also knew that a renewal of serious and major fighting between the United  
14 States and the Taliban would be a big challenge for us, given the small number of troops  
15 that we had in theater, that we would, therefore, be faced with the prospect of adding  
16 forces to Afghanistan as a standard presence.

17 [REDACTED]. I'd like to now introduce exhibit 10 into the record.

18 [Chollet Exhibit No. 10

19 was marked for identification.]

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q This is an excerpt from a U.N. Sanctions Monitoring Team report, dated June  
22 1st, 2021. If you could please direct your attention to what is marked as page 3, the  
23 second paragraph, have you read this report previously.

24 A No.

25 Q Read the relevant language into the record. The report states, quote:

1 "The Taliban's messaging remains uncompromising, and it shows no sign of reducing the  
2 level of violence in Afghanistan to facilitate peace negotiations with the Government of  
3 Afghanistan and other Afghan stakeholders. The Taliban's intent appears to be to  
4 continue to strengthen its military position as leverage. It believes that it can achieve  
5 almost all of its objectives by negotiation or, if necessary, by force.

6 A Can you please respond to this statement in the report?

7 A It appears accurate in retrospect, given that we know what happened just a  
8 few months later.

9 Q So I want to focus on the timeframe of this report which was June 2021 and  
10 what you knew at that time and, more broadly, what the Department knew at that time.

11 Did you agree it was the Taliban's intent to strengthen its military position as  
12 leverage?

13 A I can only speculate what I thought at the time, but that seems accurate.

14 Q Did you agree that the Taliban believed it could achieve almost all of its  
15 objectives by force?

16 A I, again, I don't know what I thought at the time. We obviously know that it  
17 did achieve its objectives largely by force.

18 Q What briefings did you receive on these issues at the time?

19 A I don't recall.

20 Q What was the Department's position on these issues at the time?

21 A The Department's positions on which issues?

22 Q On the Taliban utilizing the negotiations as a form of leverage to strengthen  
23 its military position and the Taliban believing it could achieve almost all of its objectives  
24 by force.

25 A Well, certainly that was the reason why Ambassador Khalilzad and his team

1 were engaged in the negotiation, to try to see if we could come to some agreement that  
2 would be a peaceful resolution of this.

3 I should note, though, given the date of this in late June that this was  
4 more -- nearly a month after the May 1st deadline. And my recollection is that the  
5 Taliban never acceded to the ability -- to our staying in Afghanistan militarily after May  
6 1st.

7 They were saying we were in violation of the Doha Agreement by keeping our  
8 forces there for retrograde and always held out that the prospect of resuming the conflict  
9 with us if we continued to stay and not retrograde.

10 Q I'm happy you flagged that specifically the Taliban interpreting the U.S.  
11 staying past that May deadline as a violation.

12 Did the Department, more broadly the U.S. Government, at any point respond to  
13 the Taliban's violations of the Doha Agreement?

14 A I can't speak to that. I mean, you'd have to ask the people dealing with the  
15 Taliban to that.

16 [REDACTED]. I'd like to introduce exhibit 11 next.

17 [Chollet Exhibit No. 11  
18 was marked for identification.]

19 BY [REDACTED]:

20 Q This is an excerpt of a study published by the counter -- the Combating  
21 Terrorism Center at West Point, in January 2021, titled "Afghanistan's Security Forces  
22 Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment."

23 The author of this study is Jonathan Schroden. Are you aware of who Jonathan  
24 Schroden is?

25 A Nope.

1 Q Would it jog your memory if I said he was the former Strategic Advisor to  
2 CENTCOM and the current Research Director for the Afghanistan War Commission?

3 A Nope.

4 Q Okay. Did you read this study at the time or at any time prior to August  
5 2021?

6 A No.

7 Q So I'd like to direct your attention to what is marked page 20 in the top  
8 left-hand corner. And if you'd please refer to the bold text box, the study states, quote:  
9 "A key question for the future of Afghanistan is, if the United States withdraws the  
10 remainder of its forces from the country, would Afghanistan's security forces or the  
11 Taliban be stronger militarily? According to a net assessment conducted by the author  
12 across five factors -- size, material resources, external support, force employment, and  
13 cohesion -- the Taliban would have a slight military advantage if the United States  
14 withdraws the remainder of its troops from Afghanistan, which would then likely grow in  
15 a compounding fashion."

16 Were you aware that the Taliban would have an advantage over the Afghanistan  
17 military if the U.S. withdrew its troops and that this advantage would then grow in a  
18 compounding fashion?

19 A No.

20 Q Did the State Department misjudge the strength and intentions of the  
21 Taliban?

22 A I think it's safe to say nearly everyone misjudged the strength and  
23 intentions -- not intentions -- strength of the Taliban and/or the flip side of it is the  
24 weakness of the ANSF.

25 I should say this was published in January of 2021. So my presumption is the

1 report was completed in the latter part of 2020.

2 Q And, Counselor, what course of action did Secretary Blinken urge the  
3 administration to take at the conclusion of the interagency policy review?

4 [REDACTED]. So, to the extent that you have a specific recollection, that's fine.

5 But I'm -- I just want to get a little more detail on what, when you say "urge the  
6 administration," in what setting? In public statements? In confidential meetings that  
7 are subject to executive branch confidentiality interests?

8 [REDACTED]. What was the recommendation that the Secretary provided at  
9 the conclusion of the interagency policy review?

10 [REDACTED]. And, first, that presumes that such a recommendation was  
11 provided. I don't -- I'm unaware of any testimony in that regard, unless you have some.

12 Counselor Chollet. Yeah, I don't have a recollection of that.

13 [REDACTED]. Do you recall if he recommended that the President follow a  
14 conditions-based approach?

15 Counselor Chollet. I don't want to speak to his recommendations to the  
16 President.

17 [REDACTED]. Okay. I'd like to introduce an excerpt from the not-yet-final  
18 transcript from Ambassador Khalilzad's transcribed interview, conducted on November  
19 8th, 2023, as exhibit 12.

20 [Chollet Exhibit No. 12

21 was marked for identification.]

22 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

23 [REDACTED]. Well, I'm -- I apologize, [REDACTED].

24 [REDACTED]. Not a problem.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q So I'm going to reference multiple pages. And this is, again, an excerpt  
2 from a not-yet-final transcript. So I apologize in advance for any typos --

3 A Okay.

4 Q -- reflected in this transcript. It's still in draft form. So, if you could look  
5 to what is marked as page 147, line 3, here the majority asks Ambassador Khalilzad, "Did  
6 you at any point advise administration that it should enforce the conditions of the Doha  
7 Agreement against the Taliban?"

8 To which he responds, "Well, Secretary Blinken and I, I believe, did recommend  
9 that conditionality. That's my judgment, that conditionality would be the prudent thing  
10 to do."

11 But then the response was, "Can you get the other side to -- the Talibs not to go  
12 back to fighting?"

13 So, if you then look to page 156, which is the next page attached to this exhibit, at  
14 line 4, here the majority asks, "So, Ambassador, I'd like to go to sort of the next question."

15 And, if you move to line 8, you'll see that's where the next question is outlined.

16 "Specifically about the decision to remain in the Doha Agreement. You noted  
17 previously sort of these distinctions between conditionality, the three different options  
18 that were presented, and that from my understanding you and Secretary Blinken  
19 recommended a conditional approach or conditionality approach."

20 To which he responds, "Right. That's my judgment."

21 So the majority asks, "That's your judgment based on your firsthand account and  
22 interpretation."

23 Ambassador Khalilzad responds, "Yeah."

24 To which the majority asks, "What was the ultimate decision made by President  
25 Biden? It was not conditionality, correct?"

1           To which he responds, "It was not conditionality with regard to the withdrawal.  
2           Only I think it's possible that a definition would have been made if the Talibs had said,  
3           quote, 'You should stay until we reach a political agreement.'"

4           I don't want to make assumptions based on the corrections, as this would have to  
5           be provided by the Department and Ambassador Khalilzad. But I do want to go back to  
6           my initial question and slightly reframe it.

7           Were you aware that Ambassador Khalilzad and Secretary Blinken made this  
8           recommendation?

9           ██████████: So I just want to point out that your question to the Ambassador  
10          Khalilzad was, "Did you advise," which then becomes transmogrified into  
11          "recommendation," which you then follow up with questions using "recommendation."

12          The context of the entire exchange was a question as to his advice.

13          ██████████: I'm happy to frame it as advice --

14          ██████████: Not what formal recommendations were made into a formal policy  
15          review process. I understand there's some ambiguity in the record. But I do -- I just  
16          want to point out your question was, "Did you provide advice, did you advise." And  
17          then, by the time we get down the last lines, that has become "recommended," as  
18          opposed to "advice."

19          And there are -- it's a very different -- very different meaning in the context of  
20          trying to project advice into an official policy review that was being conducted at the  
21          time, as you know.

22          I'm sorry, Derek.

23          ██████████: No, thank you for that distinction.

24          BY ██████████:

25          Q       And we're happy that the record reflects this distinction. So we'd like to

1 ask what -- are you aware that Ambassador Khalilzad and Secretary Blinken advised the  
2 President --

3 A I don't want to speak to what Secretary Blinken's advice to the President.  
4 But I'm aware -- frankly, reminded by this transcript -- of what Ambassador Khalilzad's  
5 advice was. So --

6 Q Can you please elaborate on that?

7 A Well, as the transcript makes clear, he was -- he was recommending to test  
8 the proposition of whether there could be a conditions-based withdrawal. He did test  
9 said proposition, and it did not work.

10 Q Did something cause a shift in this advice, or had that always been  
11 Ambassador Khalilzad's advice?

12 A I can't speak to that. I don't -- you'd have to ask him.

13 Q And how about Secretary Blinken?

14 A Again, I don't want to speak to the advice he was providing.

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q So we'll turn, sir, to focusing specifically on the withdrawal efforts. We'll go  
17 in sort of chronological order, which I think will be helpful.

18 So beginning in --

19 [REDACTED]. I would just note we have two competing definitions of  
20 "withdrawal."

21 Counselor Chollet. So where -- are we starting in February 2020?

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q No, we are starting in April 2021, which is our definition of the Go-to-Zero  
24 order.

25 So, Counselor, on April 14th, 2021, President Biden announced that the U.S. would

1 unconditionally withdraw from Afghanistan by September 11th, 2021, also known as the  
2 Go-to-Zero order.

3 When did you first learn that would be the President's course of action?

4 A I don't have a specific date, but it was sometime before that announcement,  
5 only because, as I stated earlier --

6 Q Uh-huh.

7 A -- I was making sort of consultative calls with partners before the  
8 announcement.

9 Q And how did you learn about the announcement to come?

10 A I don't recall specifically.

11 Q What advice -- we've covered that Secretary Blinken provided the Biden  
12 administration prior to the announcement. That was -- you would prefer not to speak  
13 to Secretary Blinken's advice.

14 But what was the reaction within the Department's leadership team on the  
15 President's announcement or the knowledge that the President would make that  
16 announcement of the Go-to-Zero order?

17 A I don't want to speak for any of my colleagues.

18 Q Uh-huh.

19 A But it was -- I can speak for myself. It was the announcement that I  
20 expected. So it was not surprising.

21 Q Uh-huh. Are you aware of any reaction from the Afghan Government when  
22 learning about this announcement?

23 A I don't have a specific recollection of that.

24 [REDACTED]. I apologize for backtracking. Can you say why you expected that  
25 announcement?

1 Counselor Chollet. Well, I'd been part of the interagency process, you know, in  
2 the preceding months. And, you know, we knew that, you know, where the traffic  
3 headed, seemed to be headed.

4 BY [REDACTED]:

5 Q Sir, you previously stated that one of your sort of engagements had been  
6 with NATO allies who had made a number of calls to foreign entities. And so, from our  
7 recollection, you started to make those calls prior to this Go-to-Zero order.

8 A The announcement of that.

9 Q Prior to the announcement of the Go-to-Zero order and those became more  
10 regular after the announcement. Is that correct?

11 A No, I'm sorry. Confusing two things probably. So there was  
12 a series -- intensive series of consultations and discussions with our partners around the  
13 President's announcement.

14 Then I don't recall having any sustained engagement with our allies and partners  
15 really then until the evacuation where there was discussions with them on the conduct  
16 and all the details of the evacuation because many of their countries are participating --

17 Q Uh-huh.

18 A -- in an evacuation in some way.

19 Q Yeah. During some of those initial -- the limited calls, what were the  
20 reactions of our NATO partners or allies?

21 A So I don't want to speak about, you know, given my understanding, [REDACTED]  
22 right, to the classification regarding what foreign counterparts --

23 [REDACTED]. You can, if it's specifics or direct quotes. But if you have a gestalt  
24 that you recall --

25 Counselor Chollet. My understanding, the -- gestalt understanding that I recall

1 was, you know, general understanding of our position, I mean, and everybody knew the  
2 threat that we were facing and were appreciative of our consultation because, again,  
3 some of previous announcements of U.S. withdrawals were done with no consultation.  
4 So there was a sense that they learned about it when they read about it in the press.

5 So we, understanding the impact that this decision would have on our friends and  
6 partners, many of whom had sacrificed alongside us for the better part of 20 years, it was  
7 important for us to be engaging with them throughout this process and then also giving  
8 them a heads-up before the announcement came.

9 [REDACTED]. Would you say then, in general, they were supportive?

10 Counselor Chollet. Again, I don't want to -- I don't want to speak on behalf, but I  
11 think everyone understood and were ready to support the decision.

12 [REDACTED]. Counselor, at this time, I'd like to enter exhibit No. 13.

13 [Chollet Exhibit No. 13

14 was marked for identification.]

15 BY [REDACTED]:

16 Q This is an article. The article was published in a British newspaper, The  
17 Independent, dated April 16th, 2021, entitled "Not what we'd hoped for: UK military  
18 chief disappointed over the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan."

19 I'd ask you to direct your attention to the second page as numbered on the  
20 bottom right-hand corner, and I'll read a quote: "Britain's military chief has expressed  
21 disappointment at President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from  
22 Afghanistan. General Sir Nick Carter, the Chief of Defense staff, said it was not a  
23 decision we'd hoped for but added that the U.K. respected the stance taken by the new  
24 administration.

25 Can you please elaborate on the U.K.'s response to President Biden's

1 announcement?

2 A I don't have any reason to question what General Carter was quoted saying.

3 Q And previously you had said you could not quite recall if you'd spoken with  
4 the U.K. Is there any part of this that has jogged your memory, and do you recall a  
5 conversation with the U.K. prior to or after the Go-to-Zero order?

6 A I definitely engaged with U.K. counterparts on a whole variety of issues.  
7 What I don't recall is whether it was on Afghanistan.

8 Q Okay. During prior questioning, we had also asked if you recalled any  
9 specific engagement with your German counterparts.

10 A Yeah.

11 Q I understand you may not recall that at the time.

12 [REDACTED]. We would like to enter into the record exhibit 14.

13 [Chollet Exhibit No. 14

14 was marked for identification.]

15 [REDACTED] And this is here. This is an article republished in, quote, The  
16 Hindu from German publication Deutsche Welle, dated September 1st, 2021. The  
17 article is titled "Afghanistan pullout chills U.S.-German relations."

18 If you could please point or direct your attention to the first page, there's a quote  
19 that Chancellor-candidate from Merkel's Christian Democrats Armin Lascher --

20 [REDACTED]. Lascher.

21 BY [REDACTED]

22 Q -- Lascher -- excuse me -- spoke of a major blow to the transatlantic  
23 relationship and dismay at U.S. President Joe Biden's actions.

24 Quote, "I was disappointed by his announcement on April 14th that he would  
25 implement Donald Trump's Afghanistan withdrawal order one-to-one without fully

1 involving the allies in this momentous decision, end quote."

2 He goes on to say or further say to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung newspaper  
3 in mid-August -- now to the next paragraph -- "'It is a big," quote, excuse me -- "it is a big  
4 loss of confidence, in particular, in America's competence as a military power,' says  
5 political analyst Stephan Bierling of the Regensburg University."

6 Quote: "After four catastrophic years under Trump, we had a very positive view  
7 of Joe Biden. Now that mood is changing," end quote.

8 Putting aside my horrific German pronunciation, I'd like to ask, do you believe or  
9 could -- can you speak to the claims that President Biden's announcement had chilled  
10 relationships between the U.S. and Germany?

11 A I spend a lot of time on the U.S.-German relationship, well, up to this point  
12 and since. And I can say it has never been stronger.

13 Q Following the President's decision of an unconditional military withdrawal,  
14 what direction did Secretary Blinken receive toward implementing it?

