

House Foreign Affairs Committee: Investigation of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan
Summary Prepared by Democratic Committee Staff of Key Transcript Excerpts

Transcribed Interview of Derek Chollet

Conducted on Tuesday, December 19, 2023.

Chollet currently works as the Counselor of the State Department and held the role during the Afghanistan noncombatant evacuation (NEO). His role as a senior advisor to Secretary Blinken is dynamic and flexible, as Chollet’s responsibilities are dependent on the current needs of the Secretary.

Page 9, line 13

A: Currently, I’m the Counselor of the Department.

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

A: Correct.

Page 10, line 13

Q: [. . .] And to whom do you report to at the State Department?

A: I report to the Secretary.

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

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

Page 11, line 8

Q: How often do you engage with the Secretary?

A: Daily. Multiple times, daily usually.

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

A: Yes.

Page 50, line 23

Q: [. . .] We would like to discuss your current role in a bit more detail as well. You described your role as a minister without a portfolio. Could you expand upon that a bit

for the record?

A: I often find sports analogies and others to use. So basically, I'm a senior adviser to the Secretary, a senior leader in the Department. I do not oversee vast parts of the bureaucracy. So I'm not encumbered by those management duties and responsibilities. So, therefore, I have the bandwidth to be able to flex to whatever issue needs assistance on, whether that's something like in Afghanistan, which would be a major issue, to things that are, perhaps, you know, not on the front burner. But there are circumstances that I and many senior officials are going to be doing work on. The current situation in Israel with Gaza is a recent example, which has been occupying most of my time in the last 2 months.

Q: Okay. Fair to say that your position is dynamic?

A: It is very dynamic.

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

A: Exactly.

Q: Okay. Fair to say you're a trusted adviser of the Secretary?

A: Yes.

Q: What informs that opinion?

A: That he continues to listen to me occasionally.

Chollet explained that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was a priority for the incoming Biden Administration during the presidential transition.

Page 12, line 14

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

A: So during the transition -- of course this was one of the main issues we discussed during the transition as we were preparing to take office, so I received several briefings during the transition. And then, given that it was several months until senior officials -- the Deputy Secretary for -- the Deputy Secretary, the Deputy for Management and Resources, the Under Secretary for Political Affairs -- basically the entire 7th Floor was not in their jobs for several months because of their confirmation processes -- I spent the first several months of the administration doing multiple jobs, covering down on meetings and helping to get the Secretary of State launched in his new role.

Throughout the NEO, Chollet had no role in planning for the evacuation. He primarily worked with foreign counterparts on troubleshooting aspects of the multinational coalition evacuation efforts.

Page 17, line 7

Q: [. . .] Now transitioning to the emergency evacuation as was previously defined. What was your role in the August 2021 evacuation from Afghanistan?

A: Yeah. I had no operational responsibility. As you know, that was an all hands on deck situation. So, to the best of my recollection, I occasionally would do an odd job. But it was mainly interacting, I would say, with foreign counterparts, because of course the evacuation was a multinational coalition effort. So either working with foreign counterparts on troubleshooting particular aspects of the evacuation or being available to ask questions -- or answer questions -- what I would describe my principal role then.

Chollet stated that planning for both a military withdrawal and a potential NEO began in earnest in April 2021.

Page 18, line 9

Q: And do you recall when that planning began?

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

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

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

Page 97, line 18

A: Okay. Well, don't -- so the State Department obviously doesn't have plans for military retrograde. That's the Defense Department. What the State Department was doing was preparing for the U.S. Embassy and the diplomatic functions being able to be executed, absent -- well, with either (A) a reduced U.S. military presence or no U.S. military presence. Prior to April, that was the planning that was accelerated. After April, when we knew that there was -- there was a glide path for a full U.S. military withdrawal, then that changed the context of the planning because, therefore, a big assumption now was confirmed, which was there wouldn't be a U.S. military presence to rely upon for U.S.

Embassy functions.

Page 98, line 4

Q: Can you speak a bit more to the details of the planning that began after the Go to Zero order?

A: So, again, I was not directly involved in that. But it was, understanding that the U.S. military would no longer be in Afghanistan, how could the Embassy maintain its security, you know, function, you know, the logistics issue, all of this while also trying to perform its core functions as an operating Embassy, whether that's helping continue to work with the Afghan Government, the ANSF, with on counterterrorism, trying to help get SIVs out of Afghanistan. How can it do all that if the U.S. military is no longer there?

