

**Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken**  
**Opening Statement**  
**“Examining the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan”**  
**U.S. Senate**  
**Committee on Foreign Relations**  
**Washington, D.C.**  
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I welcome this opportunity to discuss our policy on Afghanistan – including where we are, how we got here, and where we’re going in the weeks and months ahead.

For 20 years, Congress has conducted oversight and provided funding for the mission in Afghanistan. I know from my time as a staff member for then-Senator Biden just how invaluable a partner Congress is. As I said when I was nominated, I believe strongly in Congress’s traditional role as a partner in foreign policy making and am committed to working with you on the path forward in Afghanistan and to advance the interests of the American people.

On this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9-11, as we honor the nearly 3,000 men, women, and children who lost their lives, we are reminded why we went to Afghanistan in the first place: to bring justice to those who attacked us and ensure it would never happen again. We achieved those objectives long ago. Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011. Al Qaeda’s capabilities were degraded significantly, including its ability to plan and conduct external operations. After 20 years, 2,461 American lives lost, 20,000 injuries, and two trillion dollars spent, it was time to end America’s longest war.

When President Biden took office in January, he inherited an agreement that his predecessor had reached with the Taliban to remove all remaining U.S. troops by May 1 of this year. As part of that agreement, the previous Administration pressed the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners – including some top war commanders. Meanwhile, it reduced our own force presence to 2,500 troops.

In return, the Taliban agreed to stop attacking U.S. and partner forces and to refrain from threatening Afghanistan’s major cities. But the Taliban continued its relentless march on remote outposts, checkpoints, villages, and districts, as well as the major roads connecting the cities.

By January 2021, the Taliban was in its strongest military position since 9-11 – and we had the smallest number of troops on the ground since 2001.

As a result, upon taking office, President Biden immediately faced the choice between ending the war or escalating it. Had he not followed through on his predecessor’s commitment, attacks on our forces and those of our allies would have resumed and the Taliban’s nationwide assault on Afghanistan’s major cities would have commenced. That would have required sending substantially more U.S. forces into Afghanistan to defend ourselves and prevent a Taliban takeover, taking casualties – and with at best the prospect of restoring a stalemate and remaining stuck in Afghanistan, under fire, indefinitely.

There's no evidence that staying longer would have made the Afghan security forces or the Afghan government any more resilient or self-sustaining. If 20 years and hundreds of billions of dollars in support, equipment, and training did not suffice, why would another year, or five, or ten, make a difference?

Conversely, there is nothing that strategic competitors like China and Russia – or adversaries like Iran and North Korea – would have liked more than for the United States to re-up a 20-year war and remain bogged down in Afghanistan for another decade.

In advance of the President's decision, I was in constant contact with our Allies and partners to hear their views and factor them into our thinking. When the President announced the withdrawal, NATO immediately and unanimously embraced it. We all set to work – together – on the drawdown.

Similarly, we were intensely focused on the safety of Americans in Afghanistan. In March, we began urging them to leave the country. In total, between March and August, we sent 19 specific messages with that warning – and with offers of help, including financial assistance to pay for plane tickets.

Despite this effort, at the time the evacuation began, there were still thousands of Americans in Afghanistan, almost all of whom were evacuated by August 31. Many were dual citizens living in Afghanistan for years, decades, generations. Deciding whether or not to leave the place they know as home is a wrenching decision.

In April, we began drawing down our embassy, ordering non-essential personnel to depart.

We also used this time to significantly speed up the processing of Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans who worked for us. When we took office, we inherited a program with a 14-step process based on a statutory framework enacted by Congress and involving multiple government agencies – and a backlog of more than 17,000 SIV applicants. There had not been a single interview of an SIV applicant in Kabul in nine months, going back to March of 2020. The program was basically in a dead stall.

Within two weeks of taking office, we restarted the SIV interview process in Kabul. On February 4th, one of the first executive orders issued by President Biden directed us to immediately review the SIV program to identify causes of undue delay and find ways to process SIV applications more quickly.

This spring, I directed significant additional resources to the program, expanding the team of people in Washington processing applications from 10 to 50 and doubling the number of SIV adjudicators at our embassy in Kabul. Even as many embassy personnel returned to the United States, we sent more consular officers to Kabul to process SIV applications.

As a result of these and other steps, including working with Congress, by May we had reduced the average processing time for Special Immigrant Visas by more than a year. Even amid a COVID surge at Embassy Kabul in June, we continued to issue visas. And we went from issuing about 100

Special Immigrant Visas per week in March to more than 1,000 per week in August – when our evacuation and relocation operation began.

That emergency evacuation was sparked by the collapse of the Afghan security forces and government. Throughout the year, we were constantly assessing their staying power and considering multiple scenarios. Even the most pessimistic assessments did not predict that government forces in Kabul would collapse while U.S. forces remained. They were focused on what would happen after the United States withdrew, from September onward. As General Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said, “Nothing I or anyone else saw indicated a collapse of this army and this government in 11 days.”

Nonetheless, we planned and exercised a wide range of contingencies. Because of that planning, we were able to draw down our embassy and move our remaining personnel to the airport within 48 hours. And the military – placed on stand-by by the President – was able to secure the airport and start the evacuation within 72 hours.