15 A So this is after April.

16 Q Yes, sir.

17 A I don't remember a specific direction coming down. But, obviously, now  
18 that we knew that U.S. troops would be leaving Afghanistan and be all out by September,  
19 that plans needed to be accelerated to ensure that our Embassy presence could be  
20 maintained, absent significant U.S. military presence.

21 Q What direction did Secretary Blinken give to department leaders to execute  
22 that implementation?

23 A To accelerate that planning on an urgent basis.

24 Q And can you speak to your role specifically in helping to formulate that  
25 direction?

1           A    Yeah, I did -- don't recall the specific role when it came to planning for the  
2 Embassy presence after September of '21.

3           Q    You can't -- to clarify, you can't recall what your specific role --

4           A    My other specific role, no.  Others in the department were handling that.

5           Q    Okay.  You'd previously spoken to engaging on some counterterrorism  
6 issues --

7           A    Right.

8           Q    -- but particularly basing and other things.

9           A    Sure.  I'm thinking of the actual Embassy presence inside Kabul, not what  
10 was happening outside of Afghanistan in terms of basing and things like that.

11          Q    Okay.  Thank you.

12                    What withdrawal plans were in place at the time of the President's decision to  
13 withdraw unconditionally?

14          A    So the planning is --

15          ██████████:  Again, withdrawal plans as the majority has defined "withdrawal."

16          ██████████:  Yes.

17          ██████████:  Okay.  So military retrograde, which is, I believe, the definition.

18          Counselor Chollet.  Okay.  Well, don't -- so the State Department obviously  
19 doesn't have plans for military retrograde.  That's the Defense Department.

20                    What the State Department was doing was preparing for the U.S. Embassy and the  
21 diplomatic functions being able to be executed, absent -- well, with either (A) a reduced  
22 U.S. military presence or no U.S. military presence.  Prior to April, that was the  
23 planning that was accelerated.

24                    After April, when we knew that there was -- there was a glide path for a full U.S.  
25 military withdrawal, then that changed the context of the planning because, therefore, a

1 big assumption now was confirmed, which was there wouldn't be a U.S. military presence  
2 to rely upon for U.S. Embassy functions.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Can you speak a bit more to the details of the planning that began after the  
5 Go-to-Zero order?

6 A So, again, I was not directly involved in that. But it was, understanding that  
7 the U.S. military would no longer be in Afghanistan, how could the Embassy maintain its  
8 security, you know, function, you know, the logistics issue, all of this while also trying to  
9 perform its core functions as an operating Embassy, whether that's helping continue to  
10 work with the Afghan Government, the ANSF, with on counterterrorism, trying to help get  
11 SIVs out of Afghanistan. How can it do all that if the U.S. military is no longer there?

12 Q Is it fair to say then, based on your testimony, that your understanding that  
13 was the Department of Defense was the department in charge of planning?

14 A For the retrograde, yes.

15 Q Can you --

16 A Not for the U.S. Embassy presence.

17 Q Is it possible then to go into -- though you may not have been involved in all  
18 of the planning purposes, can you explain then the State Department's role within this  
19 effort, both the retrograde but also planning with Embassy?

20 A Well, the State Department's responsibility was firmly in the latter, which  
21 was planning for its Embassy presence after the full withdrawal of U.S. Forces. It had no  
22 role in the military retrograde because that was, of course, the Pentagon's responsibility.

23 Q Uh-huh. At the time of the announcement of the withdrawal, which, to be  
24 clear, was the Go-to-Zero order as our definition, what was the Department's position on  
25 continued Embassy presence in Afghanistan following the military's complete departure?

1           A    The Department wanted to maintain an Embassy presence.

2           Q    Had the Secretary made a decision on whether the Embassy would remain  
3 open following the withdrawal in its entirety or in a reduced structure?

4           A    I think the guidance was to try to, as best as I can remember, try to keep the  
5 Embassy, you know, as highly functioning as it could be, absent the U.S. military being  
6 there and just understanding what was possible or not.

7           Q    Did you believe that the Embassy could be kept open without a U.S. military  
8 presence?

9           A    Yes.

10          Q    Would you be -- are you able to elaborate on why you believed that?

11          A    It's just, you know, given the U.S. operates embassies in many, many  
12 dangerous environments around the world, without the U.S. military present and so I had  
13 confidence the State Department could do that.

14          Q    Were you aware of any disagreements between the Department -- within  
15 the Department regarding the risk of maintaining a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan  
16 without military support?

17          A    I mean, I was very well aware of the challenge, given that 20 years the  
18 United States, the State Department had relied upon the military presence to be there.

19          Q    And how did the Bureau of Diplomatic Security characterize the level of risk  
20 that would result from maintaining an Embassy operation with -- excuse me -- absent a  
21 military presence?

22          A    I don't recall specifically.

23          Q    We've learned that the Diplomatic Security was very concerned with the  
24 security of Embassy Kabul post military withdrawal. Did you and Secretary Blinken and  
25 other State Department principals pay heed to that warning from D.S.? And were they

1 given senior diplomatic -- or given senior diplomatic department leaders concerning the  
2 situation on the ground and the unacceptable level of risk that the department was  
3 assuming post military withdrawal?

4 [REDACTED]: So the assumptions --

5 [REDACTED]: Uh-huh.

6 [REDACTED]: What they've learned is what they've learned. I'm not quibbling  
7 about what they've learned, but embedded in that question is a presumption that there  
8 were dire warnings which you may or may not have heard.

9 So his previous question, which is "were there D.S. agreements," I haven't -- I  
10 don't have a problem. But just be aware that that question is not actually directed to  
11 things that you may know because it's based on what they think they've learned, which  
12 you may not know.

13 Counselor Chollet. So I don't have a specific recollection. What I can say, given  
14 my experience and given my understanding generally of the situation in Afghanistan, not  
15 surprising at all. The Diplomatic Security, their job is to be worried about security.

16 BY [REDACTED]:

17 Q Uh-huh.

18 A And to be worried about ensuring that our diplomats and everyone  
19 associated with a United States' diplomatic mission can be safe and secure. And I can  
20 tell you that was a high priority for Secretary Blinken as he faced the prospect of a  
21 diplomatic mission that would endure beyond the U.S. military presence.

22 Q Are you aware as to whether the Secretary at any point throughout 2021  
23 after the Go-to-Zero, up until the withdrawal's completion, deemed the risk of an  
24 Embassy too great?

25 A I'm not aware of that.

1 Q The Embassy was --

2 A I'm sorry. Yeah, not aware of that prior to the, you know, decision to  
3 execute the D.O. in August of '21.

4 Q Okay. Thank you. Did the Secretary ever consider formally requesting the  
5 DOD provide a stay-behind force?

6 A I don't recall what -- and I don't want to speak to what the Secretary  
7 recommended. I can say I do recall there was discussions in the interagency about  
8 whether there could be a stay-behind force and whether the Taliban would accept a  
9 stay-behind force mainly for Embassy security purposes.

10 Q Did the State Department believe the Taliban would permit the U.S. to leave  
11 U.S. troops in-country to protect Hamid Karzai International Airport and Embassy  
12 grounds?

13 A We did not know, and we needed to test that proposition, which I believe  
14 Ambassador Khalilzad was doing.

15 Q And are you familiar with Secretary Blinken and then Spokesperson Price's  
16 visit to Afghanistan in April of 2021?

17 A I have a vague memory of that.

18 Q Were you a part of that trip?

19 A I was not.

20 Q And were you involved in preparation, planning, or any other aspects of the  
21 trip?

22 A I don't recall.

23 Q Did Secretary Blinken ever communicate to you the outcome of the trip?

24 A I'm sure I got readouts from the trip. I don't recall who gave them to me or  
25 how I received them.

1 Q Okay.

2 A There's been a few trips since then.

3 Q Just a few. I'll ask it then for the record just in case, but, what was your  
4 understanding of the outcome of the trip?

5 A I don't have a recollection.

6 Q To the best of your knowledge, any -- were there any other senior  
7 Department leaders who visited Afghanistan between President Biden's announcement  
8 and the start of the emergency evacuation in August of 2021?

9 A I am sure there were visits, and I have a vague recollection of Carol Perez  
10 visiting, but I just don't remember exactly when that was. But, yeah, that's it. I am  
11 only speculating, but I'm sure there were other senior visits.

12 Q What impact did President Biden's Go-to-Zero order have on the stability of  
13 the Afghan Government?

14 A Well, I mean, of course, we found out the Afghanistan Government was not  
15 very stable, given that it collapsed precipitously in August of '21.

16 Q Did you have any interaction that informed or suggested that the Afghan  
17 Government was not as stable as we believed prior to August?

18 A Not to the degree it proved so brittle, although I think some of that comes  
19 down the leader himself. If Ashraf Ghani had one-tenth of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in him,  
20 we'd have a different story in Afghanistan.

21 [REDACTED]. I'd like to introduce into the record exhibit No. 15.

22 [Chollet Exhibit No. 15

23 was marked for identification.]

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q This is an excerpt of a report, dated August 2022, that was published by the

1 United States Institute of Peace and written by Steve Brooking.

2 Are you familiar with this report?

3 A I'm not.

4 Q I'd like to direct your attention to what's marked page 25 under the "End  
5 Game."

6 President Biden announced on April 14th of 2021 that all remaining U.S. troops  
7 would depart Afghanistan by September 11th, thus adhering to the withdrawal  
8 component of the U.S.-Taliban deal but pushing back the deadline by 4 months, end  
9 quote.

10 The report goes on the say, quote, "The announcement had an immediate impact  
11 on the negotiations, as well as affecting events in Afghanistan to embolden -- it  
12 emboldened the Taliban, seriously damaged the morale of the Republic's security forces,  
13 and persuaded many Afghans to think about switching sides to the Taliban who were now  
14 perceived as likely winners," end quote.

15 Again, the report goes on the say, quote, "Moreover, the actual withdrawal of  
16 contractor and U.S. military support had practical impacts on Republic military capabilities  
17 in terms of Afghan aircraft needed to evacuate wounded troops and to support  
18 beleaguered ground troops and accurate close-air support from the United States," end  
19 quote.

20 So I'd like to go back to some of the questions I had just posed and, namely, the  
21 impact of the Go-to-Zero order on the stability of the Afghanistan government and its  
22 negotiations with the Taliban.

23 How would you like to respond to the findings of this report?

24 A Well, I can't speak to the -- because I don't know what footnote 29 refers to.  
25 So I don't know the sourcing of this. So I can't speak to, you know, the contractor

1 military support and the practical impacts that are discussed here.

2 But it's self-evident, it seems to me, that, after 20 years of a U.S. military presence  
3 in a country that was relying on the U.S. military, once you're going to pull out the U.S.  
4 military, it's going to present challenges to the government.

5 [REDACTED] Thank you for that.

6 I think I'd now turn to with the time remaining to exhibit No. 16.

7 [Chollet Exhibit No. 16  
8 was marked for identification.]

9 BY [REDACTED]:

10 Q This is a State Department transcript of remarks that you gave at the Heart  
11 of Asia-Istanbul Process, dated March 30th of 2021. Do you recall this?

12 A I do not.

13 Q Well, I'd like to direct your attention to the second paragraph on what is  
14 marked page 1.

15 [REDACTED]. Let's go off the record for a second.

16 [Discussion off the record.]

17 [REDACTED]. Back on the record. Thank you.

18 BY [REDACTED]:

19 Q So I'd like to direct your attention to the second paragraph on what is  
20 marked page 1 at the bottom right-hand corner.

21 Here you state, quote, "This year's Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process Ministerial  
22 Conference comes at a critical moment in the Afghanistan peace process. It  
23 demonstrates the strong regional consensus for peace and development and an  
24 Afghanistan that contributes to those goals," end quote.

25 You went on the say, quote, "The United States is working closely with key

1 international and regional partners, including many of the countries around this table and  
2 the United Nations, to promote and support a process that leads to lasting peace," end  
3 quote.

4 Again, you go on the say, quote, "On March 18th, in Moscow, we joined with  
5 Russia, China, and Pakistan in a statement that underscored the importance the  
6 international community places on Afghan-led efforts to seek a just and durable political  
7 settlement and permanent and comprehensive cease-fire. The statement affirmed that  
8 we do not support the restoration of the Islamic Emirate," end quote.

9 Counselor, what were Russia's goals in Afghanistan throughout 2021 prior to the  
10 Taliban takeover?

11 A I cannot speak specifically to Russia's goals. But, in general, of course, their  
12 goals are to serve their own interests, which are usually at variance with outside. But I  
13 don't -- I have a vague recollection of Zal attending a Moscow conference, but I can't  
14 recall the specifics.

15 Q Do you have -- do you believe, rather, that their goals may have shifted now  
16 following the withdrawal as to prior to the Taliban takeover?

17 A Shifted, like, today? I don't know what their goals are today on  
18 Afghanistan.

19 Q Did you or, more broadly, the Department assess whether Russia was  
20 opposed to a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan?

21 A I actually do not know.

22 Q Are you aware of any aid Russia provided the Taliban that may have aided  
23 them in their takeover of Afghanistan?

24 A I am not aware.

25 [REDACTED]. And I'll go ahead and pause it there, and we'll go off the record

1 and end our session before we go into another exhibit.

2 Thank you, sir.

3 [Recess.]

1 [1:49 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q Before we turn to our last section of questions, I wanted to follow up on a  
4 few key issues from the majority's round.

5 In reference to the Doha deal, if I could call your attention to exhibit -- the unclass  
6 opening statements. Those would be exhibit 5.

7 A Okey-doke. You can start. I'm fine.

8 Q And we'll be referencing this in addition to the next exhibit, which I'm  
9 introducing as 17.

10 [Chollet Exhibit No. 17  
11 was marked for identification.]

12 BY [REDACTED]

13 Q And exhibit 17 are remarks by President Trump on the strategy in  
14 Afghanistan and South Asia issued on August 21, 2017.

15 Are you familiar with these remarks --

16 A No.

17 Q -- generally?

18 If I could draw your attention to page 4. There are no page numbers, but the  
19 page is dog-eared for you.

20 Referring to the first two paragraphs, I'll read them aloud. "A core pillar of our  
21 new strategy is a shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions. I've said  
22 it many times how counterproductive it is for the United States to announce in advance  
23 the dates we intend to begin, or end, military operations. We will not talk about  
24 numbers of troops or our plans for further military activities.

25 "Conditions on the ground -- not arbitrary timetables -- will guide our strategy

1 from now on. America's enemies must never know our plans or believe they can wait us  
2 out. I will not say when we are going to attack, but we will."

3 Would you agree, based on the two paragraphs I just read aloud, that this was, in  
4 fact, a conditions-based approach?

5 A Yes.

6 Q The strategy being on Afghanistan and South Asia.

7 A Well -- yeah. I guess the core pillar of the new strategy, yes, conditions on  
8 the ground.

9 Q Okay. So not only does it say conditions on the ground, it does say a shift  
10 from a time-based approach to one that is based on conditions.

11 A Uh-huh.

12 Q And this was stated by then-President Trump in 2017. Do you dispute that  
13 fact?

14 A No.

15 Q Turning to the unclassified opening statements, exhibit No. 5, I'd like to draw  
16 your attention to page 11. Page 11 is, in part, Assistant Secretary Molly Phee's  
17 unclassified opening statement.

18 Do you recall being in the classified briefing with Phee?

19 A Yes.

20 Q At the top of page 11, it reads, "Once the agreement was signed, we set up  
21 an interagency group to monitor and assess compliance, which I chaired. We found the  
22 Taliban's compliance with the agreement to be mixed. I have no knowledge that any  
23 principal in the previous administration factored these assessments into decisions to  
24 withdraw troops below 8,600. It is my judgment that the unilateral decision to reduce  
25 to 4,500 troops by September, without explicitly tying this move to a requirement for the

1 Taliban to act, significantly weakened the prospect for successful intra-Afghan  
2 negotiations as the Taliban appeared to conclude that President Trump was intent on  
3 withdrawal regardless of their conduct."

4 Do you agree with this assessment?

5 A I have no reason to doubt it.

6 Q Is it accurate that President Trump set forth a conditions-based approach to  
7 the withdrawal from Afghanistan?

8 A Certainly as articulated in this speech from August of 2017, it appears that  
9 way.

10 Q And in practice, however, the withdrawal continues to take place despite the  
11 conditions not being met?

12 A That's a fair assessment.

13 Q I'd also like to ask about the, quote, "Go-to-Zero" phrase that the majority  
14 has referenced repeatedly.

15 Are you aware of the term "Go-to-Zero" as a policy or a diplomatic term?

16 A Yeah, I'm not.

17 Q Is it fair to say it's a term of art?

18 A I actually don't know what its origination is.

19 Q Okay. What do you understand the term to mean, as referenced by the  
20 majority?

21 A I understand it, as it was used in context, going to zero U.S. Forces on the  
22 ground in Afghanistan.

23 Q Would you agree with the sentiment that the Doha deal, in effect the plan of  
24 record as you testified, was a Go-to-Zero order?