Chollet was shocked by the Trump Administration's "seriously atrophied" Afghanistan policy plan that the Biden Administration inherited.

Page 19, line 25

Q: Of course. It would be helpful to us to sort of better understand how the statement -- State Department's planning sort of proceeded once the Biden administration took office in January 2021.

A: Well, we were -- I should say we inherited basically very little planning, or a seriously atrophied plan, which, I should say, was a bit shocking given that it was a hundred days from May 1st, which was the stated deadline for withdrawal by the Doha Agreement, and the fact that we knew that there had been a reduction of forces during the transition down to 2,500. So it was making sure that we were fit for purpose and that the actual -- the planning that I would've assumed had been underway actually would get underway. And then of course the big data point that we didn't know was what the President would decide in terms of on the future U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. And once that decision was taken in April, then it reshaped the planning, because we knew that we would -- the State Department would have to plan for a future in Afghanistan without a significant or any U.S. military presence.

Page 26, line 24

Q: [...] You noted that you had inherited little planning on this issue, which was -- and I don't want to speak for you -- but appeared as a surprise given sort of the May 2020 deadline?

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

Chollet discussed Secretary Blinken's engagement in policy planning and implementation, as well as the department-wide effort to sustain a U.S. diplomatic presence in Afghanistan after the withdrawal.

Page 21, line 3

Q: [. . .] Was there a senior leader at the Department exercising overall responsibility for the Department's equities in planning for the withdrawal and a potential emergency evacuation?

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

Page 28, line 3

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

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

Page 99, line 2

Q: Had the Secretary made a decision on whether the Embassy would remain open following the withdrawal in its entirety or in a reduced structure?

A: I think the guidance was to try to, as best as I can remember, try to keep the Embassy, you know, as highly functioning as it could be, absent the U.S. military being there and just understanding what was possible or not.

Q: Did you believe that the Embassy could be kept open without a U.S. military presence?

A: Yes.

Q: Would you be -- are you able to elaborate on why you believed that?

A: It's just, you know, given the U.S. operates embassies in many, many dangerous environments around the world, without the U.S. military present and so I had confidence the State Department could do that.

According to Chollet, the goal of the interagency review of Afghanistan policy was to understand how to pursue U.S. interests with various possible configurations of military presence, and how to prevent Taliban attacks on U.S. forces. He described the robust review and rigorous debate which accompanied it.

Page 33, line 23

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

A: Well, it was to fully understand the Doha Agreement and what had transpired since the Doha Agreement. Also, to try to understand how the U.S. can pursue its interests in Afghanistan with various configurations of the U.S. military presence, trying to find if there was a way that a military presence could be negotiated with the Taliban that would prevent them from not going back to shooting at us, which they had not been shooting at us since February of 2020. That was the main thing I can remember.

Page 37, line 6

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

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

Page 119, line 20

Q: Okay. And we had also previously discussed the interagency review. Is that correct?

A: The review of early 2021?

Q: Yes.

A: Yes.

Q: That's correct. You had testified that you didn't recall specific pieces of it, but in terms of the overall structure, do you feel that the process was robust?

A: Very.

Q: How so?

A: I recall many meetings on this subject. And if memory serves, I think the AAR has a reference to the fact the interagency process went to basically no meetings and having no process to a lot of meetings and a lot of process, which was welcomed initially and maybe as people have grown tired of it since. I'll speak personally to that. But, yeah, I remember it was quite thorough and exhaustive.

Q: Okay. So sounds like it was robust. Understanding that you may not have much to say on the substance of it, would you also agree that the dialogue in terms of establishing the review was meaningful, that there was healthy debate?

A: Oh, absolutely. It was quite spirited, rigorous.

Chollet relayed the rare nature of NEOs and noted that every diplomatic mission is equipped with NEO contingency plans regardless of risk levels at post.

Page 48, line 14

Q: [. . .] Have you ever worked in a complex evacuation situation, such as the NEO we're discussing here today?

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

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

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

Q: What about outside of the Afghanistan NEO?

A: No.

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

A: Yes, thankfully.

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

A: Correct, yes.

Chollet considers Ambassador Dan Smith, to be "one of the finest Foreign Service Officers of his generation." He helped facilitate Ambassador Smith's ability to undertake an independent After Action Review.