The evacuation was an extraordinary effort – under the most difficult conditions imaginable – by our diplomats, military, and intelligence professionals. They worked around the clock to get American citizens, Afghans who helped us, citizens of our Allies and partners, and at-risk Afghans on planes, out of the country, and off to the United States or transit locations that our diplomats arranged in multiple countries. Our consular team worked 24-7 to reach out to Americans who could still be in the country, making 55,000 phone calls and sending 33,000 emails by August 31 – and they’re still at it. In the midst of this heroic effort, an ISIS-K attack killed 13 service members working the gates at HKIA, wounded 20 others, and killed and wounded scores of Afghans.

In the end, we completed one of the biggest airlifts in history, with 124,000 people evacuated to safety.

And on August 31 in Kabul, the military mission in Afghanistan officially ended, and a new diplomatic mission began.

I want to acknowledge the more than two dozen countries that have helped with the relocation effort – some serving as transit hubs, some welcoming Afghan evacuees for longer periods of time.

And as the 9/11 report suggested, it is essential that we accelerate the process for national security appointments since a catastrophic attack could occur with little or no notice. Yet today, there are nearly 80 State Department nominees pending before the Senate. Nearly twenty have already been voted out of the Committee on a strong bipartisan basis and simply await a vote in the Senate. Yesterday’s voice vote to confirm three of them was greatly, greatly appreciated, and was a demonstration of how quickly the Senate can move when the need is great and the bipartisan will is there. For our national security, I respectfully urge the Senate and this Committee to move swiftly to consider and confirm all pending nominees and to address what is a significant disruption in our national security policymaking.

Let me briefly outline what the State Department has done in the past two weeks.

First, we moved our diplomatic operations from Kabul to Doha, where our new Afghan affairs team is hard at work. Many of our key partners have joined us there.

Second, we're continuing our relentless efforts to help any remaining Americans, as well as Afghans and citizens of Allied and partner nations, leave Afghanistan if they choose.

On Thursday, a Qatar Airways charter flight with U.S. citizens and others onboard departed Kabul and landed in Doha. On Friday, a second flight carrying U.S. citizens and others departed Afghanistan. These flights were the result of coordinated efforts by the United States, Qatar, and Turkey to reopen the airport, and intense diplomacy to start the flights.

In addition to those flights, 6 American citizens and 11 permanent residents of the United States have also left Afghanistan via an overland route, with our help.

We are in constant contact with American citizens still in Afghanistan who have told us they wish to leave. Each has been assigned a case management team to offer specific guidance and instructions. Some declined to be on the first flights on Thursday and Friday for reasons including needing more time to make arrangements, wanting to remain with extended family for now, or medical issues that preclude traveling now.

We will continue to help Americans – and Afghans to whom we have a special commitment – depart Afghanistan if they choose, just as we've done in other countries where we've evacuated our embassy and hundreds or even thousands of Americans remained behind – for example, in Libya, Syria, Venezuela, Yemen, and Somalia. There is no deadline to this mission.

Third, we're focused on counterterrorism.

The Taliban has committed to prevent terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a base for external operations that could threaten the United States or our allies, including Al Qaeda and ISIS-K. We will hold them accountable to that. That does not mean we will rely on them. We will remain vigilant in monitoring threats, and we'll maintain robust counterterrorism capabilities in the region to neutralize those threats if necessary – as we do in places around the world where we do not have military forces on the ground.

Fourth, we continue our intensive diplomacy with Allies and partners.

We initiated a statement joined by more than 100 countries and a United Nations Security Council Resolution setting out the international community's expectations of a Taliban-led government. We expect the Taliban to ensure freedom of travel; make good on its counter-terrorism commitments; uphold the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women, girls, and minorities; name a broadly representative permanent government; and forswear reprisals. The legitimacy and support it seeks from the international community will depend on its conduct.

We've organized contact groups of key countries to ensure the international community continues to speak with one voice on Afghanistan and to leverage our combined influence.

Last week, I led a ministerial meeting of 22 countries, plus NATO, the EU, and the UN, to align our efforts.

And fifth, we will continue to support humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. Consistent with sanctions, this aid will not flow through the government, but rather through independent organizations like NGOs and UN agencies.

Yesterday, we announced that the United States is providing nearly \$64 million in new humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan, to meet critical health and nutrition needs, address the protection concerns of women, children, and minorities, to help more children – including girls – go back to school. This additional funding means the United States has provided nearly \$330 million in assistance to the Afghan people this fiscal year.

In Doha and Ramstein, I toured the facilities where Afghans that we evacuated are being processed before moving on to their next destinations. Here at home, I spent some time at the Dulles Expo Center, where more than 45,000 Afghans have been processed after arriving in the United States. It's remarkable to see what our diplomats, military, and employees from other civilian agencies across the U.S. government have been able to achieve in a very short time.

They've met an enormous human need. They're coordinating food, water, and sanitation for thousands of people. They're arranging medical care, including the delivery of several babies. They're reuniting families who were separated and caring for unaccompanied minors. It's an extraordinary interagency effort – and a powerful testament to the skill, compassion, and dedication of our people.

We can all be deeply proud of what they're doing. And as we've done throughout our history, Americans are now welcoming families from Afghanistan into our communities and helping them resettle as they start their new lives. That's something to be proud of, too.

With that, I look forward to your questions.