25 A Yes.



1 Counselor Chollet. Yes.

2 [REDACTED]. Okay.

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q Okay. I just want to pivot to a couple other issues you were asked about in  
5 the last round.

6 First of all, with respect to President Biden's announcement in April 2021 and the  
7 subsequent completion of a U.S. withdrawal by the end of August, you were asked  
8 questions based on exhibits 13 and 14. Do you recall those?

9 A I'm sorry, you're going to have to tell me what they are.

10 Q Thirteen is The Independent article with --

11 A Okey-doke. Yes.

12 Q -- a picture of General Carter on the front. And 14 is the Deutsche Welle.

13 A Yep. Okay, yeah.

14 Q So I believe your prior discussion with my colleagues about these articles  
15 was over the reported disappointment of some of our allies and partners in response to  
16 President Biden's policy decisions and actions on Afghanistan. Is that a fair summary?

17 A Of the questions? Yeah.

18 Q And you testified previously that I think you have nearly three decades of  
19 experience working in exclusively foreign policy and national security?

20 A Uh-huh. Yes.

21 Q So you're familiar with a range of diplomatic conversations, both public and  
22 private, on many pressing foreign policy matters. Is that fair?

23 A Yes.

24 Q And in your nearly three decades of experience, have you witnessed on  
25 other occasions where our partners and allies are disappointed by U.S. foreign policy

1 decisions?

2 A Yes. And to go further, you know, these are not necessarily statements on  
3 behalf of entire governments, but in one case it's a statement by a unsuccessful candidate  
4 for the chancellery and a university professor.

5 Q Fair. Thanks for the clarification.

6 But to my original question, would you say it's not unusual --

7 A Not unusual.

8 Q -- that other governments sometimes take issue or take umbrage --

9 A Even our closest friends and we don't see eye to eye at times.

10 Q Okay. And I want to pivot to your knowledge today of the U.S. bilateral  
11 relationship with the U.K. How would you characterize it?

12 A Extremely strong.

13 Q Why do you say that?

14 A The degree of cooperation, the degree of trust, the willingness to work  
15 together on hard issues is as good as I've ever seen it.

16 Q And similarly, could you characterize your assessment today of the U.S.  
17 relationship with Germany?

18 A The same. As I stated earlier, I've been involved with or studied the  
19 U.S.-German relationship for a good many years, and it is as strong as I've ever seen it.

20 Q And what do you think some of the factors were that contributed to the  
21 present day strength of that relationship?

22 A The degree of trust between the two sides. And this is -- of course, we've  
23 had a change in leadership in Germany between Merkel to Scholz. And the trust has  
24 been unbroken between those two different administrations in Germany, the degree to  
25 which we cooperate on all matter of tough issues around the world. They're our closest

1 of allies.

2 Q So would your testimony today, in light of what we've just been discussing,  
3 be -- let me start over.

4 Is it fair to assess that whatever purported disappointment you were discussing  
5 previously regarding exhibits 13 and 14 doesn't have any impact today on our bilateral  
6 relationships with these allies?

7 A It certainly doesn't today, and it didn't at the time. I can say just within just  
8 a few months, weeks of the September article, we were engaging in quite intensive  
9 discussion with the Germans and, of course, the Brits about the looming war in Ukraine  
10 and how to respond collectively to that.

11 Q And you would characterize that conversation --

12 A Very strong.

13 Q -- as constructive?

14 A Absolutely.

15 Q Okay. I also want to go back to something you discussed with our  
16 colleagues in the last round about continuity planning, planning in the Department that  
17 was going on to maintain an embassy presence --

18 A Uh-huh.

19 Q -- post-military withdrawal.

20 I believe you said you were aware of that planning, but not directly or extensively  
21 involved in it.

22 A Correct.

23 Q Is that a fair characterization?

24 And I believe you testified that that planning began as a contingency even before  
25 the President's April decision and renewed and continued in earnest after his policy

1 decision in April. Is that correct?

2 A That's my recollection, yes.

3 Q And you were asked, I think, about a series of options: Alpha, beta,  
4 gamma, delta. I think you didn't recall what those were, correct?

5 A I do not.

6 Q You were asked about the views of particular bureaus, such as the Bureau of  
7 Diplomatic Security, in these discussions around embassy continuity, correct?

8 A Correct.

9 Q And did you have any particular recollection of concerns that --

10 A Not particular recollection, no.

11 Q Given that you weren't necessarily privy to the specifics of this discussion in  
12 the Department on embassy continuity but that you were aware of it, were you also  
13 aware of whether that discussion resulted in a conclusion or a consensus on a path  
14 forward for embassy continuity post-withdrawal?

15 A Yes. We had a plan. My understanding, we had a plan to conduct  
16 embassy operations after the withdrawal of U.S. military forces, the planned withdrawal.  
17 Of course, events got in the way of that.

18 Q And your understanding was that plan was the consensus --

19 A Yes.

20 Q -- result --

21 A Absolutely. Yes, absolutely.

22 Q And were you aware of steps that were being taken to implement that plan  
23 for embassy continuity during 2021?

24 A I was aware steps were being taken. I wasn't tracking the details.

25 Q And, obviously, we don't have a U.S. Embassy in Kabul today.

1 A Correct.

2 Q So what is your assessment of what changed, what changed or caused that  
3 plan to no longer be relevant or implementable?

4 A The Afghan Government collapsed rapidly and unexpectedly and, therefore,  
5 causing us to pursue a NEO.

6 Q Okay. So your testimony today is that there was a plan, it was being  
7 implemented, but for precipitous takeover of the Taliban, it would have presumably --

8 A Yes.

9 Q -- been continued to be implemented?

10 A Yes.

11 Q And is it fair to say that any concerns earlier in the process would have been  
12 moot at that point if the plan was, in fact, being implemented?

13 A Yes.

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q Turning to the NEO specifically, are you aware of what the Afghanistan Task  
16 Force was?

17 A I have a vague recollection of such a thing, but I will need further elaboration  
18 to remind me what it was.

19 Q Sure. So the Afghanistan Task Force was set up to respond to the  
20 precipitous change in Kabul.

21 A In August.

22 Q Yes, correct.

23 A Okay, yes.

24 Q Do you recall who led that task force?

25 A I do not.

1 Q Okay. And did you have any interaction with the task force during the NEO  
2 itself?

3 A I don't recall that I did.

4 Q Okay.

5 A Can I ask a clarifying question?

6 Q Sure.

7 A Is this the task force that's set up by -- you know, to handle incoming calls  
8 and things like that?

9 Q Correct.

10 A We have a lot of task forces.

11 Q Correct. Yeah. So the Afghanistan Task Force, as we understand it, was  
12 the main task force stood up by Dean Thompson.

13 A Correct. Okay. This is -- yeah. So I don't recall having a substantive  
14 interaction with them.

15 Q Okay. Do you recall the size of it? Was it small, large?

16 A I don't recall.

17 Q Okay, fair enough. Do you have any impression about the effectiveness of  
18 the task force during the NEO?

19 A I mean, my recollection is it was fairly effective in that we executed the NEO  
20 successfully.

21 Q Okay. We have heard from other witnesses that support by and  
22 cooperation with the military and the Department was strong and preparation was  
23 sufficient to get an extremely challenging job done. Do you agree with this general  
24 assessment?

25 A Yes.

1 Q What informs that opinion?

2 A That we were able to execute the NEO in terms of the moving of the  
3 embassy to -- personnel to HKIA, and to safely get all of our embassy personnel out of  
4 HKIA was successful without any injury or loss of life. And that we were able to,  
5 separate from the work of the NEO, but then to help evacuate over 120,000 Afghans from  
6 Afghanistan and other foreign nationals and American citizens showed that it was  
7 successful in terms of the cooperation.

8 Also, just anecdotally, I heard that it was good cooperation, but I was not on the  
9 ground so I didn't have direct experience.

10 Q Okay fair enough.

11 [REDACTED]. I'd like to introduce into the record exhibit No. 19.

12 [Chollet Exhibit No. 19  
13 was marked for identification.]

14 BY [REDACTED]:

15 Q Exhibit No. 19 is the unclassified publicly available version of the After Action  
16 Review on Afghanistan January 2020 to August 2021, dated at the bottom March 2022.  
17 Have you reviewed the unclassified portion of the AAR?

18 A Yes.

19 Q Okay. And I believe you previously testified that Ambassador Smith was in  
20 charge of the after-action review. Is that correct?

21 A Correct.

22 Q What is his professional reputation?

23 A A sterling reputation, one of the finest Foreign Service officers of his  
24 generation and someone who has served the Department honorably and ably for many  
25 years under many different administrations.

1 Q Qualified and capable to conduct an AAR of this sort?

2 A Yes.

3 Q If I could draw your attention to page 4. The last sentence of the second  
4 paragraph reads, "Overall, the Department's personnel responded with great agility,  
5 determination, and dedication, while taking on roles and responsibilities both  
6 domestically and overseas that few had ever anticipated," referencing the NEO itself.

7 Do you agree with this assessment?

8 A I do.

9 Q Is there any further color you could provide?

10 A I think this report captures it succinctly and accurately.

11 Q Okay. Speaking to your post-withdrawal experience, you briefed this  
12 committee's members in June 2022. Is that correct?

13 A Correct.

14 Q Have your overall impressions or takeaways of the withdrawal and  
15 evacuation from Afghanistan changed or evolved since then?

16 A No.

17 Q Have your overall impressions or takeaways of the Department's capacity to  
18 undertake crisis management or response changed or evolved since then?

19 A Since then being the --

20 Q The classified briefing in June of 2022.

21 A And this is March, so this is -- I mean, reading the AAR was very informative  
22 because, obviously, I learned a lot that I did not know before. So my thinking evolved  
23 upon reading that, which was before this briefing.

24 Q Okay. I'm speaking to the AAR specifically. Were you interviewed for it?

25 A I was.

1 Q Okay. And you had also previously testified that you supported  
2 Ambassador Smith and the review itself.

3 A Correct.

4 Q Could you expand upon what you meant in terms of support?

5 A So Secretary Blinken had, of course, requested the AAR. It was something  
6 that he -- the idea of learning the lessons from the withdrawal and sharing that  
7 accountability would rest wherever it fell was something he talked about even during the  
8 evacuation when he was asked about this.

9 So to fulfill that commitment that he had made to the Department and to the  
10 American people, he wanted to launch this AAR. In order to do so, he had asked me to  
11 ensure that Dan Smith and his team had whatever support they needed to be able to  
12 successfully do this work, and it involved anything from their office space to personnel to  
13 access to people and documents.

14 And so I was just there to help Dan if he ever needed any help and otherwise stay  
15 out of his way so he could do his work independently.

16 Q Okay. And how long was the review process?

17 A That's a good question. I do not actually remember when it was started,  
18 but it's probably somewhere in here when they started their work, and then obviously it  
19 concluded in March.

20 Q Okay. And we had also previously discussed the interagency review. Is  
21 that correct?

22 A The review of early 2021?

23 Q Yes.

24 A Yes.

25 Q That's correct.

1           You had testified that you didn't recall specific pieces of it, but in terms of the  
2 overall structure, do you feel that the process was robust?

3           A     Very.

4           Q     How so?

5           A     I recall many meetings on this subject.   And if memory serves, I think the  
6 AAR has a reference to the fact the interagency process went to basically no meetings  
7 and having no process to a lot of meetings and a lot of process, which was welcomed  
8 initially and maybe as people have grown tired of it since.   I'll speak personally to that.  
9 But, yeah, I remember it was quite thorough and exhaustive.

10          Q     Okay.   So sounds like it was robust.   Understanding that you may not have  
11 much to say on the substance of it, would you also agree that the dialogue in terms of  
12 establishing the review was meaningful, that there was healthy debate?

13          A     Oh, absolutely.   It was quite spirited, rigorous.

14          ██████████:   This is the early 2021 review?

15          ██████████:   Yes, that's correct.

16          Counselor Chollet.   The policy review, yes.

17          ██████████:   Okay.

18          BY ██████████:

19          Q     And then turning to the AAR, would you also agree that there was robust  
20 dialogue, conversations, et cetera, that underpinned the findings of the report itself?

21          A     I -- since I had nothing to do with the actual production of the report, I  
22 don't -- I can't speak to how it was produced.   I can just speak to the product, which I  
23 thought was quite -- was quite thorough and quite good.   And in my own experience  
24 being interviewed, it was very professional and thorough.

25          Q     Okay.   And do you feel that the information you provided in your interview

1 was accurately reflected in the AAR itself?

2 A I thought it was a fair accounting of -- to the extent that I was familiar with  
3 the issues being discussed. Much of it, of course, preceded my time in office, so --

4 Q Okay. And in a broad sense, are you aware of about how many people  
5 were interviewed for the AAR?

6 A I don't want to put a number on it because I don't know.

7 Q Okay. Would you be surprised by the number of 125 individuals?

8 A That would sound right.

9 Q And are you aware of how individuals were selected to be interviewed for  
10 the AAR?

11 A I am not aware.

12 Q Did you volunteer or were you asked?

13 A I probably was asked, although I expect I would have volunteered if I hadn't  
14 been asked, so --

15 Q Okay. Do you think it's reasonable for the two Secretaries of State involved  
16 during the withdrawal and NEO to be interviewed for the AAR?

17 A Yes.

18 Q Are you aware of whether Secretary Pompeo was asked to speak to the AAR  
19 team?

20 A I believe he was, but, again, I wasn't involved in it.

21 Q And are you aware of whether or not he accepted the invitation to be  
22 interviewed?

23 A I do not believe he did.

24 Q Would you be surprised to hear that he was not, in fact, interviewed for the  
25 AAR?

1 A I'm not surprised to hear that.

2 Q Why are you not surprised?

3 A Because I had heard that he probably hadn't participated.

4 Q And he, in fact, declined to be interviewed?

5 A I didn't know that part, so --

6 Q Okay.

7 [REDACTED]. Do you have a reaction to a former Secretary of State not  
8 participating?

9 Counselor Chollet. Look, I think that, you know, my view is that Afghanistan,  
10 both in the time period in question and the AAR, which is just, of course, the last year and  
11 a half of our 20-year engagement in Afghanistan, given the sacrifices that have been  
12 made by American men and women in uniform, by diplomats, 2,400 killed, 20,000  
13 wounded, \$2 trillion in U.S. taxpayer dollars over 20 years, that a full, thorough,  
14 nonpartisan accounting of our experience in Afghanistan is -- the American people  
15 deserve nothing less. That's why I fully support the work of the Afghan War  
16 Commission, why I fully support the AAR and the work of the committee to look into this.

17 But I do think it's important to remember that history did not begin on January  
18 21st, 2021, and that there is a totality of a timeline here that really, in my view, would  
19 begin with the Doha Agreement through the end of the evacuation.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q Just to follow up quickly, you previously testified today about the lack of  
22 information or planning or transparency from the outgoing administration that was  
23 available to you on Afghanistan when you transitioned into the Department, correct?

24 A Correct.

25 Q Based on what we've just been discussing about Secretary Pompeo declining

1 to be interviewed for the AAR, does that comport with your experience of the  
2 administration's posture when you sought information about Afghanistan?

3 A Actually, no. I mean, as I mentioned earlier, that the State Department  
4 transition was a kind of oasis within the larger transition. And I give tremendous credit  
5 to Steve Biegun, who was the Deputy Secretary at the time, who made it very clear that  
6 he was going to take the Bush 43 approach, and his job was to do whatever he could to  
7 set us up for success. I don't think the sharing of a plan was because of a desire to hide  
8 anything. I think it was because --

9 Q A plan didn't exist?

10 A -- there wasn't a big plan.

11 Q Fair enough.

12 [REDACTED]. Great. That concludes our formal questioning. However, we'd  
13 like to provide you with an opportunity to offer in the affirmative any testimony you'd like  
14 to share with this committee, further respond to any questions we've asked, et cetera.

15 Counselor Chollet. No. I think you've covered it well. Thank you.

16 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

17 Well, on behalf of Ranking Member Meeks and the minority staff, we thank you  
18 very much for your testimony and also your service to the American people. That  
19 concludes our round. Thank you.

20 Counselor Chollet. Thank you. Thank you.

21 [REDACTED] Let's take a short break.

22 [Recess.]

23 [REDACTED]. So we're back on the record. I'd like the record to reflect that  
24 we have transitioned to 45-minute rounds from 60-minute rounds.

25 BY [REDACTED]:

1 Q Counselor, I want to go back to exhibit 16, which was entered by my  
2 colleague, [REDACTED], namely the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process transcript, remarks  
3 that you gave on March 30, 2021.