Page 49, line 14

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

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

Page 117, line 19

Q: Okay. And I believe you previously testified that Ambassador Smith was in charge of the after action review. Is that correct?

A: Correct.

Q: What is his professional reputation?

A: A sterling reputation, one of the finest Foreign Service officers of his generation and someone who has served the Department honorably and ably for many years under many different administrations.

Q: Qualified and capable to conduct an AAR of this sort?

A: Yes.

Page 118, line 24

Q: Okay. I'm speaking to the AAR specifically. Were you interviewed for it?

A: I was.

Q: Okay. And you had also previously testified that you supported Ambassador Smith and the review itself.

A: Correct.

Q: Could you expand upon what you meant in terms of support?

A: So Secretary Blinken had, of course, requested the AAR. It was something that he -- the idea of learning the lessons from the withdrawal and sharing that accountability would rest wherever it fell was something he talked about even during the evacuation when he was asked about this. So to fulfill that commitment that he had made to the Department and to the American people, he wanted to launch this AAR. In order to do so, he had asked me to ensure that Dan Smith and his team had whatever support they needed to be able to successfully do this work, and it involved anything from their office space to personnel to access to people and documents. And so I was just there to help Dan if he ever needed any help and otherwise stay out of his way so he could do his work independently.

Chollet agreed with the After Action Review's assessment of the determination and dedication of State Department personnel throughout the NEO. He also made note of the uncommon nature of the After Action Review.

Page 50, line 4

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

A: Correct.

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

Page 50, line 14

Q: It's not common?

A: It's not common.

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

A: Yes. It's a unique --

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

A: Yes. It's not routine.

Page 118, line 3

Q: If I could draw your attention to page 4. The last sentence of the second paragraph reads, "Overall, the Department's personnel responded with great agility, determination, and dedication, while taking on roles and responsibilities both domestically and overseas that few had ever anticipated," referencing the NEO itself. Do you agree with this assessment?

A: I do.

Q: Is there any further color you could provide?

A: I think this report captures it succinctly and accurately.

Chollet described Secretary Blinken as an experienced, hard-working, and dedicated individual.

Page 51, line 22

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

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

Q: How does that comport with your experiences with him in a professional capacity?

A: His reputation?

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

A: Absolutely.

Q: Hard working?

A: Yes.

Q: Smart?

A: Yes.

Q: Dedicated?

A: Yes. Empathetic.

Chollet described the ongoing, robust interagency debate and planning for counterterrorism measures in the region after the military withdrawal.

Page 57, line 2

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

A: That was underway. Some of that, of course, was overtaken by events by the fact that we no longer had an embassy in Kabul. But most of what I was focused on was not what was happening inside Kabul. That was other people and other agencies. It was thinking through how we could work with partner countries, you know, with a reduced U.S. presence on the ground. How we could work with partner countries to help execute some of those counterterrorism missions.

Page 58, line 3

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

A: I don't want to personally take any credit for any of that. I can just say that, you know, my efforts were part of a larger effort by the U.S. Government to ensure that we could continue to execute critical counterterror missions in Afghanistan. The part that I was most intentionally involved in was prior to the evacuation. So there were certain assumptions built in that there would be U.S. -- significant U.S. diplomatic presence on the ground. Of course, that had to change once we no longer had that diplomatic presence on the ground.

Q: Would you agree that the killing of al Zawahiri demonstrated that there was a post presence capability to address counterterrorism?

A: Unquestionable.

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

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

Chollet compared the “gold standard” 2008 transition between the Bush and Obama Administrations with the “shambolic” 2020 transition between the Trump and Biden Administrations.

Page 59, line 10

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

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

A: Just the level of cooperation, the level of transparency, the willingness to engage with us, the incoming team, the view that even though there might be honest policy disagreements, that their job was to ensure that we had every piece of information required to be able to succeed no matter what decision the President would make. Of course, that transition in 2008 was also quite perilous, given the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan at the time, neither of which were going particularly well. And I can say across the board, both in terms of personal engagement and written product, it set the bar for presidential transitions.

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

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

Page 60, line 11

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

A: It was, generally speaking, shambolic, but I was fortunate in the sense that the State Department -- and credit would go here to the outgoing Deputy Secretary of State, Steve Biegun -- was relative, relatively smooth as the transition goes, once the transition started. But let's remember for the record, there were several weeks in which there was a you know, the previous administration would not concede the election. And so, therefore, the formal transition was delayed by 3 weeks or more is my recollection. And then, of course, unfortunately, some agencies, including the Defense Department and the White House in particular had very, very difficult transitions where not much information was shared and it was quite contentious.