4 It's my understanding you stated that you do not recall giving these remarks.

5 A I do not.

6 Q And why is that?

7 A My guess is because it's a virtual ministerial conference. So I sat in many,  
8 many Zoom calls or virtual meetings at this time, so this one doesn't stand out.

9 Q Do you recall not having participated? Do you not recall the substance of  
10 those remarks?

11 A I don't -- I didn't recall the remarks at all until I just saw this here.

12 Q So my colleagues asked you about Russia, and there were some follow-up  
13 questions there. I want to now transition to China.

14 What were China's goals in Afghanistan throughout 2021, prior to the Taliban  
15 takeover?

16 A I can't speak to them specifically other than to clearly serve their interests,  
17 which I'm certain in significant ways varied with our interests.

18 Q Who could speak to them specifically?

19 A I'm sure -- I think this conference was -- sorry. There's a reference in here  
20 to the March 18th conference in Moscow. I have a vague recollection that Ambassador  
21 Khalilzad attended that, but can't be certain.

22 Q So when you state, "On March 18 in Moscow, we joined with Russia, China,  
23 and Pakistan," the "we" you're referencing is not you but the Department?

24 A The United States.

25 Q Okay. And were you briefed on this conference?

1 A I probably was but have no recollection of it.

2 Q And do you have any briefing materials, any sort of documentary memos, et  
3 cetera, that were created for you?

4 A For --

5 Q To provide takeaways or outcomes of this conference or in preparation  
6 thereof?

7 [REDACTED]. So I would just note that if he does, he shouldn't be -- this is not to  
8 see if he remembers what he has. If the Department has those records -- and they  
9 would if they were his in an official capacity -- if they're not already covered by what  
10 you've requested, you can request them.

11 [REDACTED]. So my question was not asked to requesting the documents.

12 [REDACTED]. No, no, I understand. You're asking him if he had any. And I'm  
13 saying I don't think it's appropriate for him to try to remember in a transcribed interview  
14 what records he may or may not have, whereas you can definitively know what the  
15 Department has of his records by just requesting them.

16 And then they would -- as an accommodation, they would be collected and  
17 produced, subject to the normal executive branch interests.

18 Counselor Chollet. I can just say as a general matter, any -- any principal's  
19 participation in anything like this would have a memo sort of setting the scene for what  
20 this is and prepared remarks, which I'm sure these were prepared for me by someone and  
21 all of that.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q That's helpful. Thank you.

24 And do you know who would have briefed the Secretary on this issue if -- if you  
25 were -- let me reframe.

1           Were you involved in briefing the Secretary on this issue?

2           A    This issue being?

3           Q    Being the conference and China's goals in Afghanistan.

4           A    Which conference are we referring to here, the March 18th conference or  
5 this conference where the remarks were given?

6           Q    "On March 18 in Moscow, we joined with Russia, China, and Pakistan."

7           A    I would guess that if I'm, in fact, correct that Ambassador Khalilzad attended,  
8 he would have -- or someone on his team would have provided a briefing on that  
9 conference.

10          Q    And would he have provided you a briefing on that conference?

11          A    Not necessarily. It probably would've been -- I would've participated -- if I  
12 had participated in it, it would've been with the Secretary. But I have no recollection.

13          Q    Did you or, more broadly, the Department assess whether China was  
14 opposed to a Taliban takeover?

15          A    I don't have a recollection of that.

16          Q    Are you aware of any aid China provided to the Taliban that may have aided  
17 them in their takeover of Afghanistan?

18          A    I am not aware that there was aid or wasn't aid.

19          Q    What were Pakistan's goals in Afghanistan throughout 2021, prior to the  
20 Taliban takeover?

21          A    Pakistan obviously had an uneasy relationship inside Afghanistan. I can't  
22 speak to their goals specifically then because I didn't deal with much, I should say, with  
23 Pakistanis then. Dealt with them more since.

24          Q    Then-Acting Assistant Secretary, now Ambassador Thompson, would have  
25 dealt with them, correct?

1 A He certainly would have.

2 Q And you previously testified that you were receiving briefings, regular  
3 briefings from him, correct?

4 A Yes, but not on everything he was doing.

5 Q Did you receive any briefings on Pakistan from him?

6 A I may have, just don't recall.

7 Q Did you or, more broadly, the Department assess whether Pakistan opposed  
8 the Taliban military takeover of Afghanistan?

9 A I do not recall.

10 Q Who would recall?

11 A Presumably Ambassador Thompson.

12 Q Are you aware of any aid Pakistan provided the Taliban that may have  
13 assisted them in their takeover of Afghanistan?

14 A I don't recall whether they did or they didn't at this point.

15 Q Was the Taliban using Pakistan as a significant base of operations in 2021?

16 A Well, the Taliban was in Afghanistan in 2021, yes.

17 Q And what was the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI's, relationship  
18 with the Taliban?

19 A I am not an expert on that so I can't speak to it.

20 Q But you did work on counterterrorism issues, correct?

21 A To be clear, the counterterrorism issue was not how to conduct  
22 counterterrorism operations inside of Afghanistan or the relationship between terrorist  
23 groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was the diplomatic issue of what basing and  
24 access we could have with other countries outside of Afghanistan for counterterrorism  
25 purposes. Other colleagues dealt with counterterrorism.

1 Q But would you agree that'd be important to be informed and familiar with  
2 issues such as the ISI's relationship with the Taliban?

3 A It wasn't -- that was not germane to whether country X would provide us  
4 with basing and access to perform counterterrorism missions in the future.

5 Q How about germane to your capacity as a senior advisor to the Secretary of  
6 State?

7 A Well, I had to cover the globe. So there were many, many issues that I had  
8 to be expert on or at least be cognizant of some of the key issues.

9 Q Do you recall who the Prime Minister of Pakistan was throughout 2021?

10 A I do not.

11 Q Would it jog your memory if I said --

12 A Was it Khan? I don't -- yeah, I don't remember when Khan came in or  
13 when he left.

14 Q Would it jog your memory if I said it was Prime Minister Imran Khan?

15 A Well, now I guessed it, yes.

16 Q Okay, great.

17 [REDACTED]. So I'd like to introduce exhibit 20 next.

18 [Chollet Exhibit No. 20

19 was marked for identification.]

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q This is an article published by The Independent on August 17, 2021. It is  
22 titled, "Taliban have broken, quote, 'the shackles of slavery,' says Pakistan PM Imran  
23 Khan."

24 The Taliban took over on August 15, 2021, correct?

25 A That is my recollection. I don't remember the exact date.

1 Q So based on your recollection, this article was published just after, correct?

2 A Yes.

3 Q If you could direct your attention to the first line on page 1. The article  
4 reads, "The Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan said that the Taliban are, quote,  
5 'breaking the chains of slavery,' inviting the wrath of locals trapped in Afghanistan.

6 "His comments came a day after the Taliban took over Kabul and the presidential  
7 palace, prompting chaos and fear among the locals who fled to the international airport  
8 and several clung to the wheels of the departing U.S. military aircraft."

9 By chains of slavery, is Imran Khan referencing the United States?

10 A I am not going to speak on behalf of Imran Khan.

11 Q Well, how would you interpret the chains of slavery?

12 A Seems a reasonable interpretation, but I don't know what he was  
13 referencing to.

14 Q Is it fair to interpret this as Imran Khan praising or even celebrating the  
15 Taliban takeover?

16 A Seems a fair assessment.

17 Q What was your or, more broadly, the Department's reaction to Imran Khan's  
18 comments at this time?

19 A I don't recall any reaction.

20 Q You don't recall Pakistan, an ally who we funded with money, weapons,  
21 support throughout many years, you don't recall the Department's reaction to his  
22 comments praising the Taliban?

23 A I don't. I could say my guess is they condemned it, but I don't -- I don't  
24 remember.

25 Q No, if you don't recall, then that is a response.

1           So I'd like to direct you back to exhibit 16, the State Department transcript of  
2 remarks that you gave at the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, dated March 30, 2021, noting  
3 for the record that you do not recall these remarks.

4           I'd like to direct your attention to the third paragraph on the second page. Here  
5 you state, quote, "We also welcome Turkey's offer to facilitate further discussions on a  
6 political roadmap in Istanbul. They are critically important talks, and we look forward to  
7 sharing additional details along with our Turkish partners."

8           Are you making reference to the Istanbul conference here?

9           A    I don't recall what this is in reference to.

10          Q    Do you recall an Istanbul conference?

11          A    I recall there were several Istanbul conferences, although I may be  
12 misremembering.

13          Q    Do you recall the Istanbul planned conference that was scheduled to  
14 coordinate cooperation with the United Nations and Qatar on Afghanistan?

15          A    I don't have a specific recollection of that.

16          Q    Do you recall whether the goal of the conference was to make progress in  
17 negotiations between the Afghan Government and the Taliban?

18          A    I don't recall the specifics around this conference.

19          Q    Do you recall the conference existing?

20          A    Vaguely, hearing about it, but I wasn't directly involved.

21          Q    Are you aware that the Taliban refused to go to the Istanbul conference  
22 after President Biden announced his Go-to-Zero order on April 14, 2021?

23          A    Do not recall that.

24          Q    Can you please speak to the Secretary's response to the Taliban walking  
25 away from the conference?

1 A I don't have a recollection of his response.

2 Q Was any concern voiced within Department leadership that the Taliban was  
3 not genuinely interested in the peace process?

4 A I remember that that was the proposition that was being tested by  
5 Ambassador Khalilzad and his team in their many engagements with the Taliban and  
6 others to try to see if there could be a negotiated outcome here.

7 Q And what did the United States view as its leverage over the Taliban when  
8 the drawdown of troops was no longer up for negotiation?

9 A I honestly don't remember. So I can only speculate what -- 3 years later  
10 what -- or 2 and three-quarters years later what we thought it was.

11 Q Was there any consideration given to delaying the President's  
12 announcement, given the impending conference?

13 A I do not recall that.

14 [REDACTED]. So I just want to be clear. You're saying you actually don't recall  
15 that being done as opposed to you just don't recall?

16 Counselor Chollet. I don't recall the conference.

17 [REDACTED]. Right. I'm just saying that there's a lot of questions that  
18 sometimes -- I want to be clear on the record when you actually say, I am aware, I don't  
19 recall that having been a position, as opposed to like the conference you just have no  
20 recollection of it. Is this not an important distinction? That's okay.

21 Counselor Chollet. I don't remember much about this at all, so I don't -- yeah.

22 BY [REDACTED]:

23 Q So I think a better question is -- because we've had a series of questions in  
24 which you don't recall what transpired during that period in Afghanistan. And I know  
25 that the chairman is very interested, given the lives that were sacrificed, both by the

1 United States as well as the Afghan civilians, which continue to be under the oppression  
2 of the Taliban.

3 Maybe it's a better question to ask, what do you remember around this period?  
4 What was happening at the State Department that is relevant to the Taliban, in terms of  
5 conferences, engagements, leverage that we had? Because we're just trying to better  
6 understand what happened.

7 A No. And I think, I mean, this was when Zai Khalilzad was engaged in  
8 intensive negotiations. I just don't remember where he was in that process. I mean,  
9 this conference on March 18th was roughly a month before the President's  
10 announcement.

11 So I don't recall the conference. I think he went to the Moscow conference and I  
12 think then he went to the Istanbul conference, but I know you've had a chance to speak  
13 with him so he would perhaps remember specifically.

14 At this time, I was not deeply engaged. And I was getting briefings, but I was also  
15 getting briefings on many, many other issues going on in the world at the exact same  
16 time. So --

17 Q And one of those issues being the ending of a 20-year war in Afghanistan,  
18 correct?

19 A No question this was one of the issues that was very important. It was not  
20 the only issue. There was many things I was working on in March and April of 2021.

21 Q Can you speak to what tabletop exercises took place in the Department in  
22 the spring to summer of 2021?

23 A So I don't have a recollection of any going on in the Department. I knew  
24 that there was a tabletop that was conducted I believe by the Defense Department, but I  
25 did not participate in it.

1 Q Who from the Department did participate?

2 A I believe Brian McKeon participated and perhaps others, but I don't recall  
3 because I wasn't there.

4 Q When did you and Secretary Blinken first get the impression that the  
5 situation on the ground in Afghanistan was deteriorating and that the Taliban was making  
6 significant military gains?

7 A So I would say it was several -- I mean, in the week or so leading up to the  
8 evacuation is when the -- it started to become clear that it was deteriorating rapidly, but  
9 the best of my recollection.

10 Q And can you speak to the rapid Taliban gains in May, June, and July of 2021?  
11 It's our understanding that, you know, this didn't happen in a vacuum. There were  
12 territorial gains happening throughout the summer.

13 A There -- my recollection is that there were territorial gains happening, but  
14 the -- and, therefore, preparations were accelerating as we were getting closer to -- to the  
15 deadline for withdrawal. But I don't -- what I recall is that it was in the week or so, give  
16 or take a few days, leading up to the -- what ended up being the fall of the government  
17 that it became very dire.

18 Q So let's go back to the May, June, and July timeframe, which is sort of a  
19 3-month timeframe. What actions did the Department take in response to those  
20 territorial gains?

21 A Well, for the Department's perspective, the goal was to ensure that we were  
22 accelerating the preparation of the embassy, to ensure that we could maintain our  
23 embassy posture there after the evacuation of U.S. military, also to accelerate the  
24 assistance provided to SIVs to try to get out of Afghanistan, and the messaging to  
25 American citizens who were still there, which I believe started back in the March

1 timeframe, to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible.

2 Q And you had noted that Ambassador Khalilzad had continued his  
3 negotiations or engagement with the Taliban in the spring of 2021, as we referenced sort  
4 of that March conference. Did this continue through the summer of 2021?

5 A I believe -- I mean, yes. I mean, he was -- I don't recall exactly when he  
6 engaged or didn't, but yes, he was on the job until sometime in the fall.

7 Q So what messaging did the Department engage in in response to the  
8 Taliban's May, June, and July territorial gains and seizures?

9 A Can you define messaging?

10 Q Sure. What did they communicate to the Taliban in response to these  
11 territorial gains?

12 A So I don't know because I wasn't the one communicating it to the Taliban,  
13 and I don't remember exactly any deliberation that I was part of during these -- during  
14 this time. But I -- you know, I think it was to register our deep concern about what they  
15 were doing inside Afghanistan.

16 And I guess one point of leverage, now that I'm thinking of it, that I seem to recall  
17 hearing about -- but, again, I don't have direct knowledge of this -- was that the Taliban  
18 did want a relationship with the United States. And, you know, my recollection is that  
19 Ambassador Khalilzad was making clear that it was going to be impossible for that to  
20 happen if they continued along the path they were on.

21 Q And hasn't the Taliban's subsequent rule since August 2021 shown that  
22 international legitimacy or a relationship with the United States was not of great concern  
23 to them?

24 A Clearly, leverage didn't work. I can't speak to whether they want a  
25 relationship with us now or not.

1 Q What did the Taliban communicate to the State Department during this  
2 period?

3 A I -- I don't know what kind of -- you know, what they were saying to Khalilzad  
4 during this period. But I don't know of any other contacts anyone in the Department  
5 would have had with them.

6 Q When, if ever, did the State Department realize that the Taliban was set on a  
7 military conquest of all of Afghanistan, including Kabul?

8 A That would have been August of '21.

9 Q What was your impression of the ANDSF during that period?

10 A Clearly, it was disappointing, given the tremendous amount of resources the  
11 U.S. Government had poured into building up the ANSF -- ANDSF over many, many, many  
12 years.

13 I personally, based on perhaps assessments I was getting from table -- you know,  
14 from the embassy that believed that there was a core of ANDSF that could, you know,  
15 certainly defend the core kind of nodes of Afghanistan for some time, but that turned out  
16 not to be true.

17 Q What do you define as the core nodes of Afghanistan?

18 A Kabul, for example. Key cities.

19 Q Did the Department employ a Kabul-centric approach to Afghanistan?

20 A Define Kabul-centric.

21 Q In terms of -- I noted the territorial gains May, June, and July, and then you  
22 stated that -- when I asked the question of when it became clear to the Department that  
23 the Taliban was set on a military conquest of all of Afghanistan, you noted that August  
24 timeframe.

25 So my question as a followup is that -- taking these realities into account, the

1 territorial gains throughout the summer of 2021 and the State Department's realization in  
2 August of the Taliban's intentions, my question is, follow-up question, did the  
3 Department employ a Kabul-centric approach in which its perspectives and assessments  
4 were based on the sustainability of Kabul and not on the country of Afghanistan?

5 A Well, again, given that our priority at the State Department was ensuring  
6 that we could maintain our diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, which was based in  
7 Kabul, that's what we were focused on. And, obviously, the government was based in  
8 Kabul as well. But as we were watching, we were seeing provincial capitals fall, yes.