Page 62, line 16

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

A: Uh-huh.

Q: -- when you entered the office.

A: Uh-huh.

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

A: Well, because if we thought of the counterfactual, which is the previous administration wins re-election, they, too, would be on a deadline to withdraw from Afghanistan by May 1st. So one would have assumed there was robust planning underway to achieve that, particularly given that force reductions were still taking place after the election, significant force reduction down to 2,500. So I was surprised that such plans didn't seem to be underway.

Chollet described the absence of contingency planning, transition briefings, and an overall lack of effort displayed by the Trump Administration regarding a military withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Page 61, line 14

Q: Okay. I'd like to draw your attention to paragraph number 3 and read into the record. "I helped lead the Biden-Harris State Department transition team, and was among the first officials to arrive at the Department in January 2021. I recall receiving only a few briefings related to Afghanistan prior to the start of the new administration. Mostly about the state of the negotiations with the Taliban." "Here's what we knew: The previous administration had negotiated an agreement calling for the withdrawal of all American forces by May 1. In other words, within the first 100 days after President Biden's inauguration. "Despite this tight timeline, during the transition we were not presented with a comprehensive plan for the completion of the withdrawal by May 1." Turning to page 13. "In fact, just weeks after the election in November 2020, the outgoing administration had suddenly announced the reduction of U.S. forces to 2,500, leaving us at the lowest number of troops in Afghanistan since 9/11." "And we only learned after the fact from press reports that at the time, there were serious discussions by the outgoing administration about removing all troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year or inauguration. "Nevertheless, our team received no contingency plans for withdrawal or a roadmap for maintaining the embassy or a plan to coordinate with allies and partners on evacuating our citizens or local partners if necessary, or found any evidence of an effort to restart the SIV process, which had been completely stalled for nearly a year and had a backlog of more than 17,000 applicants." Is there any further color you could provide on your opening statement here?

A: No. That accurately captures my recollection.

Through his role as Counselor of the State Department, Chollet learned that the Trump Administration planned to remove all troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2020.

Page 63, line 12

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

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

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

A: Correct.

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

A: There was no evidence that I was aware of that there were, and we knew a little bit of this in real time given the announcement around the reduction to 2,500 in November. Of course, we found out much more since. So I've learned since. And I can't remember -- I think I mentioned -- yes, I said that we learned, since then, that the intent had been from the highest level to go to zero by the end of 2020, or by the time of the inauguration.

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

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

Chollet believed that the Trump Administration's drawdown to 2,500 troops left President Biden in the difficult position of having to potentially increase troop levels in Afghanistan if Taliban attacks against the United States restarted.

Page 65, line 11

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

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

Q: How so?

A: Well, it didn't seem to be connected in any way to any particular negotiation. I don't recall Zal Khalilzad, who was trying to engage with the Taliban at the time, to enhance his position at all in any way. And obviously, we were at such a low level of force that

had the Taliban restarted attacks against U.S. forces, we would have been in a difficult position to defend ourselves given the small number of troops that we had there. So it made the prospect of returning to full scale war much more harrowing, and it would have meant the reality that if the war restarted against the United States, that the President would be faced with a question of adding troops to Afghanistan. Not maintaining the presence, but adding to that presence.

Chollet confirmed that President Trump’s decision to reduce troops from 4,000 to 2,500 as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were gaining strength did not comport with the requirements of the conditions-based Doha Deal.

Page 69, line 19

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

A: President Trump.

Q: And just citing paragraph one, page 4, halfway down in response to questions six, it says: “Treasury told us, as of 2020, al-Qaeda is gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under the Taliban’s protection.” So this is a document dated January 4, 2021. And I believe you testified to my colleague that you learned from press reporting on January 15, 2021, that the Trump administration further reduced troops from 4,000 to 2,500. Is that correct?

A: I learned from press reporting. I can’t speak to the exact date because I don’t know.

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

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

Q: And from both facts, despite the fact that the [Inspector General] is saying that the Taliban and al-Qaeda are gaining strength, the Trump administration continued to withdraw troops?

A: It appears that way.

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

A: No.

Page 78, line 22

Q: [. . .] [D]id you believe the U.S. should have adhered to the Doha Agreement?