9 Q Did anyone in the Department ever express concern that the Afghan military  
10 would not be able to hold the country without U.S. Forces?

11 A I don't recall that just being leveled as a blanket concern, but I can't -- there  
12 might have been someone in the Department making that case for sure. I don't recall,  
13 though.

14 Q Did anyone ever raise this concern directly with you?

15 A Not that I can recall.

16 Q How about with Secretary Blinken?

17 A Not that I can recall.

18 Q Did you follow military reporting and periodic updates on the situation in  
19 Afghanistan, such as the Commander's Placemat?

20 A I don't recall getting access to the Commander's Placemat.

21 Q So as was previously noted and mentioned multiple times, Ambassador Ross  
22 Wilson served as the chief of mission throughout the withdrawal.

23 How often did you or the seventh floor, more broadly, engage with Ambassador  
24 Wilson throughout the withdrawal?

25 A So I -- I don't recall that I individually had a conversation with him, but I

1 definitely recall that there were group briefings in which he participated. But I can't  
2 speak to the frequency of those, whether they were twice a day, three times a day, daily.  
3 Just don't recall.

4 Q And what were those briefings generally about?

5 A Well, during -- during the -- I'm sorry. I might have confused withdrawal  
6 versus evacuation. So I was speaking to the evacuation earlier when I was saying that.

7 During the withdrawal -- and remind me again, we're talking the -- what's the  
8 withdrawal definition that you're operating --

9 [REDACTED]. There's two different ones.

10 Counselor Chollet. I know. That's why. Which one is this, again?

11 [REDACTED]. It's the one that brought the troops down to zero, not the one  
12 that brought them down to 2,500.

13 Counselor Chollet. 2,500.

14 [REDACTED]. So it focuses on a complete absence of U.S. military presence.

15 Counselor Chollet. So I would say I had periodic engagements with Ambassador  
16 Wilson, but it was not like a set meeting or anything that we had, and usually it was  
17 around perhaps a specific issue he was trying to work through.

18 [REDACTED]. If you could put a timeframe on that.

19 Counselor Chollet. I mean, I don't -- my kind of general impression is it would  
20 have been a little more frequent at the beginning of the administration, so February,  
21 March, and then sort of tapered off as more people got on the jobs and more people  
22 were there to do the work and I got diverted off to do other things.

23 BY [REDACTED]:

24 Q And how about during the evacuation?

25 A So that was what I was speaking to earlier. I think that was -- I don't recall

1 whether during the evacuation I had individual conversation with him, but certainly recall  
2 being on broader briefings or calls with him, reporting on the situation on the ground and  
3 what he was -- he was dealing with and experiencing.

4 Q As the State Department's sort of chief diplomat on the ground in  
5 Afghanistan, so in country, when did Ambassador Wilson raise the alarm to D.C.? And  
6 by raising the alarm, I mean Afghanistan --

7 A In terms of the NEO?

8 Q In terms of the NEO, the need for evacuation, however you'd like to define  
9 it. It'd be helpful to us to sort of gain clarity on when Ambassador Wilson raised the  
10 alarm for the deteriorating situations in country.

11 A Well, I mean, he was not an optimist ever, as far as I can remember. I  
12 mean, there was plenty to worry about in terms of just the general direction of  
13 Afghanistan. In terms of the specific alarm that was we need to think about the NEO,  
14 that would have been in that week or so before the NEO was actually executed.

15 Q Was a NEO ever mentioned or suggested by him to the Department prior to  
16 that week timeframe?

17 A No, not that I recall.

18 Q And how often did you engage with now Under Secretary Bass during the  
19 evacuation?

20 A I don't recall that I -- again, not individually, but definitely maybe -- well, I  
21 should say that like as a group call, like a situation report, perhaps. But I don't have a  
22 specific recollection.

23 Q What were those group meetings or reports about?

24 A So we would have meetings with a whole host of officials involved in any  
25 aspect of the evacuation, and we would have the -- our teammates from downrange

1 participate.

2 I don't have a specific recollection of Ambassador Bass participating, but I  
3 wouldn't be surprised if he did. But -- and then also there was a lot of email reports and  
4 stuff that were coming in.

5 Q And how often did you engage with DMR McKeon throughout the  
6 withdrawal?

7 A On the withdrawal itself? Pretty regularly. I mean, I think once, you  
8 know -- once he got in the job and then was really seized with the planning for the  
9 embassy withdrawal, I mean, I would hear about it. But he was covering those  
10 meetings. I don't recall regularly attending those meetings with him.

11 Q Did he voice any concerns to you about the state of the withdrawal  
12 planning?

13 A Look, planning this withdrawal was a tremendously challenging enterprise.  
14 You know, getting the U.S. diplomatic footprint in a place that it could be sustained  
15 absent the U.S. military was an extremely difficult task with a whole series of difficult  
16 decisions.

17 What we discussed earlier is that through that very tough process we came to a  
18 plan that everyone believed in that could work and that we were in the process of  
19 implementing when the government in Kabul fell.

20 Q I'd like to direct you back to exhibit 16. This, again, is a transcript of  
21 remarks you gave at the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process on March 30, 2021.

22 If you could please draw your attention to the fifth paragraph on the second page  
23 of that exhibit. Here you state, quote, "With the support of our international partners,  
24 this Heart of Asia Ministerial offers an opportunity to build on this momentum in favor of  
25 peace. It sends a strong message to affirm international support for Afghan-led efforts

1 to end the conflict and the need to move quickly."

2 Quote, "We welcome your efforts to ensure this year's Ministerial sends an  
3 unambiguous, unified message: We expect to see faster progress on a political  
4 settlement and expect both parties to be prepared to engage seriously. We recognize  
5 this requires difficult compromises."

6 Counselor, can you please speak to what you meant by the peace process must be  
7 Afghan-led?

8 A So -- because I confess I don't fully recall what the Heart of Asia Ministerial  
9 actually was. I have a vague recollection it was something more about like private  
10 sector ties in the region. So I don't remember who all attended.

11 And I think the Afghan-led means it's something, you know, an outcome that's not  
12 going to be imposed on Afghanistan in terms of a negotiation between the Afghans and  
13 the Taliban.

14 Q The Doha Agreement inevitably was imposed on Afghanistan, though,  
15 correct?

16 A Well, that's my reading of it. But, of course, I wasn't in government when  
17 that agreement was forged.

18 Q And then was ultimately enforced by -- but you were in office when it was  
19 enforced by President Biden under the new administration, correct?

20 A Well, the last piece of it, which was the full withdrawal of our forces, but --

21 Q Can you please address the transfer of power efforts the State Department  
22 was pursuing between the Taliban and the Afghan Government throughout 2021?

23 A Sorry. Can you repeat the question?

24 Q Of course. Can you please address the transfer of power efforts the State  
25 Department was pursuing between the Taliban and the Afghan Government throughout

1 2021?

2 A Those were conducted by Ambassador Khalilzad. If this is in reference to  
3 his negotiations, so I can't speak to -- again, shed any further light on what he's probably  
4 already told you.

1 [2:57 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q But you were privy to those conversations or at the very least briefed on  
4 them in some capacity, were you not?

5 A I certainly was, but I have long since forgotten those briefings.

6 Q Did the U.S. Government advocate that the Afghan Government accept a  
7 power-sharing agreement where the new government would be dominated by the  
8 Taliban?

9 A I don't recall.

10 Q You don't remember if the U.S. Government advocated for a power-sharing  
11 agreement where the Afghan Government would be dominated by the Taliban?

12 A I mean, I don't recall that we pursued that. But I will have to defer to  
13 Ambassador Khalilzad on that specific.

14 Q Can you describe the transitional peace government plan that the U.S. was  
15 pushing for in early March 2021?

16 A I don't recall specifics on that.

17 Q Do you recall it not existing or do you not recall details?

18 A I have a vague recollection of that, but I don't recall any details around that.

19 Q Do you recall providing any input to the Secretary on this issue?

20 A I don't actually.

21 Q Do you recall being privy to any briefings or partaking in any meetings  
22 involving this issue?

23 A I'm certain that if there were briefings -- well, I shouldn't say I'm certain.  
24 If there were briefings around that time, there's a reasonable chance I was part of  
25 them. But I was also doing many other things at this time, so I might've been in other

1 briefings while he was in those briefings.

2 Q Was Afghanistan a chief priority of the Department during this period?

3 A It was a priority, certainly.

4 Q So would it not be important to remember details pertaining to a priority of  
5 the Department during this period?

6 A I don't remember the details.

7 Q Did this effort include a High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence that would  
8 include members of the Taliban?

9 A I don't recall.

10 Q Did this transitional peace government plan embolden and further  
11 legitimize the Taliban?

12 A I don't have the information to make that assessment.

13 Q Did this transitional peace government weaken and further delegitimize the  
14 Afghan Government?

15 A Again, don't have the information to make that assessment.

16 Q If you had to attribute percentages to the amount of time dedicated to  
17 Afghanistan, can you please speak to what percentage of your time was spent on  
18 Afghanistan throughout 2021, understanding that these percentages may have varied  
19 throughout the year?

20 A Yeah. So that's why it's important to kind of -- depends on what point of  
21 time you're asking about. Because early on, when few of my colleagues were in  
22 confirmed positions and we were in the middle of the policy review, I would say more of  
23 my time was on Afghanistan.

24 But that was maybe 20 percent. I mean, I'm just guessing based on everything  
25 else going on in the world. But then it went down as more people came on to the jobs

1 and then -- so, you know, I don't know. Ten percent?

2 Q So it would be helpful to us because we can't define when more people  
3 came on to the job as per your perspective.

4 So when did it go from 20 percent to 10 percent?

5 A I would say the March timeframe is when -- my recollection is when the  
6 Deputy Secretaries were confirmed, it was roughly March. Victoria Nuland was  
7 confirmed. I don't remember, but that's a notable thing, April maybe. And then there  
8 was more people to do the work.

9 Q How much of your time was dedicated to Afghanistan after the April 14th,  
10 2021, Go-to-Zero order?

11 A I would say it's, again, a small percentage, because at that point then  
12 my -- as I mentioned earlier -- it narrowed to this particular aspect of the  
13 counterterrorism mission -- I want to be careful here -- regarded the bases and access and  
14 engagements with foreign partners on that subject.

15 Q Okay. So how much -- what was the percentage?

16 A Let's say 15 percent.

17 Q Okay. And how about in August of 2021?

18 A So during the evacuation, I would say it was 80 percent, 90 percent, as  
19 probably that was the same for every senior official in the Department.

20 Q And can you please speak to what percentage of Secretary Blinken's time  
21 was spent on Afghanistan prior to the April 14th, 2021, Go-to-Zero order?

22 A Oh, it's hard to put a percentage on his time.

23 I would say just a substantial amount of his time given that it involved not just  
24 conversations internally in the U.S. Government but also engagements with foreign  
25 counterparts throughout this process.

1 Q And how about after the April 14th, 2021, announcement, through August?

2 A Similar. It remained a very -- it was a constant issue that he worked. But  
3 of course I recall we had a Gaza war back then in May of '21.

4 Q So who served as the senior advisor to the Secretary throughout this 2021  
5 period on Afghanistan? Because you've testified that anywhere ranging from 10 to 20  
6 percent of your time was dedicated to Afghanistan up until the evacuation in August of  
7 2021. So there's a big chunk. So just trying to better understand, who did the  
8 Secretary go to for advice on Afghanistan?

9 A Well, he sought many people for advice, many of us who did not work on  
10 Afghanistan full time.

11 If you're asking who's the person who worked on Afghanistan full time, it would  
12 be Zal Khalilzad.

13 Q So that was not my question, but that is helpful.

14 My question was, you've noted to sort of the fluidity of your role and sort of the  
15 distinctions of the role of the Counselor. So I want to better understand who was his  
16 go-to person on issues pertaining to Afghanistan.

17 A Well, I mean, it really depended on the issue. I mean, if it was about the  
18 status of the -- and security of the embassy and the planning for that and the SIV process,  
19 he would first turn to Brian McKeon and Carol Perez.

20 If he was interested in what was going on regarding the discussions with the  
21 Taliban, he would first turn to Zal.

22 I would quite often be in those conversations, but I was not the one he would  
23 necessarily turn to for any of that.

24 Q Understanding that there are different portfolios, different issues that  
25 officials in the Department worked on as pertaining to Afghanistan, was there one person

1 who exercised overall responsibility, aside from the Secretary, for Afghanistan?

2 A For everything, from the embassy to the SIV program, to the negotiations  
3 with the Taliban? That's not really how the State Department is structured, so.

4 Q But consolidating that information, there was not one person who was  
5 responsible for taking all those various equities into account and making a decision?

6 A Well, again, ultimately the Secretary of State makes the decision. We  
7 would often be in the same meetings. Not everyone did everything. So you'd hear  
8 from the experts and the people responsible for the embassy, similar to hear from the  
9 folks that are talking to the Taliban, and it would all have to fit together.

10 Q So DMR McKeon did not exercise overall responsibility, aside from Secretary  
11 Blinken, for issues pertaining to Afghanistan?

12 A He, to my recollection, had very little interaction with Ambassador Khalilzad  
13 and his team on the negotiations with the Taliban.

14 Q When in the course of the Department's withdrawal planning did the  
15 possibility of a noncombatant evacuation operation, or a NEO, come up?

16 A In terms of the possibility that there would be a NEO or the --

17 Q In terms of the likelihood.

18 A Well, it was always considered a possibility, and so that was planned for  
19 throughout.

20 In terms of it being necessary, my recollection is it wasn't until that week or so  
21 before it actually was asked for.

22 But, I mean, we were clearly aware that the situation was deteriorating, which is  
23 why we were aggressively messaging American citizens to leave starting back in March  
24 and why we were taking urgent steps to prepare for the eventual withdrawal of the  
25 military and the potential for an evacuation.

1           What I don't recall is when U.S. military assets were put in position to help assist  
2 in the NEO, because that was, obviously, a critical piece of ensuring that we could do the  
3 NEO and also the evacuation.

4           Q    And was there an Afghanistan NEO working group?

5           A    There might've been.    I don't recall.

6           Q    Did you participate in that group in any capacity?

7           A    If there was one, I did not.

8           Q    Do you recall who led that group?

9           A    I do not.    If there was one.

10          Q    Was there a plan or plans in place for a NEO prior to the August 2021  
11 emergency evacuation?

12          A    Well, there obviously was a plan for a NEO prior to that evacuation because  
13 that's how we were conducting.    There was a plan.    Like I said, all embassies have a  
14 plan for NEOs, so there should've been a plan, yeah.

15          Q    What worst-case scenarios did that plan or those plans account for?

16          A    I can't speak to those plans because I don't recall examining them in any  
17 detail.

18          Q    Did the State Department ever put together a plan which contemplated the  
19 Taliban controlling everything but for Hamid Karzai International Airport?

20          A    I don't recall if it did.

21          Q    Who at the Department was responsible for the Department's equities in  
22 that NEO plan?

23          A    Well, it's the chief of mission, is my recollection, is responsible.    I'm quite  
24 sure that in Washington that Brian McKeon and Carol Perez would've been cognizant of  
25 that.

1 Q Were there any events that the Department identified as decision points  
2 that would need to trigger a NEO?

3 A Typically NEOs do have those triggers, so I'm sure there were those events.  
4 I don't recall what they were.

5 Q When did you first learn that a NEO would be requested?

6 A In -- I don't recall exactly when I heard, but it was shortly before it was  
7 requested -- or it might've been simultaneous with the request, I don't recall.

8 Q Do you recall discussions about avoiding using the term "NEO" at any point  
9 during the Afghanistan withdrawal planning or evacuation?

10 A I don't recall that.

11 Q Did anyone in the Department ever advise on whether the terms "NEO,"  
12 "evacuation," or similar language should be avoided?

13 A I do not recall that.

14 Q To the best of your knowledge, did anyone at the Department, or more  
15 broadly the administration, call for a NEO to be initiated prior to August 15th, 2021?

16 A I'm just trying to remember if I -- I don't want to confuse this with any other  
17 of our near misses since then.

18 Not that I can recall that there was this, there was a request by that.

19 Q What do you mean by "near misses"?

20 A Well, I mean, we've had several instances since Kabul in August where we've  
21 had to consider the future of embassy security, including places where we've pulled out,  
22 most recently Khartoum. So I'm just trying to remember the sequencing of when we call  
23 for a NEO or not.

24 Q How adequate do you believe the NEO planning and preparation was?

25 A I believe that it was adequate, as shown by the results.

1 Q Did it -- did the NEO planning contemplate Afghanistan being surrounded by  
2 Afghan civilians in the manner that it was?

3 A Well, the NEO was about getting our embassy back to Kabul. And then it  
4 had not planned for this evacuation on the scale that the President ultimately decided to  
5 conduct, which was unique. Never been tried before.

6 Q And did the NEO contemplate the terrorist attack that ultimately ensued?

7 A I don't -- again, I did not see the NEO plan. But certainly the security  
8 concerns were paramount for us, no question.

9 Q So I want to go back to my question. How adequate do you believe the  
10 planning and preparation was?

11 A I believe that the fact that we were able to safely get all of our diplomats out  
12 of Afghanistan and 120,000 people out of Afghanistan in a circumstance that had no  
13 precedent in history, where we occupied only an airport, for nearly 2 weeks, while  
14 surrounded by an enemy, was a genuine accomplishment.

15 Q So I'd like to go back to exhibit 19, which is the State Department's publicly  
16 released and unclassified after-action review, or AAR, dated March 2022, that was  
17 entered by my minority colleagues.

18 If you could please direct your attention to page 12 in the "Findings" section.

19 [REDACTED]. I see actually that we're running out of time, so we may have to  
20 come back to this question so we don't go over. I'm going to stop the clock.

21 Go off the record.

22 [Discussion off the record.]

23 [REDACTED]. We're back on the record.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q So you had previously testified that, in effect, your job role is a minister

1 without a portfolio.

2 Is that correct?

3 A Uh-huh. Yes.

4 Q You also previously testified that when you assumed your current role in  
5 January of 2021, you were juggling the jobs of many individuals who were awaiting  
6 confirmation.

7 Is that correct?

8 A Correct.

9 Q And at that time you were focused, in part, on Afghanistan policy.

10 Is that correct?

11 A Correct.

12 Q And that focus on Afghanistan policy decreased in April in part because that  
13 work was then being taken on by subject matter experts who had received confirmation.

14 Is that correct?

15 A Correct.

16 Q And so those individuals had expertise in Afghanistan policy, correct?

17 A Well, they were responsible for aspects of the Afghanistan policy.

18 Q And were qualified to conduct such work, correct?

19 A Absolutely, yeah.

20 Q Okay.

21 Did you have any concerns that any issues were not being attended to related to  
22 Afghanistan by people whose job it was to cover those issues?

23 A No.

24 Q What informs that opinion?

25 A There was no shortage of meetings, work being done on these issues. And

1 I had high confidence in the team that was built to work on these issues.

2 Q And you, likewise, had confidence in the Secretary at that time related to  
3 Afghanistan policy?

4 A Of course. Yes.

5 Q And he was, likewise, involved in robust and regular meetings, correct?

6 A Yes.

7 Q And are you aware during the NEO itself how many hours people were  
8 working related to Afghanistan policy specifically?

9 A It was nearly every waking hour of every day.

10 Q And why was that?

11 A Because of the magnitude of the task and then the dedication the people  
12 put into the effort.

13 Q And in your professional opinion, do you believe that State Department  
14 officials rose to the task?

15 A No question about it.

16 Q What informs that opinion?

17 A Many colleagues who ran to the fire, who volunteered to put themselves in  
18 harm's way to try to help execute on what was truly a unique and historic effort to  
19 evacuate over 120,000 folks out of Afghanistan.

20 The tireless efforts that, by the way, continue to this day, to continue to try to get  
21 people who wish to leave Afghanistan out of Afghanistan. And despite the fact that we  
22 have no embassy there, we're still able to do that.

23 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q And I just have one quick issue to follow up on from your earlier testimony.

1 And I appreciate you've been here voluntarily today, and I don't want to belabor  
2 anything, but I do want to get some clarity from you.

3 You had an exchange with our colleagues on the majority side in which the  
4 questions you were asked alluded to U.S. policy on Afghanistan becoming "Kabul-centric."

5 Do you recall those exchanges?

6 A Yes.

7 Q And I believe your testimony in response to that term was to note that the  
8 preponderance of USG personnel in 2021 were stationed in Kabul, obviously, the Afghan  
9 Government at the time was stationed in Kabul, and that it made sense for the  
10 Department to focus on issues related to Kabul accordingly.

11 Is that an accurate summary?

12 A Yes.

13 Q I want to go back -- and I'm sorry, I don't remember which exhibit number is.  
14 Maybe someone can help me. The --

15 [REDACTED]. Unclassified exhibit?

16 [REDACTED]. No, the testimony of Brian McKeon, the excerpt that we gave you  
17 from his --

18 [REDACTED]. Exhibit No. 4.

19 [REDACTED]. Thank you.

20 BY [REDACTED]:

21 Q So you went over a portion of that testimony on page 13 with my colleague  
22 already, but I wanted to zero back in on page -- sorry. Well, he was asked about when  
23 he first became involved with work related to the Afghanistan withdrawal on page 13.

24 A Yeah.

25 Q Do you see that?

1 A Yes.

2 Q And he spoke of the division of labor between you and he. And then he  
3 says, starting on the paragraph that begins, "I worked on --":

4 "I worked on how we would continue to provide foreign assistance. If the  
5 Taliban started to control areas within Afghanistan, you know, could we be able to  
6 continue to provide assistance to people in those districts?

7 "I was lead on the SIV issue and the anticipated flow of refugees out of  
8 Afghanistan if the Taliban started taking over parts of the country; and then how we were  
9 going to secure Embassy Kabul after the U.S. military withdrawal and thinking about the  
10 possible need to evacuate the embassy and ultimately evacuate the country."

11 Do you recall that portion of his testimony that we discussed previously?

12 A Yes.

13 Q So is it accurate that at that time, in 2021, even though the Department, as  
14 you testified previously, was focused on the safety of its personnel and its engagement  
15 with the Afghan Government directly in Kabul, the U.S. Government and the  
16 State Department were also involved in many issues and activities across the country?

17 A Absolutely, yes.

18 Q And that, in fact, there was an effort underway, led by Brian McKeon, per his  
19 testimony, to figure out how to continue such foreign assistance post-U.S. military  
20 withdrawal?

21 A Yes.

22 Q And is it your recollection that U.S. Government foreign assistance had been  
23 provided to areas beyond Kabul for a long time?

24 A Oh, yes.

25 Q Can you describe a little bit more?

1           A    Again, never having been on the ground to administer said assistance, but  
2 we sought to try to get assistance to anyone, to those in need. And included to try to  
3 find ways even today without a presence on the ground to work with international  
4 organizations to provide assistance and support programming inside Afghanistan.

5           Q    Okay. And Mr. McKeon noted in his testimony that he was also lead on SIV  
6 and refugee issues that related to conditions that may develop in other parts of the  
7 country beyond Kabul, correct?

8           A    Correct.

9           Q    And that even the effort to secure U.S. Embassy people and potentially  
10 evacuate people from Kabul included planning for the, quote, "possible need to evacuate  
11 the embassy and ultimately evacuate the country"?

12          A    Uh-huh. Correct.

13          Q    Okay. So is it fair to say that USG policy at the time was not Kabul-centric?

14          A    That's fair, yes.

15          ██████████. Okay.

16          That concludes our round. Thank you.

17          Off the record.

18          [Discussion off the record.]

19          ██████████. Go back on the record.

20          BY ██████████:

21          Q    Counselor, I believe where we last left off was reference to exhibit 19, the  
22 State Department's publicly released and unclassified after-action review. That was  
23 entered by my minority colleagues.

24                So if you could please direct your attention to page 12 in the "Findings" section,  
25 bullet point 9 in particular.

1           Here bullet point 9 in the "Findings" states, quote, "U.S. military planning for a  
2 possible NEO had been underway with post for some time, but the Department's  
3 participation in the NEO planning process was hindered by the fact that it was unclear  
4 who in the Department had the lead."

5           Why was this unclear?

6           A    I don't know. I mean, I didn't write the AAR, so I don't know the basis for  
7 the assessment. But I accept it.

8           Q    So based on your assessment, who did have the lead in the Department for  
9 the NEO planning?

10          A    I would've thought that it would've been some combination of Brian McKeon  
11 and Carol Perez. But since I wasn't deeply involved in the NEO planning, it's important  
12 that the AAR made this assessment so we can get it right moving forward.

13          Q    Did Secretary Blinken ever communicate to you who had the lead on this  
14 issue?

15          A    I don't recall being part of a conversation to that effect.

16          Q    If you look to the next bullet point, bullet point 10 of the AAR, and  
17 specifically its findings, it states, "A major challenge for the NEO planning was  
18 that" -- sorry -- "A major challenge facing NEO planning was determining the scale and  
19 scope of the operation, especially when it came to how many at-risk Afghan nationals  
20 would be included, how they would be prioritized, and how long their evacuation might  
21 take.

22                "Senior administration officials had not made clear decisions regarding the  
23 universe of at-risk Afghans to be included by the time the operation started nor had they  
24 determined where those Afghans would be taken. That added significantly to the  
25 challenges the Department and DoD faced during the evacuation."

1           Why did it take so long to make these decisions?

2           A     Well, again, I can only speculate what was behind this recommendation  
3 because I wasn't part of the process to produce it, although I accept it.

4           And just based on my observations made during the evacuation, where there  
5 were many different groups that would get the attention of someone in Washington,  
6 whether a Member of Congress or an official in the administration or a celebrity or what  
7 have you, who were able to get folks' attention to try to get on a list to get in the -- into  
8 the airport.

9           And some of that, from where I sat, sort of observing all this, was clearly made up  
10 on the go, which did not make for an efficient process.   Nevertheless, we were able to  
11 work through a lot of that in real time, as inefficient as that may have been, to get folks to  
12 safety.

13          Q     When was the universe of at-risk Afghans defined and by whom?

14          A     Well, I don't know, since I wasn't directly involved in this, if there was just a  
15 set universe of at-risk Afghans.   I mean, there were clearly people who had worked with  
16 us, SIVs, people who had been recipients in programming.   There were various lists that  
17 I know that the embassy in Kabul had kept.

18          But I don't know if there was a set at-risk list.   But I certainly can tell you that  
19 during the evacuation that list was added to as new people came onto our radar.

20          Q     How did the Department determine which Afghan populations were eligible  
21 for evacuation and what documentation was acceptable?

22          A     I really can't speak to that because I wasn't a part of that process.

23          Q     Who was responsible for defining the universe of at-risk Afghans?

24          A     I do not know the answer to that.   Whether it was a single individual or a  
25 group of people, I'm not sure.

1 Q Let me reframe.

2 Was the State Department responsible for defining the universe of at-risk  
3 Afghans?

4 A The State Department had a responsibility, but I don't know if it was solely  
5 responsible. I confess, I think in some of these groups, there might've been a broader  
6 White House decision on a group.

7 Certain categories, I'm sure, were kind of clearly established. As I said, people  
8 with affiliation with us, SIVs, locally employed staff and dependents, people who  
9 participated in U.S. programs over the years. But many, many more people came onto  
10 our radar as the evacuation proceeded.

11 Q Do you recall if the White House ever defined what that group would be?

12 A I don't recall.

13 Q Can you please walk us through your involvement and role in the emergency  
14 evacuation?

15 A So as I mentioned earlier, I didn't have a particular line authority or  
16 operational responsibility. There were various tasks that would come up given just the  
17 overwhelming magnitude of work that needed to be done and was being done.

18 So whether it was making a phone call when needed to a foreign counterpart or  
19 working with a colleague in Washington to try to problem-solve, there was any number of  
20 things. But there wasn't a specific task that I had during the evacuation.

21 Q You previously noted, when making reference to sort of the difficult  
22 situation on the ground during the evacuation -- and please feel free to correct me if I'm  
23 misstating anything -- being surrounded by our enemies. Is that correct?

24 A Correct.

25 Q Do you have knowledge or insight into why the U.S. chose not to take

1 security control of Kabul during the evacuation and instead allow the Taliban to do so?

2 A I don't. But I don't recall ever hearing that there was a discussion of trying  
3 to fight the Taliban off from taking Kabul. But I wasn't in those discussions.

4 Q So you're not aware of any discussions in which the United States offered  
5 the opportunity to take security control of Kabul?

6 A I was -- I had been made aware after the fact that there was discussions,  
7 that -- well, that there had been -- that issue had been raised. But I wasn't part of those  
8 discussions at the time, and I only heard about it actually by reading about it in books or  
9 the press. I can't remember which.

10 Q So you can't recall how you were made aware of it?

11 A Well, I know at the time I was not aware of it. I don't recall whether it was  
12 a press article or a book that's been written since where I was made aware of it, but I  
13 don't have the ability to validate that beyond just what I've read.

14 Q So no one in the Department, or more broadly the administration, made you  
15 aware of it since, directly?

16 A No, not that I'm aware of.

17 Q When did the U.S. secure agreements from foreign countries to serve as lily  
18 pads for an evacuation of a large number of Afghans?

19 A So to the best of my recollection, those were done in the -- after we had  
20 made the decision to begin the substantial evacuation of civilians from Afghanistan  
21 beyond just American citizens and our diplomatic personnel.

22 Q So just so I'm understanding correctly, did this happen after the Taliban had  
23 taken control of Kabul?

24 A I believe so, but I can't remember specifically if any agreement had been  
25 forged before.

1 I recall during the evacuation there was some very quick work done to forge these  
2 agreements. And thankfully we got cooperation from some great partners to help  
3 enable us to do this.

4 Q You had mentioned planning that ensued prior to August of 2021 and that  
5 the planning for a NEO is always a reality --

6 A Yeah.

7 Q -- correct, that the Department plans for?

8 Why was it not until after the Taliban took over that the Department was able to  
9 secure these lily pads?

10 A Well, I think, again, the thought was that there would be more time, I mean,  
11 that we -- no one saw the rapid collapse of the Afghan Government. The intelligence  
12 community didn't see it, the U.S. military didn't see it, and our diplomats didn't see it.

13 But there had been discussions, to my understanding, is that had been sort of  
14 started, but nothing had been solidified until the evacuation was underway, and the  
15 decision taken to really go beyond the NEO and conduct this massive evacuation of  
16 non-Americans from Afghanistan that would, therefore, require a system of these lily  
17 pads to help vet individuals, ensure they had the proper paperwork to be eligible to come  
18 to the United States.

19 Q So I want to refer back to --

20 [Audio playing in room.]

21 [REDACTED]. Go off the record.

22 [Discussion off the record.]

23 [REDACTED]. Let's go back on the record. I'll start the clock.

24 BY [REDACTED]:

25 Q So I want to go back to what the majority entered as exhibit 5, the

1 unclassified "Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," dated April  
2 9th, 2021.

3 And in that second page, in the subsection titled "Afghanistan," we previously  
4 read a portion of the report which stated, "We assess that prospects for a peace deal  
5 remain low during the next year. The Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield,  
6 and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition  
7 withdraws support. Kabul continues to face setbacks on the battlefield, and the Taliban  
8 is confident it can achieve military victory."

9 This was dated April 9th, 2021, and you just testified to the fact that no one saw  
10 this, we thought we had more time.

11 So how can you -- can you -- it would be helpful to us if you could please reconcile,  
12 to the best of your abilities, statements that were provided by ODNI in April 2021 and to  
13 what you were seeing within the Department, obviously understanding that we're in an  
14 unclassified space.

15 A Well, again, this doesn't put a time frame on it. It just says the Taliban is  
16 confident it can achieve military victory.

17 To the best of my recollection -- and I know there's been public testimony to this  
18 effect by other senior officials -- that no one saw the rapid collapse of the Afghan  
19 Government in August of '21.

20 There was no question the Afghan forces were facing setbacks on the battlefield.  
21 But switching to my personal opinion at the time, because I remember thinking at the  
22 time that it was likely that even if the battlefield situation continued to get worse, that  
23 Kabul and the vicinity of Kabul would remain in control of the Afghan Government,  
24 because I assessed -- it turns out wrongly -- that there was a core of ANSF that were  
25 capable enough that would at least defend Kabul. Turned out to be wrong.

1 Q So if I'm understanding correctly, you noted the rapid collapse, sort of  
2 this -- sort of the adjective defining that.

3 Was its ultimate collapse -- Afghanistan's ultimate collapse -- contemplated,  
4 though, or foreseeable?

5 A Foreseeable when?

6 Q I think that's the question.

7 A I mean, it was always -- it was always -- that prospect was always out there,  
8 but of course we wanted to try to prevent that from happening.

9 And the hope was, first of all, that there could be a negotiated settlement. And  
10 my recollection is, even in early August, before the collapse, the rapid collapse of the  
11 situation in Kabul, there was still the thought that Ambassador Khalilzad and his team  
12 could try one last try at a negotiation before the deadline of September 11th to withdraw  
13 troops.

14 Q And I'm truly just trying to better understand, because it sounds, based on  
15 sort of your testimony and what we've learned in the course of the investigation, it  
16 doesn't sound like it was a matter of if it would fall but a matter of when. Is that  
17 correct?