A: I believe it was in U.S. interests for Taliban not to be shooting at American soldiers and to restart the fight in Afghanistan, particularly when we only had 2,500 troops there. So that part of the Taliban agreement is very important to us.

Chollet agreed that the Afghan government’s exclusion from and dislike of the Doha Deal created a “high degree of difficulty for success.”

Page 71, line 1

Q: It’s exhibit 7. This is a partial transcript of an interview the committee conducted with Ambassador Ross Wilson dated October 24th, 2023. This is an opening statement he provided to the committee. If you don’t mind, could you read the underlined portion on page 10, please?

A: You want me to read it?

Q: Yes.

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

Q: Thank you. Would you agree with Ambassador Wilson’s characterization that the Afghan Government was excluded from the agreement?

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

Q: Okay. And would you agree with his characterization, your understanding of it anyway, that the Afghan Government was deeply opposed to the agreement?

A: That’s my understanding.

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

A: That is my understanding.

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

A: It’s a high degree of difficulty for success in those circumstances.

Chollet explained how the Taliban believed the United States to be in violation of the Doha Deal after the May 1st deadline and threatened to resume conflict if the United States paused the military retrograde.

Page 85, line 20

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

A: The Department's positions on which issues?

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

A: Well, certainly that was the reason why Ambassador Khalilzad and his team were engaged in the negotiation, to try to see if we could come to some agreement that would be a peaceful resolution of this. I should note, though, given the date of this in late June that this was more -- nearly a month after the May 1st deadline. And my recollection is that the Taliban never acceded to the ability -- to our staying in Afghanistan militarily after May 1st. They were saying we were in violation of the Doha Agreement by keeping our forces there for retrograde and always held out that the prospect of resuming the conflict with us if we continued to stay and not retrograde.

Chollet recalled how the Taliban made it clear that if the U.S. military did not leave Afghanistan by August 31st, war against the United States "would resume in full force."

Page 164, line 23

Q: Did the Taliban issue threats to attack U.S. troops if we stayed past August 31st?

A: The Taliban -- my recollection is, yes. And going back to what I said earlier, they made threats basically since May 1st, all the way through, that we, in fact, were overstaying our welcome militarily and needed to leave.

Q: So is it fair to say that the Taliban viewed the United States as having bound itself to the Doha Agreement?

A: Like I said, the Taliban wanted the United States military out of Afghanistan, yes.

Q: So they viewed the United States as having bound itself to the Doha Agreement?

A: All I know is they wanted us out of Afghanistan whether -- they certainly signed the Doha Agreement with the previous administration and had watched U.S. troops leave prior to President Biden coming into office. And they definitely wanted us out of Afghanistan militarily and made it clear that if we did not leave, the war against the United States would resume in full force.

Q: And did we view -- and by "we" being the United States, and more specifically the U.S.

Government -- did we view ourselves as being bound by the Doha Agreement?

A: We did not want the war against the Taliban to resume, given that we had 2,500 -- and by August, it was fewer than 2,500 -- troops in Afghanistan. So it would've meant adding troops back into Afghanistan.

Page 184, line 4

Q: Okay. What do you assess would have happened had the administration revised its August 31st withdrawal date?

A: I think we ran the risk, a much higher risk of getting in a shooting -- returning to a shooting war with the Taliban at a moment of maximum vulnerability for us, given that we were only at HKIA, and we had a very, very small military footprint, and there was an acute terrorist threat that we were facing as we saw so tragically with the Abbey Gate bombing.

Q: So it's fair to say, in your estimation, that revising the August 31 deadline could have resulted in an increased risk to American personnel?

A: Absolutely.

Q: And American interest?

A: Absolutely.

Q: And American citizens?

A: Absolutely.

Chollet noted how important it was to the Biden Administration to engage with U.S international partners who sacrificed alongside the U.S. in Afghanistan before the official withdrawal announcement.

Page 93, line 25

A: My understanding, the -- gestalt understanding that I recall was, you know, general understanding of our position, I mean, and everybody knew the threat that we were facing and were appreciative of our consultation because, again, some of previous announcements of U.S. withdrawals were done with no consultation. So there was a sense that they learned about it when they read about it in the press. So we, understanding the impact that this decision would have on our friends and partners, many of whom had sacrificed alongside us for the better part of 20 years, it was important for us to be engaging with them throughout this process and then also giving them a heads up before the announcement came.