18 A That's -- that was not my impression at the time. As I said earlier, I thought  
19 that there could be -- there was reasonable chance that the Kabul area and its vicinity  
20 would be held by the Afghan -- our Afghan partners. But I was not expecting it, and I  
21 don't know anyone of my colleagues who was expecting the rapid collapse in August of  
22 2021 when Ghani fled town.

23 Q And you mentioned negotiated settlement. It's something that you've  
24 referenced multiple times in terms of Ambassador Khalilzad's sort of -- I don't want to say  
25 last-ditch efforts -- but in those sort of last moments prior to Afghanistan's collapse in

1 August.

2 What did those efforts entail? I'm just -- I'm trying to understand. Because the  
3 Doha Agreement -- the President had announced the Go-to-Zero order on April 14th,  
4 2021. What did Ambassador Khalilzad's efforts entail? What do you mean by  
5 "negotiated settlement"?

6 A Well, my impression -- again, you'd have to ask him about the details of what  
7 his efforts were -- but that there was still a hope that because the Taliban wanted to have  
8 a relationship with the United States, and it wanted to have support from the  
9 international community, that they would accept some sort of negotiated outcome.

10 So there was a view that it was worth having one last attempt to do that. That  
11 was what Khalilzad was embarking upon in early August before the rapid collapse of  
12 Kabul began.

13 Q It was a negotiated outcome outside of the Doha Agreement?

14 A Again, I can't recall specifically. I mean, it was -- it would've been, I guess,  
15 an addition to the Doha Agreement. I don't recall specifically how it would've  
16 been related to the Doha Agreement.

17 Q Do you believe that the Department effectively insulated contingency  
18 planning and emergency preparedness from the administration's politics? Or political  
19 priorities?

20 A I -- so could you elaborate on the question? I don't really follow.

21 Q Of course.

22 So, as you've noted, sort of the ultimate decisionmaker here on issues pertaining  
23 to Afghanistan would be the Commander in Chief, President Biden. The Department has  
24 its jurisdiction aside. There are career employees that have its priorities and issues that  
25 are relevant to it, including the security and safety of its employees.

1           Do you believe the Department effectively insulated -- so separated or  
2 distinguished or protected -- its contingency planning and emergency preparedness from  
3 the administration's political priorities?

4           A     Yes, I believe that was insulated from what I can see.

5           Q     Ambassador Bass was sent to Afghanistan around mid to late August 2021,  
6 correct?

7           A     That sounds right.

8           Q     Why was he sent there?

9           A     To the best of my recollection, there was a bandwidth issue, that just given  
10 the task that we had taken on, which, again, was beyond a NEO, because it was beyond  
11 just getting American citizens and diplomats and other personnel out of Afghanistan, and  
12 the magnitude of the coordination that was required, it made good sense to have  
13 someone senior to go out to the field to help augment our efforts there.

14          Q     Was the Ambassador sent to Kabul by Department leadership due to  
15 concerns surrounding Ambassador Wilson's capability to conduct the evacuation?

16          A     I never heard those concerns raised.

17          Q     So you're not aware of any concerns conveyed by members of the  
18 Department leadership about Ambassador Wilson's capabilities?

19          A     Not at the time.   And only since have I read reports, which I don't know if  
20 they're believed to be true, of people having concerns.   But I never heard them at the  
21 time.

22          Q     Thank you.

23                Do you believe Ambassador Wilson was fit for the job of chief of mission during  
24 the Afghanistan evacuation?

25          A     I do.

1 Q And why is that?

2 A I had had experience working with him in previous jobs we had, including as  
3 ambassador to Turkiye; I also think ambassador to one of the Stans -- in the Caucasus,  
4 Azerbaijan; and found him to be a very capable colleague.

5 Q And what did you understand to be the division of responsibility between  
6 Ambassador Wilson and Ambassador Bass?

7 A I confess that was not totally clear to me, because I wasn't there on the  
8 ground working it.

9 My impression was that Ross was more focused on engagement with the Afghan  
10 Government during that -- what was left of it, the remnants of the Afghan Government, I  
11 guess, during that time, whereas Bass was more about coordinating with the U.S. military  
12 colleagues and others on the ground. But I may be off about that.

13 Q Who did you understand to be in charge during the evacuation?

14 A In Kabul?

15 Q Uh-huh.

16 A Some combination of Bass and Wilson, and I don't know exactly how  
17 often they interacted. I assume they interacted all the time. I just don't know.

18 Q After the Taliban took over Kabul, did the Department ever press them to  
19 extend the withdrawal date beyond August 31st to facilitate evacuation?

20 A I don't recall the Department pressing anyone to do that, but there was  
21 certainly -- I remember a conversation about do you extend it further to allow more time  
22 for the evacuation to take place.

23 Q Did the Taliban issue threats to attack U.S. troops if we stayed past  
24 August 31st?

25 A The Taliban -- my recollection is, yes. And going back to what I said earlier,

1 they made threats basically since May 1st, all the way through, that we, in fact, were  
2 overstaying our welcome militarily and needed to leave.

3 Q So is it fair to say that the Taliban viewed the United States as having bound  
4 itself to the Doha Agreement?

5 A Like I said, the Taliban wanted the United States military out of Afghanistan,  
6 yes.

7 Q So they viewed the United States as having bound itself to the  
8 Doha Agreement?

9 A All I know is they wanted us out of Afghanistan whether -- they certainly  
10 signed the Doha Agreement with the previous administration and had watched U.S.  
11 troops leave prior to President Biden coming into office. And they definitely wanted us  
12 out of Afghanistan militarily and made it clear that if we did not leave, the war against the  
13 United States would resume in full force.

14 Q And did we view -- and by "we" being the United States, and more  
15 specifically the U.S. Government -- did we view ourselves as being bound by the  
16 Doha Agreement?

17 A We did not want the war against the Taliban to resume, given that we had  
18 2,500 -- and by August, it was fewer than 2,500 -- troops in Afghanistan. So it would've  
19 meant adding troops back into Afghanistan.

20 Q And last question, I promise, on this variation.

21 Did we view the Taliban as having bound themselves to the Doha Agreement?

22 A At which point in time? Throughout the whole -- the Taliban wanted us out  
23 of Afghanistan militarily. Wanted us to stay diplomatically, wanted us out militarily.

24 Q So let me reframe that question because of course that was one component  
25 of the Doha Agreement, but we've already gone through the other components of the

1 Doha Agreement, the various conditions, one of which was ceasing attacks on U.S. troops,  
2 and the others which we addressed, such as, for example, cutting ties with terrorist  
3 groups.

4 So I don't want to go through all of that again in the interest of time, but I just  
5 want to go back to my -- the question.

6 Did we view the Taliban as having bound itself to the Doha Agreement, not just  
7 the withdrawal date, the agreement itself in full?

8 A I think the Taliban's actions were irrespective of the Doha Agreement,  
9 particularly by the time of the evacuation. I mean, they were clearly taking the fight to  
10 the Afghan forces, our partners.

11 [Chollet Exhibit No. 21  
12 was marked for identification.]

13 [REDACTED]. So I'd like to introduce exhibit 21 into the record. This is an  
14 article titled, "State Department: Thousands of U.S. Residents Still Stuck in  
15 Afghanistan," published in Foreign Policy on Wednesday, November 3rd, 2021.

16 Have you previously read this article?

17 Counselor Chollet. I don't recall.

18 [REDACTED]. So this is an excerpt thereof. I should've mentioned that.

19 So I'd like to direct your attention to the first paragraph on the first page.

20 So it looks like a page in there is missing, so I'll just go right ahead to the question,  
21 because it wouldn't be fair to make reference to that without having that page there.

22 What efforts did the State Department make to identify the number of Americans  
23 in Afghanistan in 2021 prior to August?

24 Counselor Chollet. So, again, not directly involved in those efforts, but certainly  
25 there was an effort to contact American citizens. I mean, those -- obviously there are

1 those who had registered with the embassy, but there were a large number of people  
2 who did not. Some of those were perhaps known to us. Some of them only became  
3 known to us when they expressed an interest in leaving.

4 [Chollet Exhibit No. 22  
5 was marked for identification.]

6 [REDACTED]. And I'd like to introduce exhibit 22 next. This is an excerpt of a  
7 transcript of remarks by Secretary Blinken, dated August 15th, 2023. I'd like to direct  
8 your attention to the top of page 9, the second line.

9 Here Secretary Blinken says, "And as you know, we brought back virtually all of the  
10 American citizens who said they wanted to depart in the course of the withdrawal, and  
11 that effort continued well after and continues to this day, and I believe some 900 or so  
12 additional American citizens who have told us at one point or another that they wanted  
13 to leave, we've made sure could get home."

14 Exactly how many Americans who had said they wished to depart were left behind  
15 in Afghanistan at the end of August 2021?

16 Counselor Chollet. I don't know the specific number, although in the previous  
17 exhibit you just offered, which was from November, we have Brian McKeon saying that  
18 there were 289 U.S. citizens remaining there as of whenever that was, November of 2021.

19 [REDACTED]. Of course. The reason I ask is that there's this distinction  
20 drawn between Americans who wanted to leave versus Americans who didn't want to  
21 leave. So I just want to better understand how many Americans, if you're able to  
22 answer this question, had wanted to depart but were left behind at the end of August  
23 2021?

24 Counselor Chollet. I don't have that number in front of me -- or to my  
25 knowledge.

1 [Chollet Exhibit No. 23  
2 was marked for identification.]

3 BY [REDACTED]:

4 Q So I'd like to introduce exhibit 23 next. This is an excerpt of a transcript of  
5 an interview President Joe Biden gave to ABC News' George Stephanopoulos on  
6 August 18th, 2021. I'd like to direct your attention to what is marked page 6, beginning  
7 with the sentence that starts below the image.

8 Here Stephanopoulos asks President Biden, "All troops are supposed to be out by  
9 August 31st. Even if Americans and our Afghan allies are still trying to get out, they're  
10 going to leave?"

11 To which President Biden responds, "We're going to do everything in our power to  
12 get all Americans out and our allies out."

13 To which Stephanopoulos asks, "Does that mean troops will stay beyond  
14 August 31st if necessary?"

15 President Biden responds, "It depends on where we are and whether we can  
16 get -- ramp these numbers up to 5,000 to 7,000 a day coming out. If that's the case we'll  
17 be -- they'll all be out."

18 He is then asked by Stephanopoulos, "Because we've got, like, 10,000 to 15,000  
19 Americans in the country right now, right? And are you committed to making sure that  
20 the troops stay until every American who wants to be out --"

21 To which President Biden responds, "Yes."

22 Stephanopoulos proceeds with, "-- is out?"

23 President Biden responds again, "Yes."

24 Stephanopoulos then asks, "How about our Afghan allies? We have about  
25 80,000 people --"

1 President Biden then states, "Well, that's not the --"

2 Stephanopoulos then asks, "Is that too high?"

3 President Biden states, "That's too high."

4 President Biden then continues, stating, "The estimate we're giving is somewhere  
5 between 50,000, 65,000 folks total, counting their families."

6 Stephanopoulos then asks, "Does the commitment hold for them as well?"

7 President Biden responds, "The commitment holds to get everyone out that, in  
8 fact, we can get out and everyone that should come out. And that's the objective.  
9 That's what we're doing now, that's the path we're on. And I think we'll get there."

10 Stephanopoulos then asks, "So Americans should understand that troops might  
11 have to be there beyond August 31st?"

12 President Biden states, "No. Americans should understand that we're going to  
13 try to get it done before August 31st."

14 President Biden is then asked, "But if we don't, the troops will stay --"

15 To which President Biden responds, "If we don't, we'll determine at the time  
16 who's left."

17 And he follows up with, "And if you're American force -- if there's American  
18 citizens left, we're going to stay to get them all out."

19 Did the State Department consider President Biden's vow or assurance that U.S.  
20 troops would stay until all American citizens were evacuated to be a statement of U.S.  
21 policy and thus a directive to the State Department?

22 A Well, again, at this -- at the time of this interview, August 19th, we were still  
23 11 days -- 12 days from the end of the month. So we were still working day and night to  
24 get every American out.

25 The President made a decision to leave on August 31st. And after that date the

1 State Department continued to work tirelessly to get people out of Afghanistan -- first  
2 and foremost Americans but not exclusively, also SIVs and others -- as quickly as possible.  
3 And that's an effort that remains to this day.

4 Q Drawing back to exhibit 22, namely, Secretary Blinken's -- the excerpt of  
5 Secretary Blinken's remarks dated August 15th, 2023 -- so that would've been this  
6 year -- he stated, "I believe some 900 or so additional American citizens who have told us  
7 at one point or another that they wanted to leave we've made sure to get home."

8 Just to confirm, per Secretary Blinken's August 15th, 2023, statement, Americans  
9 were, indeed, left behind, correct?

10 A I'm not sure at what point or another he's referring to there, so I don't -- I  
11 can't put a time frame on this exactly.

12 Q But Americans were left in Afghanistan, correct, based on that number that  
13 was provided?

14 A Clearly some were still there, but also I know some left, and then they went  
15 back, so --

16 Q Can you say with certainty that every American who wanted to get out got  
17 out?

18 A I cannot say that.

19 Q So would you say that President Biden did not uphold his promise to the  
20 American people?

21 A No. I think I would say President Biden has been -- was holding that  
22 promise over the last 2 and a half years, since August 31st, by continuing to get those  
23 Americans, those few Americans left, if there are any, and non-Americans out of  
24 Afghanistan even though we do not have an embassy currently there.

25 Q And how many SIV applicants were left behind in Afghanistan at the end of

1 August 2021?

2 A I do not know the specific number.

3 Q Are you aware of how many SIV-eligible Afghans were left behind in  
4 Afghanistan at the end of August 2021?

5 A I do not know.

6 Q How about more broadly, the number of Afghan allies who were left behind  
7 at the end of August 2021?

8 A I do not know.

9 Q Are you aware of how many Afghan allies and former Afghan Government  
10 officials were killed by the Taliban after the end of August 2021?

11 A I don't know.

12 Q Looking back on Afghanistan, is there anything you think you could or should  
13 have done differently?

14 A Oh, life is full of things you should have done differently. But as I said  
15 earlier, given the challenges on our agenda right now and for the last 2 and a half years,  
16 everything looks a lot harder if we were still fighting the war in Afghanistan.

17 BY [REDACTED]:

18 Q Sir, just a couple of questions from me. And this is going back a little ways,  
19 but understanding your sort of 15 percent involvement with Afghanistan stuff --

20 A Ish.

21 Q -- after April. And that's a rough percentage.

22 A Ish. Very rough.

23 Q How involved were you in the planning for Embassy Kabul to operate  
24 without a U.S. military presence?

25 A Not, as I said, not directly involved, but certainly cognizant of the general

1 status of that planning.

2 Q And I think you had testified, but please correct me if I'm wrong, that that  
3 planning was indicating, I mean, this was a very difficult and challenging prospect with a  
4 fairly low likelihood of success, is what I believe you might've said.

5 A Yeah.

6 Q But I'd love an opportunity for you to correct that. Maybe that's not right.

7 A Well, challenging and difficult, yes. I mean, we believed that the plan that  
8 had been agreed upon, that was in the process of being implemented prior to the  
9 collapse of the government in August, was viable and could work.

1 [3:54 p.m.]

2 BY [REDACTED]:

3 Q Okay. Was viable but maybe not a high likelihood of success, just this could  
4 work?

5 A No, there was confidence in the plan.

6 Q Okay.

7 I understand maybe the confidence and, perhaps, hindsight 2020, now knowing  
8 that the Afghan Government would collapse as fast as it did, that may impact this. But  
9 prior to that, what was driving the focus and effort for what was a very difficult and  
10 challenging plan? That still viable, you know, was proven so difficult to attack?

11 A Well, again, the biggest challenge was how to execute certain functions  
12 without the U.S. military in Afghan given just the logistical spying and the security  
13 element of the U.S. military there.

14 Q Right.

15 A So that's a huge challenge. We faced it in Iraq in 2011. We were facing it  
16 in Afghanistan. And perhaps because of the fact we were able to maintain a presence in  
17 Iraq after withdrawal of U.S. forces there in 2011, we thought that we could do this in  
18 Kabul. And I think we could have had the Afghan Government not fallen.

19 So that -- but that was the challenge. And the question, to my mind, was just,  
20 you know, could we ensure that we had the necessary resources because it was going to  
21 require a whole new set of resources for the State Department, not the Defense  
22 Department, to be able to execute this mission.

23 Q You had also mentioned, in response to my colleague's question, that  
24 Ambassador Khalilzad had made a last-ditch, or sort of, maybe a last-minute effort at the  
25 beginning of August to try and secure a sort of negotiated settlement. Is that correct?