Chollet confirmed that the Doha Deal implemented under the Trump Administration committed the United States to “Go-to-Zero” and withdraw all U.S. forces and supporting personnel from Afghanistan.

Page 109, line 23

Q: Would you agree with the sentiment that the Doha deal, in effect the plan of record as you testified, was a Go to Zero order?

A: Yes.

Page 110, line 21

Q: And do you agree that it was this deal, the Trump administration’s February 2020 deal, that committed the United States to not just withdraw all military forces, but that it also committed the United States to withdraw all private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel within 14 months of this deal?

A: Yes.

Chollet noted that steps were taken to continue embassy operations after the withdrawal of U.S. military forces until the Afghan government’s unexpected collapse.

Page 114, line 11

Q: Given that you weren’t necessarily privy to the specifics of this discussion in the Department on embassy continuity but that you were aware of it, were you also aware of whether that discussion resulted in a conclusion or a consensus on a path forward for embassy continuity post-withdrawal?

A: Yes. We had a plan. My understanding, we had a plan to conduct embassy operations after the withdrawal of U.S. military forces, the planned withdrawal. Of course, events got in the way of that.

Q: And your understanding was that plan was the consensus

A: Yes.

Q: -- result --

A: Absolutely. Yes, absolutely.

Q: And were you aware of steps that were being taken to implement that plan for embassy continuity during 2021?

A: I was aware steps were being taken. I wasn’t tracking the details.

Q: And, obviously, we don’t have a U.S. Embassy in Kabul today.

A: Correct.

Q: So what is your assessment of what changed, what changed or caused that plan to no longer be relevant or implementable?

A: The Afghan Government collapsed rapidly and unexpectedly and, therefore, causing us to pursue a NEO.

Q: Okay. So your testimony today is that there was a plan, it was being implemented, but for precipitous takeover of the Taliban, it would have presumably--

A: Yes.

Q: -- been continued to be implemented?

A: Yes.

Q: And is it fair to say that any concerns earlier in the process would have been moot at that point if the plan was, in fact, being implemented?

A: Yes.

Page 139, line 5

Q: And how often did you engage with DMR McKeon throughout the withdrawal?

A: On the withdrawal itself? Pretty regularly. I mean, I think once, you know -- once he got in the job and then was really seized with the planning for the embassy withdrawal, I mean, I would hear about it. But he was covering those meetings. I don't recall regularly attending those meetings with him.

Q: Did he voice any concerns to you about the state of the withdrawal planning?

A: Look, planning this withdrawal was a tremendously challenging enterprise. You know, getting the U.S. diplomatic footprint in a place that it could be sustained absent the U.S. military was an extremely difficult task with a whole series of difficult decisions. What we discussed earlier is that through that very tough process we came to a plan that everyone believed in that could work and that we were in the process of implementing when the government in Kabul fell.

After learning that Secretary Pompeo declined to be interviewed for the After Action Review, Chollet argued that the American people deserve a thorough, nonpartisan account of U.S. activity in Afghanistan spanning the time between the signing of the Doha Deal and the end of the NEO.

Page 121, line 18

Q: Are you aware of whether Secretary Pompeo was asked to speak to the AAR team?

A: I believe he was, but, again, I wasn't involved in it.

Q: And are you aware of whether or not he accepted the invitation to be interviewed?

A: I do not believe he did.

Q: Would you be surprised to hear that he was not, in fact, interviewed for the AAR?

A: I'm not surprised to hear that.

Q: Why are you not surprised?

A: Because I had heard that he probably hadn't participated.

Q: And he, in fact, declined to be interviewed?

A: I didn't know that part, so --

Q: Okay. Do you have a reaction to a former Secretary of State not participating?

A: Look, I think that, you know, my view is that Afghanistan, both in the time period in question and the AAR, which is just, of course, the last year and a half of our 20-year engagement in Afghanistan, given the sacrifices that have been made by American men and women in uniform, by diplomats, 2,400 killed, 20,000 wounded, \$2 trillion in U.S. taxpayer dollars over 20 years, that a full, thorough, nonpartisan accounting of our experience in Afghanistan is -- the American people deserve nothing less. That's why I fully support the work of the Afghan War Commission, why I fully support the AAR and the work of the committee to look into this. But I do think it's important to remember that history did not begin on January 21st, 2021, and that there is a totality of a timeline here that really, in my view, would begin with the Doha Agreement through the end of the evacuation.