1           A    Correct.

2           Q    At that point in time, were you aware of any sort of information that had  
3 changed the calculus, that had moved this towards we might be in a worse position at the  
4 start of August than we thought we had been, but prior to the week leading up to sort of  
5 the NEO and immediate emergency?

6           A    So could you reframe your question?

7           Q    Yes.

8           The efforts at the beginning of August by Ambassador Khalilzad, if described as  
9 sort of a last-ditch negotiated settlement effort, why were they last-ditch at maybe the  
10 start of August? What were you starting to see, or what was the State Department  
11 starting to see that made that last ditch?

12          A    Well, we were coming to the end of the timeline to withdraw troops.  
13 Remember, we had already passed the original timeline, May 1st.

14          Q    Right.

15          A    So the Taliban was making it clear to us that we were on borrowed time in  
16 terms of, you know, they never accepted the fact we -- they never agreed to us staying  
17 beyond May 1st, and they were making it clear, my understanding, to our military  
18 commanders, that as long as you are in retrograde and you are leaving, we will not start  
19 shooting you.

20          Although, the military was quite concerned about that so, therefore, they were  
21 quite efficient about trying to get out of Afghanistan.

22          But knowing that that final deadline was approaching in early September, there  
23 was a thought. Let's use this time left while the military is still there to try to see if we  
24 can have someone -- one last negotiated -- well, I shouldn't say last, because maybe it  
25 wouldn't be the last, but let's make a final diplomatic push before that inflection point of

1 the military deadline for withdrawal.

2 Q And would you say the last diplomatic push ended up being the last, but this  
3 new diplomatic push was in an effort to execute the plan of an embassy in Kabul open  
4 without U.S. military support?

5 A No. It was separate from that. This was -- I mean, this was about, can we  
6 find some negotiated settlement and, you know, lasting political solution to governance  
7 in Afghanistan. The U.S. Embassy was separate completely from the U.S. Embassy  
8 support effort.

9 Q Okay.

10 And you had also maybe testified earlier that while the Taliban was making some  
11 military gains throughout the spring and summer time frame of 2021, that Ambassador  
12 Khalilzad had made it clear to them that this would not advance their interest for  
13 diplomatic relations with the U.S. Is that a fair characterization?

14 A That's my understanding, yes.

15 Q So taking that into account, was the consideration of diplomatic relations  
16 with the Taliban a part of the calculus for maintaining an embassy presence in Kabul  
17 without a U.S. military support?

18 A Sorry. Us? Could you rephrase the question?

19 Q Yes.

20 Was the desire to have, from the Taliban, a desire to have diplomatic relations  
21 with the U.S., was that part of the calculus informing the effort to keep an embassy open  
22 in Kabul without U.S. military support?

23 A No. I mean, of course, we were still not -- we were not conceding that the  
24 Taliban would take over Afghanistan.

25 Q Of course not.

1           A    And we would have to have the face questions of how to relate with them,  
2 as we do today now that they're in charge and we don't have an embassy there.

3           So we were -- the decision to maintain an embassy and to ensure that that  
4 embassy was able to function safely and effectively was irrespective of what was  
5 happening on the political side of the negotiations that Khalilzad was leading.

6           Q    It strikes me that that would be interesting to keep those separate because,  
7 it does seem from where we're standing now anyway that those two are very intimately  
8 connected between sort of the political settlement and negotiations that Ambassador  
9 Khalilzad was working on, and the viability of the plan to maintain an open embassy  
10 without military support.

11           Can you help me understand why those two might be able to be separated in your  
12 eyes?

13           A    Well, because, again, we hadn't conceded the Taliban taking over, and so the  
14 idea was we could have some agreed-upon political settlement that would end the  
15 underlying issues surrounding the Afghan civil war.

16           But all throughout we thought it would take months and months, perhaps years  
17 for that negotiation to unfold. So in the meantime, we're going to have a diplomatic  
18 presence there to work with the Afghan Government that's in power and help provide for  
19 citizen services and provide humanitarian assistance and continue to work with the  
20 Afghan Government.

21           Q    So I'll ask this question, which will get back to my colleague's sort of open  
22 opportunity for you to speak, too, which is it possible that in this very intense planning  
23 operation, and considering all of the complex calculus which we don't have time to delve  
24 into today, that there was an aspect of looking to Iraq and looking to past situations and  
25 understanding efforts made diplomatically to address some of the political shortfalls that

1 maybe Ambassador Khalilzad was attempting to address, that all of this led to maybe an  
2 opportunity or, rather, a situation where the State Department was blinded to what  
3 might be unfolding?

4 A Well, again, to be clear, I know of no intelligence analysis --

5 Q Right.

6 A -- military analysis, diplomatic analysis that predicted the rapid collapse of  
7 Kabul in August of '21.

8 Q So you wouldn't say that some of these efforts maybe created a situation  
9 where there was tunnel vision for the State Department?

10 A Our desire to keep an embassy in Kabul?

11 Q Yes.

12 A No. We were hoping that conditions would allow for us to maintain an  
13 embassy in Kabul. The question was how one would do that without the U.S. military  
14 there. Of course, conditions did not allow that, which is why to this day we do not have  
15 an embassy in Kabul.

16 Q And that's where I want to tie back into my colleague's question, which is  
17 now, as we sit here in hindsight of 2020, are there aspects of the planning process that  
18 would you like to identify now on the record that would have been better had they been  
19 done differently or that you would have adjusted now knowing what we know?

20 A Look, I think we've spoken earlier about the AAR, and I think there are a lot  
21 of good ideas in the AAR, ideas like legitimate criticisms of the process, not just the  
22 process in the 150 some days of the Obama administration and its tenure here but the  
23 process leading back to the previous administration about how this was conducted.

24 We have endeavored to implement many of the lessons learned and particularly  
25 when it comes to embassy security, messaging to American citizens in areas of conflict.

1 And whether that was Kyiv or Addis Ababa or Khartoum or Tel Aviv recently, we have  
2 applied those lessons in thinking through how to ensure that we can get Americans and  
3 those we work with out of harm's way if necessary.

4 Thankfully, even though in one of those cases, we pulled an embassy, in another  
5 one we pulled it for a while in Kyiv, but then we sent it back. And in one case,  
6 thankfully, in Tel Aviv, we didn't have to pull anything, but we have applied all of these  
7 lessons as best we've been able to in those situations since August 21st.

8 BY [REDACTED]:

9 Q And just to correct, by the last 150 days of the Obama administration, you  
10 mean the Biden administration?

11 A I'm sorry, I misspoke. Biden, yes. Thank you for correcting me.

12 Q No problem.

13 So as we're winding down, we have about a minute and a half to endeavor do get  
14 this done in a minute and a half. If not, I will follow up, but I just wanted to briefly touch  
15 upon your preparation for this interview.

16 How did you first learn of the committee's interest in conducting --

17 A I read about it in the press.

18 Q And what was your reaction?

19 A It was a little surprise, but welcomed the opportunity to do it.

20 Q And why were you surprised?

21 A Just because I read about it -- normally, I think a colleague would have given  
22 me a heads-up it was coming, but I read about it in the press. But as I said, I welcomed  
23 the opportunity to talk about this.

24 Q Fair enough.

25 And what kind of preparations did you take for this interview?

1 A Other than some time spent with my esteemed colleagues here, none.

2 Q On behalf of Chairman McCaul, we greatly appreciate your voluntary  
3 appearance today and engagement to the committee in answering our questions. We  
4 have more we could ask I feel like, which is always the case, but we understand it's  
5 getting late.

6 I want to provide you an opportunity -- I know my minority colleagues do as  
7 well -- for any closing remarks you may have.

8 A Well, just to say thank you for the seriousness of which you all conducted  
9 this. And as I said, you know, I'm sort of an amateur historian. I've written a lot of  
10 histories over the years, and I believe in the importance of us trying to understand fully  
11 what happened here in Afghanistan. That's why I fully support the work of the Afghan  
12 work mission because understanding the ups and the downs of four administrations, two  
13 Democrats, two Republicans, and the difficult journey we traveled in Afghanistan is  
14 critical for all of our interests moving forward.

15 So I applaud your efforts and wish you luck.

16 Q Thank you very much.

17 A Thank you.

18 [Recess.]

19 ██████████: So we're back on the record.

20 BY ██████████:

21 Q Thank you again for being here. Just a few very quick follow-up questions.

22 I just want to be crystal clear for the record. You answered a few questions in  
23 the prior round about negotiated settlement, and I wanted to be clear. When you use  
24 the term negotiated settlement, you're referring to an agreement that would be  
25 concluded between Afghans, correct?

1 A Correct.

2 Q Between the Taliban and other Afghan political leaders or actors?

3 A Correct.

4 Q Okay.

5 And is it accurate that the United States' policy has been to support, encourage,  
6 and pursue such a negotiated settlement, an intra-Afghan agreement for many years?

7 A Yes.

8 Q Can you tell a bit more about that effort?

9 A Well, again, I can't speak to what Ambassador Khalilzad and his team were  
10 up to prior to January 21st, 2021, but I know that he was involved in a very intensive set  
11 of negotiations. Obviously, that led to the Doha agreement in February of 2020, and  
12 then the follow on to the Doha agreement to try to find some political settlement in  
13 Afghanistan.

14 So that was the effort he continued on into the Biden administration.

15 Q So it's fair to say that pursuing such an intra-Afghan political settlement was  
16 a longstanding U.S. policy priority across the administration?

17 A Yes.

18 Q And was it also a priority of Embassy Kabul to support such work over  
19 several administrations?

20 A It certainly would have been a priority, yes.

21 Q But was it the sole purpose of Embassy Kabul?

22 A No, no.

23 Q So at any given time, whether or not there was progress toward a negotiated  
24 settlement, there would have been other reasons to maintain a diplomatic presence in  
25 the country?

1 A Absolutely. Absolutely.

2 Q Can you describe some of those reasons?

3 A Well, there is engaging with the government of Afghanistan. There is  
4 working, you know, on citizen services with U.S. citizens, with partners on the ground,  
5 administering humanitarian assistance, administering all the various programming the  
6 United States Government had put into place over the better part of 20 years to help  
7 build capacity inside Afghanistan, to support Afghan NGOs.

8 So it was one of -- it was either the second largest or the largest embassy in the  
9 world at that time. So there was a lot of missions for it to perform in addition to  
10 supporting political administrations.

11 Q So is it fair to say that the planning that you testified to that was ongoing in  
12 2021 to keep an embassy presence in Kabul, the purpose of that was to serve a multitude  
13 of --

14 A Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. It wasn't solely about the political  
15 negotiations.

16 Q And you also testified previously about the number of Americans that may  
17 have been in Kabul after August 31. I think you weren't able to necessarily speak with  
18 authority or to pinpoint such a number, but I just want to back up and get some context  
19 around that discussion.

20 Is it accurate for us to assume that State can only assist Americans who make  
21 themselves known to the Department and express the desire for assistance?

22 A Yes.

23 Q And would such an effort of making oneself known to a U.S. Embassy and  
24 requesting assistance, including potentially leave a country, would that be based on an  
25 individual's personal circumstances and personal calculations?

1 A Yes.

2 Q And I believe you testified to this previously, but is it possible that their  
3 personal calculations could change?

4 A Absolutely, and they did change.

5 Q So you are aware of instances --

6 A Yes.

7 Q -- where people's --

8 A Well, heard anecdotes about this. I don't know specific individuals but I  
9 know it's happened.

10 Q Okay.

11 So is it fair to say that the number of American citizens in a country at any given  
12 time, and in this case in Afghan, on any given date would have presumably been a  
13 dynamic number?

14 A Very.

15 Q And a number subject to change?

16 A Very.

17 Q And a number subject to variables or unknowns that the U.S. Government  
18 couldn't have been aware of?

19 A Yes.

20 Q Is it possible that a number that would have been quoted to you from a  
21 speech or an article in 2023 could have been entirely different than a number that we  
22 would have been aware of at a different moment in time?

23 A Yes.

24 Q Are you aware of travel warnings that the Department put out in 2021 to  
25 American citizens assessing the risks of staying in Afghanistan?

1 A Yes.

2 Q Can you describe your understanding of these?

3 A Yeah, I know that they -- I believe in March was when they began in earnest.  
4 There was -- I forget the exact number but there was -- it was a lot. I mean, more than  
5 one a month as I recall basically -- in very stark terms saying do not go to Afghanistan and  
6 get out of Afghanistan as long as there is commercial traffic available to you.

7 Q So is it fair to say that because of what we were speaking of earlier, that an  
8 individual's decision to leave or stay is based on personal calculations, and the U.S.  
9 Government doesn't control that --

10 A We can't force people to leave.

11 Q -- we, nevertheless, wanted to make an effort --

12 A Absolutely.

13 Q -- to warn people that --

14 A And warn people of the risks as we saw them and to offer our assistance in  
15 helping them to get out if they needed to, you know, get -- you know, help to travel.

16 Q Okay.

17 And I think you spoke to this previously, but again, just to be crystal clear for the  
18 record, you were asked questions about a commitment or a pledge or a comment about  
19 staying in Afghanistan until every last American had left, correct?

20 A I was asked questions --

21 Q You were asked questions --

22 A Yes.

23 Q -- about that?

24 A Yes.

25 Q And you just testified that at any given time we may not know the full

1 universe of Americans in a country at any given time?

2 A Correct. Although to be clear, we endeavor to have as accurate a number  
3 as we can.

4 Q Okay.

5 What do you assess would have happened had the administration revised its  
6 August 31st withdrawal date?

7 A I think we ran the risk, a much higher risk of getting in a shooting -- returning  
8 to a shooting war with the Taliban at a moment of maximum vulnerability for us, given  
9 that we were only at HKIA, and we had a very, very small military footprint, and there was  
10 an acute terrorist threat that we were facing as we saw so tragically with the Abbey Gate  
11 bombing.

12 Q So it's fair to say, in your estimation, that revising the August 31 deadline  
13 could have resulted in an increased risk to American personnel?

14 A Absolutely.

15 Q And American interest?

16 A Absolutely.

17 Q And American citizens?

18 A Absolutely.

19 Q Okay.

20 [REDACTED]. I think that's all we have. I apologize for using more than 5  
21 minutes.

22 Counselor Chollet. That's okay.

23 [REDACTED]. But thank you again for your testimony.

24 Counselor Chollet. Great.

25 [REDACTED]. We'll go off the record.

1 [Whereupon, at 4:14 p.m., the interview was concluded.]

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Certificate of Deponent/Interviewee

I have read the foregoing 185 pages, which contain the correct transcript of the answers made by me to the questions therein recorded. — *with errata attached.*



Witness Name

2/23/24

Date

**Errata Sheet for the Transcribed Interview of Derek Chollet**  
**dated 12/19/2024**

1) majority errata, (2) minority errata, (3) State/agency counsel , (4) private counsel (as applicable) and witness errata

Page	Line	Change	Reason
2	7	Change to [REDACTED]”	
2	8	Change to [REDACTED]”	
2	9	Change to [REDACTED]”	
16	2	Change “charge” to “chargé”	
35	24	Change "has a recollection" to "has no recollection"	
40	24	Change “Civil War” to “civil war”	
41	1	Change “Civil War” to “civil war”	
42	22	Change “operation allies refuge” to “Operation Allies Refuge”	
43	3	Change "experiences, specifically that related to your role as counselor, in terms of foreign policy or national security" to “experiences, specifically related to your role as counselor, that involved foreign policy”	
43	11	Clarify [nonverbal response.] to "Yes"	
43	22	Clarify [nonverbal response.] to "Yes"	
45	14	Change "point out you've " to “point out – you’ve”	
47	24	Strike “which are”	
48	24	Change "post" to "posts"	
54	16	Revise to "related to maintaining a counterterrorism"	
81	23	Change “followup” to “follow-up”	
93	23	Change "if it specifics" to "if it's not specifics"	
100	8	Change "heard" to "occurred"	
100	9	Change "agreements" to "disagreements"	
104, 124, 130, 139, 140		Regarding questions about his statement provided in the March 2021 “Heart of Asia” virtual conference which he did not recall attending, Counselor Chollet "since consulted [his] records and found that in fact [he] did not 'attend' this conference in-person, in real-time, but instead pre-recorded a short statement on behalf of Secretary Blinken, which was then shown at the conference without [his] attendance either virtually or in person, hence [his] then recollection of not 'attending' this conference during the interview."	

107	13	Change "17 are" to "17 is"	
108	9	Change "it does say" to "it also says"	
109	10	Change "continues" to "continued"	
123	7	Add "not" before "sharing a plan"	
135	13	Change "table" to "Kabul"	
135	25	Change “followup” to “follow-up”	
138	9	Change "There's two different ones" to "There are two different terms."	
149	3	Chane "back to" to "out of"	