Chollet believed the NEO to be a “genuine accomplishment” which occurred “in a circumstance that had no precedent in history.” He applauded the dedicated work of Secretary Blinken during the NEO and had complete confidence in his colleagues who were responsible for Afghanistan policy.

Page 148, line 24

Q: How adequate do you believe the NEO planning and preparation was?

A: I believe that it was adequate, as shown by the results.

Q: Did it -- did the NEO planning contemplate Afghanistan being surrounded by Afghan civilians in the manner that it was?

A: Well, the NEO was about getting our embassy back to Kabul. And then it had not planned for this evacuation on the scale that the President ultimately decided to conduct,

which was unique. Never been tried before.

Q: And did the NEO contemplate the terrorist attack that ultimately ensued?

A: I don't -- again, I did not see the NEO plan. But certainly the security concerns were paramount for us, no question.

Q: So I want to go back to my question. How adequate do you believe the planning and preparation was?

A: I believe that the fact that we were able to safely get all of our diplomats out of Afghanistan and 120,000 people out of Afghanistan in a circumstance that had no precedent in history, where we occupied only an airport, for nearly 2 weeks, while surrounded by an enemy, was a genuine accomplishment.

Page 150, line 4

Q: You also previously testified that when you assumed your current role in January of 2021, you were juggling the jobs of many individuals who were awaiting confirmation. Is that correct?

A: Correct.

Q: And at that time you were focused, in part, on Afghanistan policy. Is that correct?

A: Correct.

Q: And that focus on Afghanistan policy decreased in April in part because that work was then being taken on by subject matter experts who had received confirmation. Is that correct?

A: Correct.

Q: And so those individuals had expertise in Afghanistan policy, correct?

A: Well, they were responsible for aspects of the Afghanistan policy.

Q: And were qualified to conduct such work, correct?

A: Absolutely, yeah.

Q: Okay. Did you have any concerns that any issues were not being attended to related to Afghanistan by people whose job it was to cover those issues?

A: No.

Q: What informs that opinion?

A: There was no shortage of meetings, work being done on these issues. And I had high confidence in the team that was built to work on these issues.

Q: And you, likewise, had confidence in the Secretary at that time related to Afghanistan policy?

A: Of course. Yes.

Q: And he was, likewise, involved in robust and regular meetings, correct?

A: Yes.

Q: And are you aware during the NEO itself how many hours people were working related to Afghanistan policy specifically?

A: It was nearly every waking hour of every day.

Q: And why was that?

A: Because of the magnitude of the task and then the dedication the people put into the effort.

Q: And in your professional opinion, do you believe that State Department officials rose to the task?

A: No question about it.

Q: What informs that opinion?

A: Many colleagues who ran to the fire, who volunteered to put themselves in harm's way to try to help execute on what was truly a unique and historic effort to evacuate over 120,000 folks out of Afghanistan. The tireless efforts that, by the way, continue to this day, to continue to try to get people who wish to leave Afghanistan out of Afghanistan. And despite the fact that we have no embassy there, we're still able to do that.

Chollet believed Ambassador Ross Wilson to be fit for the role of Chief of Mission. He noted that Ambassador John Bass was sent to Afghanistan to assist with the magnitude of coordination that the NEO required.

Page 163, line 5

Q: Ambassador Bass was sent to Afghanistan around mid to late August 2021, correct?

A: That sounds right.

Q: Why was he sent there?

A: To the best of my recollection, there was a bandwidth issue, that just given the task that we had taken on, which, again, was beyond a NEO, because it was beyond just getting American citizens and diplomats and other personnel out of Afghanistan, and the magnitude of the coordination that was required, it made good sense to have someone senior to go out to the field to help augment our efforts there.

Q: Was the Ambassador sent to Kabul by Department leadership due to concerns surrounding Ambassador Wilson's capability to conduct the evacuation?

A: I never heard those concerns raised.

Q: So you're not aware of any concerns conveyed by members of the Department leadership about Ambassador Wilson's capabilities?

A: Not at the time. And only since have I read reports, which I don't know if they're believed to be true, of people having concerns. But I never heard them at the time.

Q: Thank you. Do you believe Ambassador Wilson was fit for the job of chief of mission during the Afghanistan evacuation?

A: I do.

Q: And why is that?

A: I had had experience working with him in previous jobs we had, including as ambassador to Turkiye; I also think ambassador to one of the Stans -- in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan; and found him to be a very capable colleague.

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